



ANGELA WHITE

LIFE AFTER WAR BOOK #21

DANGEROUS
DEALS

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Dangerous Deals
by
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A Huge Mistake
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I Win
I Need My Team
Don't Look
All In Good Time
It's Her Job
Close

All We Have

We made it home,
But we're not the same.
We flinch at noises,
And loathe the rain.

We have no faith;
We've lost all trust.
We're filled with fury,
At what happened to us.

Surrounded by water,
This island is another cage.
We try to adjust,
And not give in to the rage.

Fake smiles during the day,
bête noires at night.
replaying the horror,
While trying to find the light.

Every scar is an unwelcome reminder;
We doubt we'll ever recover.
We're alive, but we didn't really survive.
All we have now is each other.

Chapter One

Welcome Home

1

“It’s time for all friends and family to wait outside while we get the medical exams started.” Tonya began pointing at the kids. “Do a round on beach duty, or run and get whatever they need that we didn’t bring.”

The tent was full of neatly lined up cots covered in bags, boxes, and blankets. More kits and supplies sat along the walls, covering nearly all of the empty space. Tonya doubted they could hold much more in here, but she needed that excuse to get the kids to go.

Amy didn’t want to leave Wade.

Wade picked her up and settled her onto his hip so she didn’t have to. He could tell how badly the little girl needed attention.

Missy left without arguing. She wanted Shawn to get checked out. His injuries were ugly to view and his mind was a dark, dangerous place. She had faith that Tonya would help him.

Many of the others also left, but Wade shook his head at Neil and Samantha. “Stay.”

Samantha immediately sat down and took his hand. She could tell how scared he was.

Wade took in her short curls and nervous eyes. He was also baggy-eyed and scared. The sound of the ocean was a reminder that wouldn't stop. Wade now knew more about fear than he ever wanted to. *I'll help us both somehow.*

Neil was encouraged that Samantha had initiated contact with a male. He stayed next to her and enjoyed the relief that Angela was home. It had been a rough month without the real boss here.

Wade was also worried about Neil. He was thinner under his Eagle gear and more somber. *I shouldn't have gone on that run. My family needed me.*

Tobias opened the medical curtain all the way. "Are we ready?"

Tonya picked up her clipboard. "Yes. Remember what I said on the way down here. We're not pushing them at all. If they don't want to do it, they don't have to."

Tobias gave her a charming grin, eyeing her curved body inside the faded jeans and hoodie she was wearing beneath her white coat. "You're the boss."

Tonya snorted. "Not for all the gems in the world."

She stepped out of the small medical tent they'd erected inside the large one that was now housing all of the mission men and the rescue team.

Everyone looked toward her.

Tonya saw their apprehension and tried to soothe it with a calm tone. Most people hated to get

a medical check; it was part of the job to deal with their fears. “I’m taking the most serious cases first.”

Half of the tent relaxed and resumed what they’d been doing.

Angela pointed. “Dace, Thomas, Greg. We have head injuries, shark bites, broken bones, burns, infections, impalements, splinters, and bruises.”

Tonya began clearing a path for Dace’s stretcher. “It sounds like you had a hell of a trip.”

Men and women glanced away, not wanting to share their pain. So did Kenn. He was covered in new scars, but the worst damage was in his mind.

Angela rubbed her aching spine through her jacket. “Hell is spot on.”

Tonya noticed Greg’s eye patch again and winced. Nearly every inch of Greg’s exposed skin was scarred from being burnt. Tonya recognized it from the explosions on the cruise ship. “I’ll do the best I can.”

“I believe in you.”

Tonya felt her own unease settle down a level. She was grateful. “Thank you.”

“It’s my honor. Now get your skinny ass to work.”

“Aww. That’s so sweet!” Tonya tried to offer more comfort. “Terry and Morgan will supervise any procedures. The medical team I’ve picked all have minor experience in most of what you listed.”

Tonya motioned to Lisa, who was fussing over Dace. “Help us get him into the medical tent. He can

stay in the small area on the other side after we're done with him."

Lisa snapped at Tobias as he quickly lifted one side of the stretcher. "Be careful!"

Tobias smiled again, but it wasn't as warm. He tried to be nice to the big breasted brunette. "We will. You can stay with him."

"Damn straight I'll stay with him!" Lisa didn't care about the disapproval of some of their witnesses. She marched next to Dace's stretcher, keeping a firm hand on it.

Tonya looked at Angela. "Wasn't she with Greg when you left?"

"Yes."

Tonya scanned Piper, who was making eyes at Adrian. "And wasn't she with Dace?"

"Yes."

"I'm confused."

Angela chuckled dryly. "Get used to that feeling."

"Okay, I will." Tonya scanned the others in the huge tent. "I'll handle you two at a time, with Lisa and Dace first, then Thomas and Greg. When I say next two, pick yourselves and we'll roll right through this part."

Tonya saw relief at them doing it together, but only a few of them liked doing it fast. "Or maybe I'll take my time and release you together in a couple of days?"

Relief filled the tent.

Angela nodded. "For them. Not me."

“Good. The camp needs you back in charge as soon as possible.” Tonya entered the medical area. “Let’s roll.”

Thomas and Greg exchanged concerned glances. Both men turned toward Shawn with a silent request.

Shawn assumed he needed permission. “Boss?”

Angela was proud of him. Shawn was scared of any medical treatment now. Just seeing the medical staff had made him twitchy, but he was still willing to help his teammates. “Go on.”

Shawn followed the white-coated medics into the smaller tent, trying not to react to the sights and smells. He hadn’t done much medical work since Harry’s death. It took him straight back to waking up in the lab with Isabel’s sister about to castrate him.

Tonya felt Shawn’s unease. She handed him the clipboard. “You can tell me what happened to each person as I do the exam.”

Lisa scowled. “I’ll tell you what happened to—”

“Hush now.” Shawn didn’t give Lisa time to argue. “Dace was hit in the back of the head and knocked out. He hasn’t woken at all. No other injuries that I know of.”

Lisa made a face but obeyed because it came from one of the mission men.

Tonya tugged the curtain shut.

As soon as she turned around, Shawn opened it back up a few inches.

Tonya heard it. She assumed closed spaces were also a problem and didn't argue.

Tobias stayed glued to Tonya's hip, handing her the stethoscope so she could listen to Dace's breathing.

Kenn watched through the small crack, keeping his mind blank so no one would know Shawn had opened the curtain to let him observe how Tobias interacted with Tonya.

Angela didn't expose him. She wanted to see that, too. "Let's settle in. You're all on downtime until the medical checks are finished."

Everyone went to their cot to unpack the gear they thought they would need.

Isabel stayed quiet, like Selina was doing. They didn't know the medics or the people who were coming in and out with supplies. The new woman kept a close eye on Angela.

Marc noticed it. He trusted both of those women. He didn't like it that they were nervous. It quickly rubbed off.

In the opposite corner of the crowded tent, Tim stood up and put his multi-tool back into his pocket. "Radio's ready."

Tim had been asked to handle that because everyone else who knew how to wire it was busy. This tent had a full setup instead of just a handheld system. Tim retreated as Gus came over.

Gus decided keeping a good attitude would make this easiest on all of them. He keyed the mic with a grin. "This is Gus, reporting for drama."

People snickered but shied away from the bruises, healing burns, and stitches on Gus's big body.

Brittani's weak voice came through the waves. "Gus! I'm so glad you're okay!"

Gus's free hand twitched and slid into his jeans pocket. "Yeah. Me, too. How are you?"

"I'm fine. They're making a fuss over nothing."

Gus could tell that wasn't true. He knew when she was lying, but even if he hadn't, she sounded on the edge of death. "I hope you're resting and stuff."

People tuned out the call now that it had reached the boring part.

Nearby, Marc directed the two teenage boys toward a rear row of cots. They were Kendle's relatives, though they'd never met. He didn't know the exact connection yet, but he would figure it out.

Adrian got the two new men from the sailboat, Dario and Ned, to start unpacking their bedrolls.

Their Golden Retriever wanted to sniff the cats lying across Dog's back while bathing him. The Retriever was pulling hard on the lead in Dario's hand.

Greg suppressed a shudder. "Always keep him on a leash around us."

Mission men throughout the tent agreed. None of them were comfortable with any canine but Dog. Even the yapping puppy out on the beach was a worry.

"We will." Dario was happy to be among people who seemed good. Magic use didn't bother him at

all. He'd seen much worse in the fog. "His name is Duke."

The mission men didn't care.

Amy waved at the big dog over Wade's shoulder. "Hi, Duke."

The Retriever kept sniffing the cats. His hot breath drew hisses.

Duke pulled harder on the leash, trying to get closer. *They smell good!*

The bunker cat lashed out with full claws and took a layer of skin from Duke's nose.

Duke yelped and dove beneath the cot. *Make it stop!*

"Damn it, Buster. Be nice!"

The bunker cat cringed at Tonya's shout. Then it stood up on Dog's back and leapt under the cot. *Here, doggy-doggy!*

Duke yelped again as the cat dug claws into his fur and started cleaning him.

Tonya groaned. "That's not what I meant!"

Marc lifted the confused cat off the whimpering Retriever while everyone laughed. He put it back on Dog. "As you were."

The cat began hacking up a hairball.

Marc jumped out of the way so it didn't get on his boots. "Duke's right. That's disgusting."

Chuckling, Angela motioned toward Theo. "You're with me."

Theo blanched. He wasn't ready for a therapy session. His sweatpants and ripped t-shirt didn't seem appropriate for spilling his guts to the boss.

“Can we hold on that for a minute?” Daryl came over to Angela. “I have some updates.”

Angela wondered why he was in full Eagle gear. It looked like all the guards were, even down to the vests. She decided to ask later. “Jennifer will handle it.”

“Yeah, she will and that’s why I want to talk to you now.” Daryl regarded Kyle; he didn’t have sympathy for the man’s new scars, the cast on his arm, or his haunted expression. “Go stand watch for an Eagle privacy moment.”

Kyle knew he was already being tested to see if he was an Eagle first and a husband second. He went to the flap without protesting. He needed to know what had happened so he could figure out how to help his wife.

Kyle saw a large group of musclebound brawlers coming down the beach in what was obviously a patrol. He assumed they were doing the entire island. He’d already spotted jungle foliage on their black pants and sand on their boots.

Angela didn’t want to make things worse before she’d had a chance to assess the situation. “Are you sure Jennifer can’t handle it?”

“Yes.” Daryl wasn’t going to take no for her answer. “It’s important, Boss.”

Angela stopped stalling. “Tell me.”

Daryl kept his voice down. “Jennifer used her enforcer gift.”

Angela wasn’t surprised by that. “Was it warranted?”

“The first one was. Two camp members were fighting, knocking stuff over and bumping into people. The Eagles would have covered it their usual way, but Jennifer did a fast zap tap and both men stopped. They even helped clean things up.”

“But?”

“But she did it openly!” Daryl calmed his tone. “It was right in front of the normals, against two normals. It stirred things back up. We’ve been doing damage control for weeks and it’s not enough.”

Angela sighed. “Because she did it again.”

“Yes. One was against an Eagle. I don’t have to tell you the fighters here aren’t used to being treated that way by anyone except you and even then, it only happens when it’s really needed.”

“Why was it done?”

“Stanley talked back to her.”

Silence fell through those listening.

Angela was shocked. “She zapped Stanley?”

“Yes.” Daryl finished his report. “The last one was against a teenager, Boss. And he’s a good kid.”

Fury flashed out in a thick wave, raising the tent’s temperature in seconds. Angela smothered the inner fire. “Go on.”

“That’s all I have...on that front.”

“Put everything else in your nightly report for me?”

“Jennifer said the nightly reports still come to her until you’re out of quarantine.” Daryl didn’t want to stir up more problems, but Jennifer had been very specific.

“They do. That doesn’t mean I can’t have a copy.”

Daryl tried to smile. It wasn’t successful. “Welcome home.”

“Yeah.” Angela motioned toward Gus. “We need that radio clear and she needs to rest. Get Gus off the call.” Angela could tell how uncomfortable Gus was as Brittani rambled on about things that didn’t matter.

“You got it.” Daryl headed that way.

Angela turned and found Grant standing right behind her. She realized he was also in full Eagle gear. Angela sighed again. “Let’s hear it.”

“She shut down my wedding plans and then said I have to do equal time as a sailor. I’ve had to miss Eagle training sets.”

“Why not trade days?”

Grant’s voice rose. “She stopped all shift trading!”

“Why?”

Daryl spoke over his shoulder. “We’ve had a few no-shows from the rookies.”

Angela waved it off. “We always have that.”

“Exactly. She’s taking control too far and micromanaging everything.” Daryl motioned at Gus in Eagle code. *Take your time.*

Gus grimaced. He understood Daryl wanted Brittani to talk as long as it took to make her happy, but Gus wanted to be done.

Angela lifted a brow at Grant. “Anything else?”

Grant grinned. “Welcome home, Boss!”

The gophers entered the warming tent in time to hear that. They echoed the sentiment, making Angela smile.

Richie and a few rookies carried supplies to the medical tent or sat boxes next to Angela's table. Once again, they were in all full Eagle gear. It felt like Jennifer was reminding her that the Eagles were always ready to fight.

Angela regarded the church people, who were listening while distributing supplies.

Tim brushed his hand down his sweater to remove the dust. "I have no complaints. Jennifer has kept tight control over a population of sinners."

Ralph reluctantly disagreed. "She caused a lot of tension by forcing the normals to sit with the descendants for every meal."

Tim scowled at the gray-haired man. "Angela did the same thing in the mountain."

"Yeah, but it was with the kids." Ralph glanced toward the tent flap and continued when he saw only the guards and not Jennifer. "Adults can't be pushed that way. Every meal is now quiet, tense, and over fast. It's not good for the camp."

"People will adjust." Tim faced Angela. "But I can't. I'm not breaking our deal, but I refuse to be your spy anymore."

Another shocked silence went through the tent. Most of them had known; no one had expected him to give it up.

Angela gave Tim a cool stare. "As long as you don't break our laws, we'll work through the rest."

Tim wasn't happy with that answer, but there was nothing he could say to make her happy now. "We'll bring in more blankets. It gets cold on the beach at night."

Mission men grimaced at his comment, all flashed to the tiny island where they'd met Mel.

Dog whined. *I want my cat back!*

His pain hit the other animals and the people.

Marc rubbed the wolf's scarred ear, trying to offer comfort but not get scratched by the cats. Dog was upset over Mr. Sneaky; his cats were upset that he'd been gone for so long.

Ralph dropped an envelope onto Angela's table and then left.

The sound of the ocean roared outside the tent, bringing more tension.

Zack waved at Richie with his burnt hand. "Can I borrow your headphones?" Zack wasn't sure why Timmy hadn't been here to welcome him home, but Mike had left to do his shift on gopher duty. He no longer had a distraction.

Richie handed them over. "Keep them for now. Welcome back."

"Thanks." Fighting with his cast, Zack carefully slid the headphones around his neck but not onto his ears. He barely noticed the Native American chanting Richie had been listening to. He just needed a static noise to drown out the angry ocean while still letting him hear what was being said.

Wade saw that and wished he also had a pair. He chose to distract himself with conversation instead.

He smiled at Samantha. "Tell me about the boys. I'll bet they're getting big."

Waves crashed onto the shore again.

Wade and Samantha flinched in tandem.

Amy took Samantha's hand and then Wade's. "I'll protect you."

Both adults almost cried.

Neil breathed a sigh of relief. It had been hard to be alone dealing with the trauma and misery. He was beyond glad that Wade was home.

Angela looked around. "Who else?"

Neil nudged Samantha's arm, gently. "Take your turn."

Samantha started to shake. She quickly shook her head and tugged on her short curls.

Angela waddled over to the terrified woman. "Tell me."

Samantha was able to speak through her fear because Angela was the one who had rescued her. "She limits my time with the boys. She said I'm not safe around them." A thick tear rolled down Samantha's cheek.

Angela wiped it away. "Why did Neil allow it?"

Samantha shivered. "He wants me to fight back, but I'm scared she'll hurt them to hurt me!"

Angela hugged Samantha while she cried. She scanned Neil's thoughts and found his fear of the same thing. The kidnapping had also scarred him.

Neil wrapped an arm around Samantha when Angela stepped back. "I've been spending that time

with the babies and Samantha's been alone. That's why she isn't more recovered."

Angela wasn't sure that was the full reason, but she didn't say so.

Kyle was shocked. "Why would Jenny do those things?" He could tell they weren't lying.

Tonya spoke up. "She's trying to keep control of everything and live up to the boss's reputation. It's not an easy job."

Angela heard the anger in Tonya's voice. She went to the curtain of the medical area, ignoring Lisa's scowl and Shawn's fresh tension. "Any trouble you'd like to tell me about?"

"Yes, but not openly."

Angela connected to Tonya, but not alone. She was already connected with the mission men. All of them saw Jennifer zap Timmy and take him to his knees.

Zack stiffened. "It was my kid." He clicked the music off.

Eric glared at his father as he came in with a small load of supplies. He was still upset about Zack's retirement announcement. "That's why he didn't come down to meet you yet. He's scared and avoiding her."

Allison shushed Eric as she came in with gear, not wanting the boy to get in trouble.

Eric's voice rose. "If she hurts Timmy again, I'm going to fight her and die!"

Everyone looked at Angela, not sure how she would handle it.

Angela gestured in Eagle code.

Kyle keyed his radio. “Jenny, the boss wants you in the QZ.”

Jennifer’s defensive, snotty voice came right back. “Already? I thought they’d all want more time to tattle on me and sway her emotions!”

Tonya dropped the stethoscope and made everyone jump. “Damn.”

Samantha started crying again.

Eric’s eyes lit up bright red.

“I’ll be there when I finish what I’m doing!”

“Copy.”

The gophers finished unloading the supplies and then hurried out, eager to start spreading what they’d overheard but also desperate to get out of Jennifer’s path.

Angela went to the chair they’d brought in for her and sat down, ankles throbbing. “It’s great to be home.”

2

Theo went to the chair across from Angela for the private session that wasn’t going to be private. He was almost relieved now. His secrets weren’t great and his burns were hurting as they healed, but his issues weren’t anywhere near as bad as everyone else’s were.

Angela studied his unshaven face and his restless mind. “How are you feeling about being home?”

Theo made a face.

Angela chuckled. “Yeah, I get that.”

Theo knew she also wanted a real answer. He didn’t hold back so she wouldn’t feel the need to dig. “It’s uncomfortable. It’s also nice, but I’m worried about being alone now. I might fall back into bad habits.”

The mission men understood completely.

“I also believe I’m strong enough to do it. I just need to avoid the triggers.”

“What do you think will trigger it for you?”

Theo let his loneliness show. “I’ve never been like anyone else in this camp. I’m not bonded to anyone. I need to change that and then it will be easier to fight my addiction.”

“I agree. But it won’t be with Debra or Bernice.”

Theo was glad that Bernice and Crissy had left the tent. “You don’t know that.”

Snorts went through the canvas.

Theo flushed.

Angela shrugged. “I’ve been wrong a few times, but I’m telling you to look outside the narrow circle you’ve surrounded yourself with. You’re a single man with a great deal of respect in this camp. Keep that in mind when you go out searching for someone to ease that loneliness.”

“I will.” Theo smiled genuinely for the first time in a while. “Thank you.”

“I mean every word of it. Don’t let the mistakes outshine the good. You’re a vital part of Safe Haven

no matter what role you play or who you share your life with.” She gestured.

Theo stared. “That’s it?”

“Is there something else you’d like to cover?”

A dozen topics went through his mind, but none of them seemed as important after her words. “I’m good.”

Angela glanced toward the medical area, not liking how quiet it had gotten. Before she could ask, Lisa’s annoyed voice broke the silence.

3

“Do you know what’s wrong with him yet?”

Tonya let go of Dace’s wrist and wrote on the clipboard that Shawn held out. “No, but Morgan and Terry will check him over, too. Just give us time. We’ll help him if we can.”

Lisa was disappointed. She’d been hoping for a magic cure. “Can’t you just zap him awake or something?”

Tonya frowned. “I don’t do that. Perhaps you should ask Jennifer.”

Lisa’s face tightened. “No, thank you.” She’d already heard enough to know that wasn’t a good idea.

Tonya started to push the stretcher to the rear, private area.

Tobias quickly stepped around her, brushing her arm as he took over the job.

Out in the big tent, Kenn’s anger grew.

Angela saw it, too. She didn't distract Kenn like she might have done for the other men. "Once Gus is off the radio, everyone else can have five minutes to contact their friends and family. I'm certain they're waiting for word."

Daryl caught her pointed tone as he stood by Gus, but there wasn't anything he would deny Brittani right now. He was just standing here listening to her have a good moment.

Gus also caught the hint. He waited for a clear moment and then used that excuse. "I have to let the rest of the team use the radio now, Brit."

"Oh. Okay. You'll come see me when you're out of the QZ?"

Gus didn't want to agree, but like Daryl, he wasn't going to deny Brittani something simple and stress her out. "Sure. Get some rest."

Gus handed the handset to Daryl and then went to the empty chair across from Angela without being called. He could feel Angela worrying about him now that he'd spoken to his ex.

Angela eyed his burns. "How are you feeling about being home?"

Gus was honest. "When do we leave?"

Instead of laughing, Angela sympathized. "We're all feeling like that."

"You, too?" Gus rolled his eyes at himself as memories of their trip flashed. "Sorry."

"No worries." Angela was used to having her needs and feelings overlooked unless it was anger.

She wasn't upset over it. "Tell me how you feel about that call."

Gus didn't look at Daryl. "I'm pissed off. If she'd just stayed with me, this wouldn't be happening to her!"

Daryl lingered near the flap. "I'm sorry. You have no idea how much I wish I could go back and change things."

Every mission man in the tent tensed as hard memories and painful images ran through their minds.

Angela leaned back in her chair. "This is going to be harder than we thought."

"You'll get us through it." Adrian ignored everyone else. "You're the boss."

Angela grunted. "Jennifer's the boss until I'm out of quarantine."

"I'm working on it!"

Everyone laughed at Tonya's joking shout.

Grant hated to break up the good moment right when they needed it, but he didn't have a choice. "Here she comes."

Tonya waved Thomas and Greg into the medical area and jerked the curtain shut as soon as they were inside.

Grant hurried down the beach, away from the main path.

Even the church people tensed despite not having bad things to report about Jennifer.

Angela rubbed her belly and tried to find a comfortable position. "Let the guards know we need

some music in here. Bring a variety of genres we can pick through to drown out the sound of that damn water.” The waves were crashing against the rocks, getting to her.

Mission men were grateful that she understood.

Kyle passed the message, but his eyes didn't leave the pregnant teenager marching down the clover covered path. Wearing a loose blue jean jumper with flat black boots and a low-necked white silk shirt from the ship's gift shop, Jennifer was like a supermodel coming down a runway. *She's still the most beautiful female I've ever seen.*

For one instant, the girl he loved shined through, blushing under his appreciation. She loathed his injuries and wanted to heal every inch of his broken, scarred body.

Then the witch took back over, glaring at him and everyone else.

Kyle held the flap for her without trying to talk. There would be time for that when she finished with the boss. *But I'm never leaving her alone again. That's a deal breaker for me. I'll never take this risk again. From now on, we'll go together or we won't go at all.*

Chapter Two
Unstable

1

Jennifer entered the crowded tent.

A wave of menace came with her.

Dog growled.

The cats on his back spotted Jennifer. All of them hissed, ears lying flat. The cats took off to the rear of the large tent away from her.

Jennifer glared at them and everyone else. Her mood was ugly.

Zack used his good hand to pull Eric back when the boy would have approached Jennifer. Eric was feeling emboldened now that Angela was home, but Zack didn't want him to get in hot water.

Wade didn't care about being in trouble. He glared at Jennifer. "You're not keeping Samantha away from her babies anymore!"

Neil tugged on Wade's big arm. "Let it go for now." He didn't want Wade to be a target for Jennifer's wrath; he wanted Angela to handle it.

Samantha stepped behind Wade when Jennifer's eyes landed on her.

Drawn, Wade turned and wrapped Samantha up in his free arm. "It's okay, Sammi. Things will be better now."

Wade glared at Neil. He was shocked that the man had allowed Jennifer to treat Samantha this way.

Neil wasn't offended. *You don't understand.*

"No, I don't."

"You will." Neil didn't look at Jennifer. He didn't want her to see the rebellion growing in his eyes. Now that Angela was home, everything would be different.

Jennifer went to the chair across from Angela and sat down. She hated being on this side of the desk. "Where do you want to start?"

"The camp, please."

Jennifer wasn't in the mood to pretend things were fine. "I know you called me in here to chew me out. Just get it over with!"

Angela kept an even tone. "Give me the updates and we'll go from there."

Jennifer glared around the tent again. "They've been telling you stories. I heard it all!"

Samantha's tears fell harder, quickly soaking Wade's shirt.

Angela shrugged. "So?"

"So, why aren't you jumping on me?"

"Is there a reason why I should?"

"No!"

"Then give me your updates and we'll go from there."

During the distraction, Kyle eased closer.

Angela shook her head.

Jennifer brought up a shield around herself, eyes lighting up bright red.

Kyle stopped and retreated.

Jennifer sneered at both of them.

Angela was losing patience. “If you don’t want to update me, I can have Tonya clear me first and I’ll go get them myself.”

“No!” Jennifer heard her loud, defensive tone and tried to calm down. “There are a lot of updates. Do you want them in any particular order?”

“Start at one end and go all the way through. Finish right here, with yourself.”

Jennifer forced herself to obey. “We have double the food that we had before you left. We’ve fished every day and the orchards are doing much better now that Samantha has taken over care of our crops.” Jennifer smiled toward Samantha.

Samantha quickly wiped her face and smiled back around Wade’s arm, but everyone saw it was forced.

“We have six months’ worth of water stored on the island. The tanks on the cruise ship are full.”

“That’s great. Power?”

“We’ve run power cords to all the main buildings. Half of them are being powered during the day by the solar panels, but we haven’t solved the battery storage puzzle yet, so we’re still using a lot of candles at night.”

“Kenn will help with that.”

Kenn nodded from his cot, where he was still watching the medics. He didn't mind that type of work.

Angela subtly studied Jennifer as she made notes on the updates. "Shelter?"

"We finished the first bunkhouse in town. Daryl did an amazing job on it."

Daryl stared back coolly. He couldn't be bought off with nice words.

"The work crew moved in the basic furniture a week ago. We're still adjusting as we go on that one. We keep having to move things around to maximize the space."

"We knew it would be cramped. Are at least a few people living in it yet?"

Jennifer lifted her chin proudly. "Everyone is."

Angela stared. "How did you manage that?"

"I insisted."

A cold breeze went through the tent.

Angela made another short note in her book. "Defense?"

"We have four towers around the island with a locked gun cabinet in each. There's also a kit with a radio and battery charger, rations, and a medical box."

"Good." Angela braced for the bad news she knew was coming. "Health?"

Jennifer started with the good news. "All of the people who were wounded in our last fights have recovered. Not all of them fully, of course. We can't regrow fingers and toes."

Mission men winced at her brutal words. Greg shut his eye and relived losing the other one.

Jennifer paled as she caught their memories, their scars. Her gaze went to Greg's eye patch and flinched away. The mission team had been so quiet that she'd overlooked their pain. "Sorry."

Angela moved on. "What about the other people who have issues?"

"Candy and Brittani are hanging on, but it's not good for either of them. We've been doing daily healing sessions." Jennifer didn't let anyone see the images in her thoughts of the two women or anything else. She didn't want anyone in her mind now.

"You've tried transfusions?"

"Yes, from Adrian's frozen blood and from Conner, straight from the tap. It helps for a few hours and then they start sinking again. Brittani has been on bed rest the whole time. Conner does healing sessions with her, as well as Tobias and a few others. He was right about the communal living setup. Always having people around sounds awful, but for her, it's helping. She's a little stronger now."

Daryl was thrilled about that, but the idea hadn't come from Jennifer and it wasn't enough to keep Brittani going until the birth.

Jennifer tried to inject something good. "The babies are doing well. Candy has still been able to breastfeed. Tonya said the infants are growing like they're supposed to be."

“That is good news.” Angela scanned her notes.
“What about the garbage?”

“We started doing the weekly garbage trips to Henderson Island.”

“Burying or dumping?”

“Just dumping for now. Even I couldn’t scare up a crew for that job.”

People winced again.

Angela wanted to comfort them, but it might be dangerous to get distracted right now. “Once we can transport some big machines out there, we’ll start burying it.”

Jennifer had already considered that. “We may not get to it. The currents are pulling trash from all over the world. It seems like a losing battle.”

“If we find a way to direct it onto the beach, and then move it to the middle, it can stay there until society recovers. Then we’ll need a trash facility set up to handle it. How are the new island setups coming?”

Jennifer was starting to thaw. She lowered her shield and leaned forward, eager to talk about how much they’d achieved. “All the setups you wanted have been started or finished, except for the medical building. We’ve upgraded where we could, but we needed the engineer here.”

Her slightly accusing tone was ignored by Angela.

Theo thought about what he’d gone through on the run and agreed with Jennifer. *I should have stayed here and kept working.*

“Our ships?”

“All of them got some repairs, concentrating on the cruise ship. Grant drew up a design for a bay for repairs, but we don’t have enough supplies to build it.”

“I’ll see what I can do about that. How are the other ships?”

“Trash covered and getting rusty. Grant says that’s normal.”

Angela kept getting updates and searching for weaknesses. “Contaminated areas?”

Jennifer was eager to boast about the accomplishments. “We’ve cleared the areas in and around the gardens. We only have one other place still testing positive for contamination. It should be dug up over the next two days. The land area beneath the cave has doubled from dumping there; we’re keeping everyone away from it while the ocean and sun do their thing. We also got the guard post set up in the cave above the cove like you wanted. We have personal dosimeters ready for the Eagles who do that shift.”

“Good. Bathrooms?”

“The septic system hasn’t progressed at all. We’re using the outhouses and the ships. So far it’s holding.” Jennifer wasn’t sure if she felt disapproval over that one. She got defensive again. “If I’d had the engineer here, I might have made more progress.”

“Theo’s on a month-long break that just started when we landed, so put that out of your mind for a

while!” Angela only had so much patience herself. She wasn’t going to take shit from anyone. “Update me on the kids and animals.”

Jennifer didn’t push the issue. “The kids are fine. They hate the school sessions. None of the animals are reproducing; the gators stay by the creek. The puppy and the horse have become friends and like to raid the orchards together. The cats are good mousers, but they eat too much. I cut their rations.”

And that explains Tonya’s displeasure. Angela lifted a brow. “Down to?”

“Every other day on scraps from the mess. The rest of the time, they get sent to the fishing area while we’re gutting the haul. They seem healthy so far.”

“We made some friends in Australia. At some point, we’ll pick up a small herd from them and try again to create a farm that we raise for meat.”

Jennifer waited for more, curious about their trip.

Angela moved on. “Crime?”

“We removed three rookies from the Eagles over theft. They were given warnings and put under watch. Tim put them with church people so it wasn’t a drain on manpower.”

“And the others?”

Jennifer’s shoulders went up again. “We’ve had no problems other than the fights you’ve already been told about. I handled them quickly and fairly

and moved on. Ralph and Pam are still on conditional release.”

Jennifer didn't mention Tim. The outcome of the vote on privacy was still upsetting to some people. Tim had forced that by not revealing Courtney's plan to blow up the ship. Jennifer thought he should have been punished with more than just an Eagle beating, but it was too late for that now.

“Events?”

“The monthly matchup was put on hold while you were gone, like you wanted.”

Daryl and the others hadn't known Angela ordered that.

“I also paused all weddings and parties because we're going through supplies too fast. We have to switch to group events or there won't be anything left for everyone else.”

“I agree.” Angela looked up from her notes so she could watch Jennifer's expressions. “The normals?”

Jennifer sighed. “It's tense again. I handled a problem openly. I thought it was better than trying to hide it like we've always done. I take full blame for that. I've tried to talk to people about it, but they don't trust me now; they're scared.”

Angela stared at her. “That doesn't bother you.”

“No. Like I said, we didn't have any big problems. You told me to keep the peace and I've done that.” Jennifer went on, now in full defense mode. “I zapped Timmy because he asked me to.

He's having a hard time sticking to the diet and exercise program. He got frustrated with himself and asked me to help. I didn't like doing it."

Angela heard the lie. Jennifer had enjoyed it.

Their witnesses hadn't known Timmy asked to be zapped. A few of them made mental notes to verify it before offering Jennifer an apology.

"And Samantha?"

Jennifer gestured toward the upset family. "They're not letting the babies out of her sight at all. And she won't go out around people, so the boys aren't getting any socialization. It's not good for the twins or for her. And Neil knows it. He's just agreeing with everything she says or thinks because he feels guilty that she got hurt."

The truth rolled through the tent, not calming the tension but explaining things in a different light.

"I know it's a hard job. Tell me about Stanley."

That was the one Angela couldn't find a reason for.

Jennifer grew cold. "He didn't like the new Eagle rules, the bunkhouse living, the corrections, the changes. He mouthed off and then he wouldn't stop. I made him quit before the brawlers got involved. He would have gotten worse from them. They don't like it when I'm disrespected."

Angela realized Jennifer now had the brawlers in her pocket. "I see you've lined up an army if you need it."

Jennifer glared. "Do I?"

Angela slowly nodded. "Yes. I'm going to do what you fear the most."

Jennifer shoved up from the table. “I won’t take it back! I don’t want to be that other Jennifer again!”

Angela stayed calm. “Have you been tested for the rage illness?”

“Of course.”

“And?”

“I’m infected. We all are. You knew that before you left!”

“Any progress on the vaccine?”

“No. I put the medics to work on the cancer people. Anger can wait!”

Angela regarded her pointedly. “No, it can’t, Jenny.”

Jennifer barely got control of herself. “Anything else? I have rounds waiting.”

Angela smiled sincerely. “Thank you for keeping them together and safe.”

Jennifer grunted unhappily. “It’s my honor.” She stomped to the exit.

Kyle stepped in front of her.

Jennifer felt bad about his new injuries, but she wasn’t going to budge on her choice. “No.”

Kyle steeled his tone. “I want to see my kids.”

Jennifer went around him. “I’ll take care of it.”

“Jenny...”

“No!” Jennifer left.

Kyle was distraught. “Can you help her?”

Angela shook her head. “Not while she’s so angry and defensive. We have to let this play out.”

“You could insist that she take it back.”

“No, I can’t.” Angela resumed making notes in her book without explaining. If she insisted, it would push Jennifer into doing something drastic. She had to come around to it on her own and that would take time. “Personal sessions are resuming in five minutes. If you’re not seeing the medic, you’re seeing me.”

Angela’s face settled into an expression the mission men knew too well.

People started talking and muttering.

Kyle begged. “Please don’t hurt her.”

“I won’t. She’ll do that to herself.”

“No!”

“You’re the only one who might be able to reach her, Kyle.”

“Then clear me first.”

Angela signaled Tonya, who was watching through the open curtain. “Clear Kyle last and then keep him away from her.”

“What?!”

“She doesn’t want to deal with you yet, Eagle. She’s afraid we’ll force her into removing your gifts.”

“We will!”

“Exactly. Let her calm down. That much stress isn’t good for the baby.”

Kyle stared, scared. “You’ve made another plan.”

“Not completely. I need help with parts of it.”

“What do you need me to do?”

“Make her want you more than leadership.”

“How do I do that?!”

“Have an affair with me.”

Silence went through the tent and the guards outside.

Kyle scowled. “Say that again.”

Angela grimaced. “No. Once was too much.”

“Then you don’t mean it.”

“But I do.” Angela pointed. “By this time tomorrow, everyone outside this tent will think you cheated on her during our run.”

Kyle scoffed. “No one’s going to believe that. Look at the size of you!”

People chuckled or groaned at his insensitive comment.

Angela waddled over to him while sending out a wave of desire.

Kyle was struck. He froze, trying to fight it.

Angela kissed him softly in front of everyone.

The guards outside the tent saw it; so did the brawlers as they came by.

Angela stepped back. “There. That’s not hard at all.”

Kyle shifted uncomfortably. “Says you.”

Angela laughed as she went back to the chair. “Let’s get some more personal therapy sessions done. I want all the kids and Marc next.”

In the medical area, Cate lowered her shield.

Tonya jumped. “Where did you come from?!”

“My mom.” Cate giggled as she left Lisa’s side to attend the therapy session. Her longer hair bounced against her neck in cute curls that reminded

everyone of Angela even though Cate wasn't her biological daughter.

Cody joined his sister, still appearing very much the same as the boy who'd left with them. *But I'm not the same and they all know it. That's why they don't look at me for long.*

Angela nodded at him. People had treated her the same way after she'd taken over Adrian's job. Some of them still didn't like to make eye contact with her because she was the leader. Cody was adjusting well to being treated differently.

In the corner of the tent, Megan casually picked up a CD that one of the kids had set down. She slid it into her pocket as she went to the exit.

The six month-old puppy rushed into the tent, getting under Megan's feet.

Megan let herself fall, kicking the puppy in the process. *I hate dogs!*

People hurried over to help her up.

About to enter the tent with the rest of the church group, Ed glared at Megan. He'd seen it all. The pretty brunette thought she could do whatever she wanted because she had pouty lips and curvy hips, but Ed wasn't impressed.

Megan acted like she hadn't noticed his anger. She accepted the kindness from the men who helped her up and then left with a small smirk.

Angela made another note in her book. "I need my hourly weather update."

Mission men glanced toward Ray.

Ray shrugged. "I'm quarantined."

Grant had come back as soon as Jennifer left. He spoke up from the flap. "I'll go do a round of the sub and check on it for you."

As he left, Samantha caught Angela's attention. "I can try to look...if Grant will let me."

Angela pinned her with a hard glare. "You already know Grant doesn't own you, but you're clinging to it."

"He's good." Samantha shivered. "I can't be captured again if someone already owns me."

The mission men all felt bad for her.

"Get her ready for freedom, Neil." Angela already couldn't take Samantha's attitude.

Neil held up a hand defensively. "She hasn't gotten mad yet. I've been waiting on the signs you laid out for her."

"It's coming shortly. Get ready for it."

"Does that mean you're going to piss her off?" Neil wasn't sure if he wanted that or not.

"I'm going to help her accept freedom, like I've done with Reicher's subjects."

Mission men winced again.

Neil wasn't comforted by that. He followed Kyle's lead and begged. "Please don't hurt her, Boss."

Angela smiled at Samantha, but her eyes were cold. "No pain, no gain."

Samantha ignored her protesting men this time. She slowly agreed. "If it gives me my life back, I'm willing."

“Good girl.” Angela turned her attention to the kids and the one sullen Marine gathering in front of her. “We’ll start with the youngest and go to the oldest. Tell me how you feel about being home.”

2

Thomas carefully climbed onto the table without betraying his fear. He’d loathed the medical exams in the lab, and he didn’t know Tonya or her team. He kept his focus on Shawn as Tonya came over to him.

Tonya eyed his wrist cast and the healing gash on his arm, then paused at the ugly red stitch lines on both of his legs. Compassion filled her mind. “You must be Thomas! Welcome to Safe Haven!”

Greg rolled his eyes at her too-friendly tone. “You’re pushing.”

Tonya let the cheerful tone drop. “It’s not me, I know, but people say I need to work on being more open during these moments.”

Greg lifted the brow over his missing eye.

Tonya stared at it, horrified. “I’m sorry for your loss.”

Greg waved his cast at her. “Much better.”

Tonya laughed while inwardly cringing at his healing burns and bruises. “You mission men are gonna be a handful.”

Thomas was encouraged by the banter. He finally looked at Tonya.

Tonya felt his fear. She connected to him mentally and let him see her mind. She hated the heavily scarred man's terror, but she did admire his strength. He'd walked in here on his own, without his crutches. After wounds like his, that took an enormous amount of determination.

Thomas relaxed. He laid down on the table and pulled up the shorts on one of his horribly scarred legs. "Jaws tried to eat me. The boss made him eat a pineapple instead."

"Sounds tasty." Tonya began checking the wounds for infections or areas that weren't healing. She could tell he was lucky to be alive as she examined the scarring lines.

Tobias stared at Tonya in longing. She wasn't open to most people, but she would do anything to put a patient at ease once they were in an exam. *I want her so much!*

Greg glared at Tobias. "Be very careful."

Tobias ignored it. He wasn't worried about the mission men or the strange bonds they'd come back with. He only cared about convincing Tonya to give him a chance.

Thomas caught Tonya's eye. "Don't trust him."

Tobias flinched.

Tonya ran a finger over the healing wounds, still marveling that Thomas had survived. "I assume you mean Rico."

"Yes. I knew him in the lab before we were rescued. He's unstable."

Tonya didn't want Rico's second chance to be ruined. Many of their people had come from bad pasts, including herself. "He only had a guard here because he's new."

"Just watch out for him, okay? You seem nice. I don't want you to get hurt like others have been."

Tonya tried to search his mind for the reason.

Thomas gently shut the connection between them from his side. "It's not my place to fill in that story."

Tonya shrugged. "I have a man I'm happy with. Rico is nice to me and he looks out for me, but that's as far as it goes."

Thomas glanced over at the other medic. "What about him?"

Tobias stiffened.

Tonya frowned. "We work together."

"Not even friends?"

Tonya didn't want to talk about this at all and certainly not with a stranger. She gently shut that connection from her end. "Do you have a lot of pain from the scarring tissue?"

Thomas immediately backed off. "A bit. The painkillers are helping."

"How much are you taking?"

"One pill every four hours."

"Since it happened?"

"Yes." Thomas understood where she was going. He didn't want to become an addict. "Cut me off of them. I'll be fine without the drugs."

“We’ll ease you off so you have fewer withdrawals.” Tonya made notes on his chart. “We’ll take your blood now.”

Thomas jerked as Tobias approached him with the needle.

Greg put his good hand on Thomas’s shoulder. “I’ve got you.”

Thomas shut his eyes and let them finish. It helped to have someone here who understood.

Tonya was furious beneath her calm demeanor. “I hope he’s dead.”

Greg nodded. “Marc’s father died a horrible death before we blew up his lab.”

Gophers and guards stored that juicy nugget to spread later.

Marc glared toward the medical area, but he didn’t yell at Greg. His parentage would have come out at some point anyway. Now it would be out there quicker and hopefully die down faster among all the other drama.

He still couldn’t meet the eyes of the guards as they did a sweep of the tent. Finding out Reicher was his father had changed him forever.

Cate came over and climbed into Marc’s lap, mindful of his cast and stitches.

Marc held her and let their bond soothe some of his pain. “Love you, kid.”

Cate snuggled against his neck. “Say it again.”

“I love you, Cate Brady. And I always will.” Their therapy session hadn’t been easy, but it also hadn’t been awful. Angela had forced him to talk

about keeping busy while he was back. She'd suggested he help prep the trip to go find Jayda's family.

Cate's arms tightened around him, but she didn't ask him to stay.

Marc distracted her before she could ask to come along. "I think your brother needs a hug, too."

Cate immediately grabbed Cody's arm and pulled him over.

Marc started tickling the kids. They forgot to ask if they could go on the trip.

Angela was glad he'd stopped it, but the twins weren't going to forget when they saw people packing and heard them talking about it. He would have to get an answer ready.

She didn't want them to go, but Marc's kids were a big asset and they needed to be with him as much as he could stand. If he decided to take them along, she wasn't going to protest. *It will also give them more real world experience; they need that, too.*

Angela couldn't help her next thought. *If he takes his kids along, he doesn't have any reason to come back.*

Marc caught that. He refused to look at her.

3

Angela bobbed her head toward the man coming from the medical area. "Let's chat."

Thomas nervously limped over to the chair. He didn't want to do this in front of everyone, but he knew better than to ask for special treatment.

“And that’s the real problem, right?”

Thomas nodded. “I don’t want to be treated differently because of my injuries. I’m a rookie, learning how to be an Eagle.”

“There will be some things you can’t do. I’ll have to switch you out at times and give you less hours. I don’t want to hear you bitching about that. If you don’t want to be treated differently at all, concentrate on fully healing and then I won’t have to make those choices.”

“I’ll try hard.” The medic had told him it would be a month before his cast could come off. She’d also told him to use the crutches even when he didn’t want to. Thomas assumed all of them would be on light duty for the next month. Most of the mission men had a broken bone that needed time to heal.

Angela smiled at him. “I believe you.”

Thomas sensed she wasn’t going to let him go so fast. He copied a method he’d seen her mate use. “What about you, Boss? How are you feeling about being home?”

Conversations around them paused as everyone waited to see if she was going to follow her own rules about the therapy sessions.

Angela laughed. “You’re good.”

“Yep.” He waited.

Angela let her misery show. She made sure they all felt her fear, her hatred of the sound of the ocean, her slight concern about being back on land. Then she closed it up. “I’m working through it just like all of you.”

Thomas frowned at her, like she was always doing to them. “And you’ll talk to one of us if it gets too bad?”

Angela’s eyes went straight to Kyle. “Yes.”

Kyle tensed, realizing she was sending out a wave of need for his understanding. He nodded. “I’ve got you covered.”

The gophers and helpers stared in surprise at more evidence of the new bond between them.

Marc ignored it again and kept playing with his kids, but he felt it this time. *I can’t take too much of that. She’s right. I have to find something to keep me busy or the old tiger will definitely come out of his cage.*

Angela didn’t tell him she wanted that. Marc needed time to figure out if he could deal with her in leadership. Until he finally faced that, their relationship was on hold.

Chapter Three

Sooner Would Be Better

1

“**T**immy’s coming down.” Kyle was still at the tent flap. He couldn’t look away from the boy. Timmy had gained a lot of weight. He was carrying it in his face, his neck, and in the stomach that hung over the waistband of his tan cargo pants. The white coat he had over his clothes flapped in the wind, drawing attention to it. Kyle felt bad for the boy.

Tonya came out of the medical area. She swiped her hair from her face and met Timmy as he came in with a notebook.

Tonya read the results while everyone in the tent stared at the boy or waited nervously. These were the results for half of the people she’d now gotten through their exams over the last three hours. “It’s good. Every rage test is negative so far and the infections are already starting to respond to the stronger antibiotics.”

People relaxed and returned to napping, reading, and chatting with the teammates next to them in the crowded, smelly tent. Tonya had called a break in the medical exams a short time ago so she could clean the medical area and restock. She’d finished with all of the serious injuries and was now

set to resume working on the people who had minor wounds.

Timmy smiled to welcome Zack home, but he didn't go over to chat. He was still working right now.

Zack stared in concern.

Timmy went to Angela and handed her a stack of papers and envelopes.

Angela didn't stare at his fat rolls, but it was hard not to. She now understood why Jennifer had insisted on a strict diet and exercise plan for Timmy. If he kept going, he would become obese and endanger his life. It would also encourage more of their population to do the same and their food supply couldn't take that. "Anything important?"

"These are from the camp. Most are welcoming you home. A few are issues that can wait."

"Thanks." She studied his chubby face. "How are you?"

Timmy forced another smile. "Okay."

"Uh-huh." Angela could feel how much he hated to be the center of attention. "When you go back, jog the entire way."

"I will." Timmy gave her a real smile this time. "Welcome home."

Angela and the others understood Jennifer had been telling the truth. Timmy wanted to get healthier; he just needed help with it.

"We sent some vials of the rage vaccine to the lab. Make sure no one knows they're there."

Timmy saw crumbs on his shirt and quickly wiped them off. “Why?”

“So they don’t destroy it.” Angela thought about Jennifer. “Some of our people enjoy being mad.”

“I’ll handle it.” Timmy glanced at Adrian, noticing his burns weren’t as bad as everyone else’s. “Sadie’s coming down.”

Everyone got set to watch the show.

Timmy left to go secure those vials. He thought about Jennifer and wondered if he could help her. *She’s been great about helping me when I need it.*

Timmy forced his heavy body into a jog. *She won’t take it willingly. Maybe I can cook it and slip it into her food somehow. Governments used to do that. Why not me?*

Timmy got out of the way as Sadie came by. He didn’t want to watch or listen to what was sure to be an ugly scene.

Sadie marched into the QZ tent in full Eagle gear, with her spiked blue hair standing straight up. She scanned the eager witnesses and spotted Adrian. She swept the females around him as she stomped over. Sadie didn’t care about his injuries. “Where is she?!”

Adrian didn’t want to do this in front of everyone. “Who?”

“Your new whore! I’ve heard the stories!”

“Damn Safe Haven’s gossip vine.” Adrian had been hoping Sadie wouldn’t find out until he was out of the QZ.

Sadie studied his bruised face. “It’s true.”

“Yes. I’m sorry. You deserve better.”

“Yes, I do!” Sadie glared. “I waited for you to get home. You could have done the same for me!”

Adrian shook his head. “No, I couldn’t. I’m sorry.”

Sadie didn’t want his apology. “Whatever. We’re done.”

Adrian tried to keep things calm. “I understand. I’ll get my stuff out of Kendle’s bunker as soon as I’m out of quarantine.”

“I already moved your stuff to your shack weeks ago. I’ve been in the bunkhouse since the rule changed.” Sadie glared again. “I know how to follow the rules!”

Adrian smiled at her. “I’m proud of you.” He really was.

“Slam your pride! You cheated on me.”

Adrian was already tired of the drama. He fired back. “You’re not as upset about it as you want the boss to believe. Why is that?”

Sadie blushed. “I found someone who can love me the way I deserve. But I waited for you! I didn’t cheat.”

Adrian decided a clean break would be best at this point. “Well, I did.”

“Asshole!” Sadie stomped toward the tent flap. “Mitchels can’t be trusted. They have no honor!”

Adrian’s control broke. “You knew that all along, so stop blaming me for your stupid choices!”

“Why you conceited, selfish...” Sadie turned and fired her strongest pain spell.

Adrian fell to the ground, screaming as agony took over his mind. Sadie's burn spell was strong, though it was only mental.

Even the people who wanted to see Adrian punished were furious. It sent them all back to the lab and listening to the screams of a teammate without being able to stop it. Mission men moved toward the girl with clenched fists and angry intent.

Jennifer appeared on the beach path.

Sadie felt it coming. She held her arms open. "It was worth it!"

Jennifer zapped Sadie, using a strong version so the girl wouldn't do this again.

Sadie screamed as she fell to the sand in front of everyone.

Angela saw how much Jennifer enjoyed it.

Jennifer's eyes lit up bright red in open challenge.

Even the birds went quiet this time.

Fear went through some of the mission team. Biff couldn't control it. He brought out his stone defender and moved it toward the pregnant teenager.

Guards and people on the beach gasped and retreated.

"What the hell is that?!"

Jennifer's anger grew. She didn't understand their reaction to a simple correction.

Angela glared at Biff. "Control your reaction!"

Biff shut his eyes and forced the stone warrior to vanish. He trembled as soon as it was gone, feeling defenseless under his burnt skin.

Gus also had trouble with control. *Can I punish her, Boss?*

Angela turned her glare on the big man. “If you ever ask that again, your second chance is gone.”

Gus’s shoulders dropped.

Angela turned toward the flap in time to see more pleasure cross Jennifer’s face. Then it was gone and she stared back emotionlessly, waiting for Angela’s reaction.

Angela sighed. “Get me cleared, Tonya. I can’t fix things from in here.”

Tonya had observed it all in concern. “I can have you out by morning, Boss. Lot of tests ahead of you now.”

Angela rubbed her aching spine. “Sooner would be better.”

2

Jennifer marched back toward town, muttering angrily.

Hannah quickly retreated from Jennifer as she went up the clover path. Hannah didn’t meet her eyes, hand dropping to cover her sore stomach.

Jennifer glared at Morgan’s girlfriend as she went by, but there was no fun in an easy target. Jennifer went into the jungle.

Hannah was glad Jennifer kept going. She rubbed the bruise on her swollen stomach again and resumed her post along the path.

Sadie got to her feet. She sent a last glare toward Adrian and hurried off, taking a different path than Jennifer had. Tears streamed over her red cheeks.

She went by a group of normals standing on the hill. They were all staring at her in sympathy and concern even though she was a descendant. They knew Sadie as a warm, funny rookie who followed the rules. They didn't know what she could have done to deserve that punishment.

Standing on the beach, Ralph turned toward the other church members. "Did you see that?!"

Parker, who'd been with Safe Haven since Adrian's leadership, pointed at Ralph. "Stop it right now."

Ralph stiffened. "It was a monster!"

"Lower your voice!" Parker saw the normals were coming toward the beach. "Don't make things worse."

"But we're in danger again!" Ralph's scared voice came out in a fast whisper. "And only a couple of normals made it home. She brought back all of *her* people!"

Parker walked away. "No, she didn't. You miscounted."

Ralph began trying to figure out who he'd missed.

Near the edge of the yellow QZ tape, Pam fingered her fluffy pink scarf and watched while

hoping for a chance to slip by the guards so she could talk to Shawn. “You can’t avoid me forever.”

Missy came down the clover path with Shawn’s favorite bedroll in her arms. She lifted her chin as she went by Pam. She entered the tent and went straight to the guard. “Drop the flap.”

Kyle did it without asking why. He was ready for some privacy; everyone was tired of being gawked at.

Pam’s eyes narrowed as the flap dropped, cutting off her limited view. “I hate that kid. Someday, she’s going to find out just how much.”

3

In the tent, Missy started fixing Shawn’s bed while trying not to think about how much she hated Pam.

Isabel and Selina went over to stand guard near Angela. Their medical visits were over. Stitches had been taken out of both women, though Isabel had to keep the cast on her wrist for at least another month. Their injuries were minor compared to the men. They both expected to be put to work soon.

Angela let them stay close.

Marc frowned. “Are you in danger from Jennifer?”

“Yes. We all are.”

Wade started to get up and do his job as Angela’s right hand.

Angela refused. “Spend time with your family for now. When you’re really ready, we’ll all know it.”

Angela regarded Neil “How many of the camp did you unlock?”

Neil had been ready for that question for hours. “There were 10 more of us. I suspect there are another six Invisibles in the mix. Jennifer already connected them all to the hive.”

“How many of those were against their will?”

Neil didn’t back down from her disapproving tone. “Only a few. Most of them were thrilled to be like us.”

“How did Jennifer take it?”

Neil shrugged. “She was there when I unlocked them. She scared a couple of the more aggressive people by tugging on their gifts so they understood not to go crazy. That’s been peaceful so far.”

“Any name I need to watch out for?”

Neil gave the truth as he saw it. “Candy. She’s terrified of dying. She might not obey the rules as she gets worse. Morgan set her surgery date. It’s two weeks from now.”

“That soon?”

“Yes. She’s not doing well.”

Angela winced at the images of Candy from his mind. Jennifer had been closed to them all, preventing images.

“Conner’s draining himself at her healing sessions, but it isn’t doing much.”

Adrian spoke up even though he knew no one wanted to hear his voice right now. They all liked Sadie. Everyone would now blame him for her being punished. “I brought some other vials from the lab. One of them is a cancer treatment.”

“They had the cure for cancer?!” Tonya was suddenly furious.

Adrian understood; he’d felt the same way when he found it. He was just bitter now. “The records called it a treatment, not a cure.”

Tonya swallowed the anger. It wasn’t a surprise that someone had developed a working treatment and then hoarded it. “I’ll research that and the rage vaccine as soon as I get back to the lab.”

The stressed team winced at her words.

Tonya shrugged. “I can call it my office.”

They all nodded, even Kenn. “Much better.”

Tonya wanted to go to him and hug him right then, but she had work to do. She went to the medical area and opened the curtain while Tobias finished replacing the sheet on the table. “Next two.”

Wade hadn’t liked Angela’s platitude. He entered the medical area so he could be cleared to work.

Piper was embarrassed by everything that had happened. She hurried in after him and shut the curtain, but not all the way. She knew what was going on with Kenn.

Wade kept his voice down as he spoke to Tonya. “Do you happen to know if any of Harry’s lovers are pregnant?”

Tonya wrote their names on the blank patient cards and acted like she wasn’t curious about what had happened to Harry. She was certain she would hear about it at some point. “I’ll try to find out.”

“Thanks.”

Terry, the Chief Medical Officer, entered the big tent and scanned for Jayda, leaving the flap open. He was on a break and he wanted to welcome her home.

He found her sitting near Trent and Biff, holding Biff’s burnt hand. Terry assumed he was upset. Stories of the mission men being very jumpy were flying through camp. “Hi!”

Jayda quickly got to her feet and led Terry over to a corner with only empty cots. She avoided the hug he tried to give her. “We need to talk.”

Outside, shift change was starting. Each of the arriving guards peered into the tent curiously, making the tension rise even more.

Cody motioned to Cate. “We’ll cover in here. You guards can all stay outside.”

Angela held up a hand when the guards protested. “You heard him. Outside until the exams are done.”

The guards assumed privacy was the reason. They left with curious looks at the scarred mission team.

Cate and Cody took up posts next to the flap.

“How can you explain that?!”

Terry’s shout at Jayda didn’t help the mood.

Charlie had had enough drama. He laid down in his cot. “I’ll do the next shift. Wake me in three hours.”

Cody checked his watch. “I will.”

Angela liked it that Charlie and Cody had just worked that out without being told. She also hated it. Their homecoming wasn’t going anything like she’d hoped for.

“I’m sorry! Get off my back!” Jayda kept shouting. “I didn’t make any promises to you. We’re not a couple!”

“Yes, we are! Were!” Terry’s voice got louder. “I kissed you and you liked it!”

“I was just surprised!”

“Liar! Cheater!”

“Prick!”

Angela sighed again. “I’m with Gus. When do we leave?”

4

“Next.”

Marc rose, motioning the two teenagers and Bret along. “Shawn can take a break.”

Shawn came right out of the medical area and went to his cot, where Missy had made his bed and laid out a few books for him. Marc was still their team leader as far as Shawn was concerned.

He nodded to Angela when she lifted a brow at him. Being in a medical setting for the last five hours hadn't been easy on Shawn, but it also hadn't been as bad as he'd been expecting. Tonya had insisted on a pain pill for him when she'd noticed his burns and stitches. "She's good, calming."

Everyone who'd gotten their exam expressed agreement. Tonya had made them feel comfortable by letting them know what she was doing, before she did it, every step of the way.

"And the other one?"

Shawn glared toward the curtain that Tobias was closing behind Marc. "Sleazy."

Angela resumed organizing her notes. "Well, we've always had that type in Safe Haven."

Adrian heard her and flushed.

In the medical area, Tonya got out extra blank patient cards, then smiled at the four anxious males. "Who wants to go first?"

Marc gave Bret a small nudge when he didn't flinch like Kendle's relatives did. "Tell her anything going on with your body or health; ask her for what you want."

Bret had been watching Tonya all day. He stepped forward, flashing a familiar grin as he held out a hand. "I'm Bret."

Tonya shook, instantly struck. She frowned slightly as he let go. "Do I know you?"

Bret shrugged, still pushing out charm. "I think you've met my dad."

Tonya motioned him onto the exam table. “Who’s your dad?”

Bret hopped up onto the cold table. “I’m hoping you can tell me.”

Tonya paused, glancing at Marc. “I don’t have a data base for comparing his DNA. You know that.”

Marc’s tone was emotionless as he answered. “Test him against Adrian...and me.”

Bret was too old for the descendant spark test. They’d already tried it.

Tonya gawked.

Silence went through the few Safe Haven people still in the tent who were close enough to hear.

Tobias smirked. The perfect Marc Brady had yet another lost child. It was satisfying.

Bret scowled at the older medic. “We might have the same father, shithead.”

Tobias backed up and backtracked. “I didn’t mean it like that.”

“Liar.” Bret focused on Tonya before the male medic recovered and found an answer. “How long will it take?”

Tonya got a blood kit from her case. “I’m not sure, honestly. I’ve never done a parentage test. I’ll have to check the books.” She opened the bag and began laying the supplies on the table next to the boy. “Then I’ll run the test at least three times to make sure the result is accurate.”

“Why so many times?” Bret held out his arm. He wasn’t afraid of having blood drawn. He already

trusted this medical woman because the other men did.

“It’s practice for me, and to develop a routine for it that I can copy down for the other medics. We’re recreating all the medical procedures that were lost in the war.” Tonya saw his wince. “We don’t experiment on people here.”

Tonya had already told that to several new people, including the two subjects who’d come in with Theo. She was eager to have time later to study their files. She found it fascinating that Gio and Nero had a natural immunity to so many different illnesses. “This will sting a bit.”

Bret barely felt the needle. He’d been through much worse. “What happens if it’s Adrian?”

Tonya was sure the alert boy saw her wince this time. She didn’t lie. “People will start to dislike you even before they meet you. Mitchels are not welcome with us, for good reasons.”

Bret had observed Adrian’s argument with the blue-haired woman, but he’d been hoping that was an exception and not the rule. “I’ve heard stories about his son, Conner. He has a good place here.”

Tonya began drawing the blood from his thin arm. “Yes, and no. He’s made some mistakes and he’s been punished for them. He continues to improve, but we’ll never really forget that he carried on the Mitchel legacy of not being trustworthy around women.”

Adrian rolled over on his cot to avoid the accusing stares of those listening to the

conversation. He concentrated on Tonya's tones, feeling her personal dislike. *She didn't let go of her grudge against me at all. In fact, it sounds like it's worse now.*

He kept listening, trying to figure out how deep it went. He had to make peace with the people who hated him the most; he just wasn't sure how to do that. He hoped for a clue on it as Bret asked his next question.

“What if it's Reicher?”

Tonya eyed Marc's burnt skin and decided to be completely honest again. “It's not, kid. I'm already certain you're a Mitchel. It's in that grin, those eyes, the arrogance in your tone. I'm sorry. If Marc was your brother, you'd have a fighting chance here since the boss will do anything to make him happy. She hates Adrian; we all do.”

Bret's shoulders drooped. “I probably won't stay long then. I've spent too much time living with people who hate me.”

Tonya withdrew the needle and smoothly stuck the band aid over the hole with her free hand. “Where would you go?”

“To America, for the final battle.”

Tonya capped the tube and labeled it. “That's years away.”

Bret's tone grew sharp. “It's not. I'm already certain it will happen sooner. It's in the wind, the water, the sun. I'm sorry. Nature isn't going to sit back and wait until you're all ready to kill her.”

Tonya was taken aback by his brutal words and razor sharp intelligence. He'd tossed her exact lines back, making his own point. "It's definitely not Marc."

Marc put his good hand on Bret's shoulder. "Safe Haven isn't supposed to discriminate. If you fight hard to follow the rules and make a good place here for yourself, I'll help you. So will any of the mission men, including Tonya's fiancé."

Tonya caught the hint that she was letting her bias show. She shook her head. "Don't lie to him, Marc. In time, when he starts eyeing Angela, or Samantha, or one of our kids, you won't trust him either."

"If he goes bad, there's no reason for me to trust him." Marc understood what Tonya was doing now. She wanted the boy to be scared so he wouldn't follow in his father's footsteps. "Anyone who can't follow our rules shouldn't be here."

Bret caught Marc's thought through the team hive. He smiled at Tonya. "Thanks for caring enough to bullshit me."

Tonya laughed in surprise. "Oh, yeah. You're definitely a Mitchel."

Marc frowned this time. "Are you saying I'm not as sharp as Adrian?"

"Yes. That's exactly what I'm saying."

Marc laughed with her, feeling at ease now.

Angela approved of Tonya's manner. Those males would now have a better medical memory to hopefully push out one of the bad ones.

Kenn watched and listened proudly, but with a bit of dread. He still hated getting a medical exam, but that wasn't his issue. *I'm about to break the rules and prove you don't have to be a Mitchel to cause trouble.*

In the medical tent, Tonya caught that and turned her back to the patients to keep them from seeing her happiness. *I love that man so much!*

5

“She has no right to keep you here. A young man your age should be out exploring the world, finding his place in it.”

Charlie tossed restlessly on his cot as the sultry, conniving voice in his nightmare continued.

“She keeps you here because she's weak. She knows she can't handle leadership without you. It's not fair.”

Charlie stared at the woman's beautiful facade in anger. “You shouldn't be here!”

Nature chuckled. “Neither should you, boy. Why do you stay?”

“The alpha ordered it.” Charlie tried to pull out of the dream, but the water had him surrounded. Thick waves crept up his legs, holding him on the beach.

“A real man provides for his child. He doesn't hide behind his mother while that child dies!”

Charlie fought harder as the waves reached his waist. “I can’t disobey my mom again. She gave up everything for me.”

“Your son needs you!” Nature’s teeth clicked together as she lunged forward.

A baby wailed as her teeth sank into his throat and bit down.

Charlie jerked upright on the cot, gasping. His hand went to his gun.

Angela put her hand over his wrist. “Easy. Deep breaths.”

Charlie shook, hand clutching his holster. “Nature. Teeth.”

Angela ran her free hand over his sweaty brow. “You’re awake now.”

He’d been moaning in his sleep. She’d recognized the sound and come over to comfort him. She knew from her own nightmares that grabbing a weapon usually came after making that noise.

She wasn’t surprised that Charlie had had a nightmare about Nature. He’d been in the bunkroom and hadn’t gotten to see the fight, but he’d listened to it and his imagination had run wild.

Angela’s witch challenged her. *Then how does he know about the teeth?*

Stories. But Angela stored the question anyway. “Are you okay now?”

Charlie let go of his holster. He leaned against the tent wall, shivering. “Peachy.”

Angela stayed next to him in case he wanted to talk, but she didn't push. She felt the chaos in his mind.

"There was a baby crying. And water holding me in place."

Angela, along with several others, all tried not to react. Fear of the water was something almost everyone in this tent now had in common.

"I think I need to go find my kid."

Angela felt another bond with him. "We'll talk about it."

Charlie was encouraged that she hadn't said no. He got to his feet. "I'll do a guard shift now."

Angela understood he was working to keep from thinking about it. That was probably why he was dreaming about it. At some point, he was going to go searching and nothing she could do would stop him.

Marc saw her concern. He also knew Charlie wasn't going to be patient much longer. Instead of comforting Angela or patronizing Charlie, Marc stayed with Kendle's relatives and Bret while they finished their exams.

He was sure that Tonya was right about Bret's parentage, but he hoped it wouldn't matter to him in the end. Bret was a good kid who needed strong guidance. *And I need to prove I'm not biased anymore. Not for Angela, but for myself. I can't keep spreading my father's awful legacies. The Mitchel/Reicher feud can finally end in this lifetime.*

Marc glanced over and found Adrian staring at Angela in open longing.

Fury went through Marc. *But only if he changes. Without that, none of his line will survive.*

Chapter Four

I'll Hate Her Forever

1

Angela's chin came up from her notes. Her nose twitched.

People who were awake glanced over.

Angela's lips curved. "It's dinner time, team. And by the smell of it, Thelma and her family cooked."

A small cheer went through the group, waking some of the others. People got up and wiped sleep from their eyes, stretching and yawning.

It had been a peaceful preening. The medical checks were almost done. Tests had come in steadily, giving relief at the negative results for rage and other issues. They'd all had some time to unwind from their arrival now. Angela was sorry to see it end, but her stomach was aching. She needed to eat.

Marc pointed as the gophers began to enter with covered trays. "Make sure the boss is fed first."

Stanley didn't stare at Marc's scars or his cast. He headed toward Angela. "Welcome home!"

Angela laughed, taking the tray. She lifted the lid and inhaled deeply. "Life is good."

Stanley snickered. He set the rest of his trays on the edge of her desk and directed the other helpers. “Walk around and let them take a tray from you. When you’re empty, go get another load.”

“Why so much?” Angela shoved in a bite of the shrimp and noodles and groaned.

“Jennifer said to deliver breakfast, too. It saves on manpower for tomorrow’s shifts.”

“That’s a good idea.” Angela heard his tone as he said it, however. Stanley hadn’t forgotten or forgiven being zapped.

“She also told us to bring down your burn boxes.” Stanley saw Angela’s slight reaction. “Sorry. I don’t know what else to call them.”

Angela swallowed and forked another bite. “Give Harry’s box to Morgan, quietly.”

“I will.”

Allison, Mike, and Leeann came in with their arms full. They went around the tent, delivering the boxes that were still taped closed like they had been before the teams left. Angela had insisted on doing it that way. She hadn’t wanted anyone to worry about coming home to find out someone had discovered their secrets, like last time.

Kyle slid his wedding ring on. His burn box didn’t have anything else in it. He’d asked that it be delivered to Jennifer if he didn’t make it back.

Angela sent out another wave of desire.

It hit Kyle and the gopher next to him. Both males ignored their bodies and followed their brains. Stanley took Marc’s box to him.

Kyle gave Angela a deep smile, like the ones he reserved for Jennifer.

Angela dug into her tray again, not reacting to the surprise of the gophers.

Kyle was playing his role now. He'd run through the possible outcomes and figured out it was likely to work based on one brief instant that had happened while Jennifer was in here with them earlier. *She sneered when I obeyed. She's already jealous that I was out with Angela on this run.*

Marc refused to participate. He also didn't blow it. He slid his wedding ring on and helped Kendle's relatives get their trays. He didn't have anything else in his burn box either.

Shawn didn't have a burn box at all this time. He sat on his cot and let the women in his life push food into his mouth.

Allison stopped next to Zack. She didn't care that he quickly shut his burn box. "What happened to Harry?"

Zack stiffened. "He was shot during a riot. He saved Lisa's life."

Lisa was standing near the entrance of the private medical area. Her eyes teared up. "Harry is my hero. I don't care that he wouldn't stop hunting power levels. I'll never forget that he died for me."

Greg quickly shook his head at Lisa, but it was too late.

Allison's eyes narrowed. "What's she talking about?"

No one answered.

Gus took a tray from Richie. “Thanks.”

Richie gestured toward his pocket.

Gus took the Walkman out. “Awesome.”

“Stanley’s pockets have the music. You’ll all have to share. There isn’t much of a selection. Most of it came from the gift shop and employee lockers on the ship.”

Gus was thrilled. “We’ll be able to sleep a little now. It’s great.”

Mike and Leeann finished delivering the boxes together, putting Dace’s beneath his cot.

When Lisa would have opened it, Mike glared at her. “That’s not yours!”

Everyone missed Leeann’s flinch as they stared at Mike. It was the first time that many of them had ever heard him raise his voice.

Lisa flushed and let go of the box.

Mike softened his face and his tone as he turned toward Leeann. “You should visit for a while if you want, or go have some fun on the ship while it’s still open.”

Leeann yawned even though she wasn’t tired. “I’m beat.”

Mike walked her to the flap. “Goodnight.”

“Night.” Leeann left with a small limp that said it hadn’t been easy to be a gopher today.

The rest of the helpers got busy collecting empty boxes and garbage bags from the cans that were filling up.

The flap lifted again. Daisey came in with a line of people carrying babies and diaper bags.

Noise overwhelmed the tent as infants were given to their mothers, shown to their fathers, supplies were brought in, and people conversed. For an instant, it was too much for some of the mission men.

Angela whistled loudly. “I want two minutes of complete quiet!”

The babies ignored her demand. So did the ocean. No one else made a sound.

Angela calmly resumed eating.

The mission men understood she’d done it for them. People would spread a tale that she’d had an outburst, but she was perfectly fine. They could feel her slight amusement through the team bond.

Daryl waited the full two minutes, then came over to the desk. “Jennifer wants you all reconnected to the hive.”

Angela’s amusement turned to annoyance. She’d just gotten them to calm down. Now they were all staring in near panic. “Not yet. I’ll let her know when.”

“She won’t like that answer.”

Angela looked up, fork pausing. “Shall I tell her myself?”

Daryl grinned. He was finally allowed to have a spine again. “I’ll handle it, Boss.”

“Good. Make sure you’re a part of the welcoming committee later.”

Daryl laughed. “Nice try. I’m not verifying anything.”

Angela chuckled. She knew the Eagles would be by later to give them a personal welcome home. “Go spend dinner with that sweet wife of yours.”

Daryl’s face fell. “No, thank you.” He went over to Samantha to give her the diaper bags he was carrying.

Angela swallowed, then caught Daisey’s eye. “Bring their gear down here. The babies will stay with their mothers and fathers tonight.”

Daisey hesitated.

“Problem?”

Daisey grunted. “Jennifer said they can only stay an hour and then they need to be taken back to the bunkhouse.”

“They’re staying here.”

Daisey glanced at Daryl. “Jennifer won’t like that.”

Angela also looked at Daryl. “Shall I tell her that one myself?”

Daryl could hear the annoyance in Angela’s tones now. “Nope. I’ll handle that, too.”

Daisey smiled at him. “Thank you. I already pissed her off by insisting we bring them down instead of making Samantha go back up there.”

Angela stared in surprise. “Did you just curse?”

Daisey nodded. “No.”

Everyone laughed, but it didn’t fool Angela. Daisey and Jennifer were butting heads over Samantha and it was getting ugly if it had pushed Daisey into cursing and openly complaining.

The crying, cooing babes distracted Charlie. He motioned to Bret and Troy. "Take a shift now."

They switched places with all the Safe Haven people watching.

Angela didn't answer the silent questions about why kids were on duty or why they were running their own guard shifts in here at all. She finished the last bite on her tray and groaned. "Please tell the cooks how much I love them. I mean that, deeply."

Charlie laughed as he went by her. Cody and Cate fell in with him, still offering comfort to combat his sadness.

Samantha noticed it. She smiled slowly. "Want to hold one of them?"

"Sure." Charlie sat on the cot next to Samantha to hold one of her boys while she fed the other.

Neil was surprised and grateful. Samantha was already showing more signs of life. "Welcome home, Boss."

Angela enjoyed Neil's pleasure. "Let Cody take a turn, too. He needs to understand what's most important in any population."

Cody's brows went together as he searched for the answer. "Babies?"

Samantha smiled at the boy. "Without kids, a society will die out and then you have nothing to rule."

Everyone else was shocked again. Most of them had listened to the words. The mission team had listened to Samantha. She knew Cody's destiny after only half a day in this tent with him.

Angela signaled. “Get those beautiful babies fed. Then I want a meeting with my female Eagle team.”

“Topic?” Isabel was eager to still be a part of that group.

“Who’s going to lead it while I’m on maternity leave.”

Samantha looked over, too curious to stay quiet. “Jennifer is team XO. She gets to lead it.”

Angela denied that. “Not anymore.”

2

“Last two, let’s go!”

Tonya’s nervous voice drew attention from the calm group that had finished eating and was enjoying the entertainments that had been provided. They all watched as Kenn approached the medical area.

Shawn peered around. “Who’s the second victim?”

Tonya chuckled. “You.”

Shawn’s fear was so strong that it flew through the tent, waking people. He’d thought he was done after her quick check of his burns and stitches.

Missy got up and went toward the medical area.

Angela pointed at the flap. “Guard duty.”

Missy changed directions with a glare.

Shawn was grateful. He didn’t want the little girl to see his scars or to find out what all had

happened to him. She'd already seen too much in his mind when he'd arrived.

Angela got ready for that anyway. Missy was a descendant. There's no way she wouldn't find out.

Kenn got onto the table first; he leered. "Hi, honey. I'm home."

Tonya chuckled because it was expected. The sight of his burnt, scarred, bruised, stitched body made her want to cry.

Tobias came around the table to start handing her equipment. He was also upset over Kenn's injuries, but only because they proved how tough the Marine was.

Tonya felt the tension rise. "Why don't you sit this one out?"

Tobias was relieved. "Good idea."

Kenn put his leg against the table with the supplies, blocking the man's exit. "Stay. Let's get to know each other."

Tobias glared. "Move that leg or I'll move it for you."

Kenn smiled happily. "That is what I had in mind, you wife-sniffing bastard."

Tobias hadn't expected a straight out confrontation. He tried to defuse the situation. "She's not your wife and I've never sniffed her."

"But you have touched her against her will." Kenn had been watching all day. "You've had your hands all over her. Deny it. Go on."

Tobias didn't. He'd enjoyed having to work in such close quarters.

“And not once did you care if she was willing, if she liked it, if she wanted you to touch her.” Kenn’s leg dropped. “She’s going to file charges against you if you ever touch her again, for *any* reason. Keep your hands to yourself!”

Because Kenn had approached it as a criminal matter, Tobias was trapped. He tried to cover his ass. “I’m sorry. There’s not enough room in here.”

Kenn shook his head. “Nope. Try again.”

Tonya waited, letting Kenn handle it.

Tobias scowled. “It’s not up to you!”

“True. If it was, I’d slit your throat right here and now and we’d be done with it. So try again and maybe you’ll keep your life.”

Tobias began drawing energy for a spell.

Kenn felt it coming. “Shall I call the enforcer?”

Tobias froze in place, hating Kenn and hating Jennifer for causing him to feel enough fear to stop.

Kenn stared coldly. “I said try again.”

Tobias didn’t have another option. “I’m sorry for touching you. It won’t ever happen again.”

Tonya enjoyed having someone defend her honor. “Thank you. Please step out now while I finish these last two exams.”

Tobias looked to Kenn for permission.

“Very good.” Kenn stood up and held out a burnt hand. “No hard feelings?”

Tobias snorted, but he smiled. “No. I’d do the same if she was mine.”

Kenn shook the man’s hand.

Mission men tensed, suddenly catching the wave of triumph coming from the angry Marine. Tobias didn't know Kenn well enough to understand how upset he really was.

People looked at Angela, expecting her to stop it.

Kenn didn't give her time. He tugged Tobias closer and then slammed his head into the medic's face.

Blood sprayed his shirt and chest.

Kenn did it again, knocking Tobias to the floor. Then he followed the man down and started using his big fist to drive in the point.

Tonya grabbed the tray of blood vials and went through the rear exit to stand by Angela. She didn't want the samples destroyed. Everything else was replaceable.

Kenn had planned it out carefully. The only thing that was destroyed was Tobias's face.

Tobias tried to fight back with fists and magic, but Kenn's fast, brutal punches took the strength out of him through pain. It was an ugly, one-sided fight that brought the guards into the tent.

Marc grabbed Kenn's arm before he could deliver a final, and possibly killing, hit. "You're done now, Grunt."

Kenn let Marc pull him to his feet. He got in one last blow with his boot as he stepped back. "If you ever touch Tonya again, or any woman, without permission, I'll finish this!" Kenn returned to the exam table. "Come on. It's time to poke me."

Tonya chuckled. She joined him, pulling the curtain shut.

Kenn waited until she put the tray back in place, then opened his arms, letting her make the choice.

Tonya slid into his personal space and hugged him tightly. "I missed you so damn much!"

Angela grinned as people helped Tobias to his feet and started wiping off the blood to find out how badly he was hurt. Kenn and Tonya were perfect together.

Eagles began settling bets based on when the fight had occurred, laughing and groaning. They'd known it was going to happen when Kenn saw what was going on. They ignored Tobias.

The guards near the flap tensed.

Everyone knew what that meant.

Mission men began lining up in front of the medical tent as Jennifer appeared.

Jennifer's sharp gaze went over Tobias's beaten face and then the line of men who were preparing to fight her if she insisted on punishing Kenn for it.

Angela lifted a brow, voice cool. "Problem?"

Jennifer huffed and turned away. "Get it out now. Once you're out of that tent, you will all follow the rules!"

Samantha began gathering the diaper bags. "I want to go back to the bunkhouse now. It's too violent here."

"No." Angela used an even tone. "Life is violent, Samantha. You have to readjust to this environment."

“The boys could have been hurt!”

“Kenn wouldn’t have let the fight reach us.”
Angela firmed her tone. “No more hiding. It’s time to take the next steps toward recovery.”

Samantha hesitated.

Angela stared. “I can ask your owner if you like.”

Samantha flushed.

Wade started to defend her.

Neil put a hand on Wade’s arm. “Leave the boss alone. She knows what she’s doing.”

Samantha turned toward Neil with a surprised glare.

Angela and Neil were both glad to see it.

Angela pushed harder. “I’ve been told you’re living in Luke’s old cabin. I want you moved into the bunkhouse, tomorrow.”

Samantha’s mouth opened.

Everyone who understood what was happening silently rooted for her to keep fighting.

Samantha closed her mouth.

Neil was still happy that Samantha had shown any spark at all. He took the diaper bags from her and put them back under their cot. “Let’s get these little shit machines changed.”

Samantha chuckled. “Okay.”

In the medical tent, Tonya stepped out of Kenn’s arms with a smoldering leer. “Later.”

Kenn ran a scarred hand over her soft cheek. “Whenever you’re ready, I’ll be there.”

Outside the tent, Tobias stomped across the beach with blood still dripping from his nose. He went by Jennifer, who had stopped on the beach and was staring at the angry ocean. A storm was coming in.

Jennifer was listening to thoughts from inside the tent. She didn't care about Tobias or his minor injuries. In her opinion, he should have been zapped a few times so he would remember that the female had to be willing. What she wanted now was to hear what was being said about her and leadership. One of the gophers had mentioned Angela was having a team meeting, but Jennifer hadn't been invited to it. "You're not going to push me out, Angie. I'm the leader here!"

Guards backed up and took a different path on their routes, not wanting to draw Jennifer's angry attention.

In the tent, Angela braced for yet another ugly scene. It was Shawn's turn with the medic. "Here we go."

3

"I was castrated." Shawn had whispered, but it was clear by the silence that he'd been heard outside of the medical area.

"Oh, my God!" Tonya didn't know what to say or what to do about it. "Why?!"

“Reicher didn’t want his medics to be distracted by anything, especially not sex.” Shawn didn’t mention the conversation that had happened right before that moment. Reicher had thought he was a predator. That was why he’d given such a drastic order.

“That’s awful. I’m so sorry.”

Missy stared toward the medical area. Her young mind tried to figure out what they were talking about.

Tonya held Shawn’s burnt hand. “Is there anything I can do?”

“No. I have to work through it on my own. I may regain my sexual function over time, but I’ll never have kids.”

Shawn’s heartbroken voice triggered the chaos.

“What did they do to my Shawn?!” Missy pulled the images from the minds of people who couldn’t hide it fast enough...

Missy’s shrieks filled the tent and spilled out onto the beach. Guards came running.

Jennifer hurried that way.

Halfway up the clover path, Tobias stopped and turned while holding his bleeding nose.

The awful pain in her screams reached Pam, who was on her way back down to the beach. She abruptly changed course, pink scarf swinging. It clearly wasn’t a good time.

In the QZ tent, Selina held Missy and tried to get her to stop screaming.

Shawn came out of the medical area, but her screams didn't bother him. It was the exact sound he'd made while it was happening. It bonded him to her.

Selina finally put a hand over Missy's mouth. "Stop! Breathe!"

Missy's face was deep red. Her wild eyes went to Shawn. She sucked in air around Selina's hand and screamed again.

Shawn beckoned to her as he came over to them.

Missy shoved Selina aside and jumped into his arms, still screaming.

Shawn pushed her mouth against his shoulder to muffle the noise. When her sharp teeth bit into his skin, he barely noticed. All he could feel was her pain. It was like reliving his own terror as it happened. Tears rolled down his cheeks as her shrieks became sobs. They finally subsided to twitches and moans.

People had already looked away, unable to take the misery, but not Angela. She watched it all and let it burn into her heart so the guilt would stay fresh and painful.

Shawn patted the little girl's back and walked around with her, trying to calm them both. "It's okay."

"They hurt you!" Missy's rage erupted. "It's her fault! She sent you there!"

Shawn didn't let the girl down. He wasn't sure if she might attack Angela. "Don't blame the boss. I wanted to go on that run."

“But she knew! She knew what would happen!”

“She protected you when no one else would. I love her for that.”

“From who?!”

“From me, Missy.” Shawn sat her on her feet and used his shirt to wipe away her snot and tears. “And from yourself.”

“You never hurt me!”

Shawn still didn’t think he ever would have, but Angela had been right too many times to count. He redirected the girl’s anger. “I needed to get away for a while. I had to go and that had to happen.”

Missy’s mind went straight to Pam. “The drunk traitor made you upset. It’s her fault you wanted to leave!”

Shawn didn’t deny that Pam’s betrayal had hit him hard.

Missy took a deep breath to keep from screaming again. “I’ll hate her forever.”

She turned to face Angela.

Angela cut her off with brutal truth. “This was the only way I could leave you two together, Melissa. You now have loving parents. Cherish them and move on from this obsession with a man you will *never* be allowed to have in *any* other way.”

Missy cried again, but she didn’t scream.

Selina hugged the girl, heart breaking for her pain, but her mind absorbed the words. She would watch Missy in the future to be sure she wasn’t crossing any lines with Shawn. Everyone else would watch Shawn for the same thing.

Missy held on to her new mother and stared toward the flap with devious plans now rolling through her chaotic young mind.

Shawn returned to the medical area to finish his exam. "It went better than I expected."

Tonya's ears were still ringing from the girl's screams. "How so?"

"No one died."

Missy moaned, sucking back another sob. *The night's not over!*

Selina wrapped her sweater around the little girl and cradled Missy on her lap while rocking her. "It'll be okay, sweetheart. We'll fix him right up, eh? It's okay."

It was easy to see that Selina already cared for Missy. The story was going around that she'd protected Shawn, where Pam hadn't, and proved her gun skills while doing it. Approving smiles were sent toward the rookie.

Stanley saw the older woman standing near Angela was wearing a rookie jacket. He wondered what she'd done to earn it. She seemed tough, but her age would prevent her from going further than a rookie. Stanley smiled in welcome.

Isabel nodded politely at the cute young bloke. She judged him to be in his early twenties, though he had a babyface that made it hard to be sure. As he stared, Isabel felt her heart pick up pace. She stared back at him, surprised by her reaction.

Stanley turned toward Angela, feeling her about to give another order.

Outside, the wind increased. It howled along the beach, tossing sandy grit against the canvas.

Stanley hated how all of the returned people tensed or shuddered. “What can I do?”

Angela forced out a normal tone while her heart pounded. “We need more music.”

Even as she said it, she knew that wasn’t going to be enough. “We’ll also need a snack in a few hours, unless she wants us to just eat the breakfast trays. Have some long tables brought down and decks of cards, maybe some poker chips. We’ll all be up late.”

Stanley checked his watch. “Jennifer has the camp on a midnight bed time, for everyone.”

Angela sighed. She was starting to get upset.

Mission men turned toward her, drawn by the sound and feel even without the team bond.

Stanley caught the hint. “No need to tell her yourself. I’ll cover it.”

Angela didn’t smile. “With respect, Eagle. If you make her zap you, I won’t be pleased.”

Stanley shrugged. “Maybe next time.”

Now Angela laughed. “Get out of here.”

Stanley went to the flap, but he looked over his shoulder to find the older woman watching him.

Angela stared between them until Stanley left. A small smile came to her lips. “That’s interesting.”

“What is, Boss?”

Angela shook her head at Greg as he came over to relieve Isabel on guard duty. “Nothing.”

Greg knew something had honestly surprised her. It didn't happen often. He took Isabel's place so she could go care for her waking infants.

Angela relaxed as Greg took that spot. Even covered in burns, missing an eye, and one wrist in a cast, he still made her feel better.

Marc noticed it. Her words about not being safe went through his mind.

Marc caught Adrian's attention. "You have an overnight shift on the boss."

Adrian swallowed his joy. "Whatever you say."

Chapter Five
Not The Only One

1

“Hang on.”

Jennifer stopped to let Daryl catch up. It was almost sunset now and she was still prowling the island. Daryl had just come from the quarantine tent; she was already certain she wasn't going to like whatever he'd been sent to tell her.

It was hard for Daryl to keep from gloating as he reached Jennifer. “The boss is tired of everyone being cooped up in that tent. We're moving the guards back to give them access to the beach. Keep the camp members away as much as you can while they adjust.”

Jennifer didn't protest like she wanted to. She already knew it wouldn't matter. Now that Angela was back, the Eagles were following her lead again. She slapped at a pesky insect instead.

“We're also bringing down a few more cots and some extra supplies. Friends and family have decided to stay, with the babies. The boss wants you to try to find a few more guards for duty down here overnight.”

Again, Jennifer stopped herself from complaining. She wasn't happy about the choices,

but they were small in comparison to the other issues.

Daryl wanted to feel sympathy for the teenager, but her behavior while Angela had been gone prevented it. He strolled back down to the beach to direct the expansion of the quarantine zone.

Jennifer felt his smirk even though she couldn't see it. It was a struggle not to lash out. She marched up the clover path with her fists clenched tightly in her pockets.

As soon as she was out of hearing distance, Jennifer allowed herself to vent. "After everything I've done for them in the last month, they still have no loyalty to me at all!"

Jennifer believed she had done a good job while Angela was gone. She felt betrayed and persecuted. It didn't help that stories were going around about Angela and Kyle kissing. Jennifer didn't want to believe the rumors, but she couldn't help the strong flare of jealousy that ran over her sweaty skin like fire. She had always been a little jealous of how close Angela and Kyle were. None of this was helping that feeling.

"I can live with the bedtime changes, Samantha staying with her babies, Missy's screams, stories going through camp and keeping people wired." Jennifer kicked clovers into the jungle. "I can even live with no hive connection yet, the fighting and yelling, and Eagles ignoring my orders."

Jennifer stopped. Her eyes turned red. “But not being invited to the team meeting pisses me off! I’m her XO!”

Jennifer felt menacing eyes on her in the darkening shadows of sunset. She stopped and turned, glaring.

Nature smiled coldly. “Hello, Jennifer.”

Jennifer recognized Nature’s beauty in a vague way, admiring the huge antlers and the glowing green foliage that covered her body. Nature was beautiful and dangerous.

Jennifer considered calling for help. Then she remembered her situation. New anger sent a row of hot sparks along her skin that quickly vanished.

Nature clucked sympathetically at the pregnant teenager. “It’s always hard when someone we admire so much disappoints us.”

Jennifer snorted bitterly, but she didn’t answer the tall, cocky entity who was clothed in thick green foliage.

Nature studied Jennifer, taking in the hand on her belly bump and the barely controlled rage in her stance. “We have a lot in common.”

“What do you want?” Jennifer didn’t feel threatened by Nature, but she knew this situation could quickly get out of hand. According to the stories, Nature had agreed to stop hunting the normals; descendants were still fair game.

Jennifer’s anger rose again. “She always protects them over us.”

Nature was keeping track of the girl's thoughts. She clucked again in fake compassion. "You believe everyone should be treated equally."

"Of course, I think that. We have just as much right to live as the normals do!" Jennifer snapped her mouth shut.

Nature tried to create a bond with the stubborn, angry girl. "Just because you were a little strict, they're all turning on you. I know exactly how that feels."

Jennifer didn't want to be drawn in, but she couldn't help it. She was feeling very unloved. "How could you possibly understand?"

Nature leaned against the trunk of a thick, bushy banyan tree. "My methods also scare the populations of the earth, but everything I do is designed to keep life flourishing. I'm always an outcast. I know how hard that is."

"The difference is that I don't enjoy hurting people!"

Nature stared back knowingly. "Don't you?"

Jennifer didn't answer. She knew Nature wanted to use her against Angela.

Nature shrugged. "After so much disrespect, anyone would be tempted to enjoy the pain of those who caused their suffering. It's a normal reaction."

Jennifer's voice dropped to a mutter. "I'm supposed to be better than that."

Nature arched a perfect eyebrow. "Why?"

Jennifer huffed. "Because I'm not an animal! I'm supposed to be civilized."

“You believe anger denotes a lack of intelligence.”

Jennifer bobbed her head. “Intelligent people settle problems without drawing blood.”

“An enforcer only zaps people to get them to obey the rules.”

“Exactly. I see nothing wrong with using firm discipline on a population who enjoys killing as much as everyone in this camp does. Angela thinks letting the Eagles beat on someone is punishment enough, but we can do better than that.”

Nature continued to examine the girl. She had to get rid of Angela. None of the others here could have forced that submarine meeting or learned so much to use against her. Nature had decided on a three-pronged plan. She would turn people against Angela, and encourage them to challenge her for leadership. She would also find easy targets that could be manipulated into trying to kill the powerful woman. She just wasn't sure if Jennifer would be a part of that plan.

Jennifer slapped at another determined insect trying to fly into her nose. “You should go away before somebody finds out you're here.”

Nature was encouraged that Jennifer hadn't already called an alarm. “This is my island. I can go anywhere on it or in it.”

Jennifer hating feeling like a traitor for talking to the enemy. “Don't you have better places to be?”

Nature tried to sound lost. “Even I get lonely, child.”

Jennifer assumed the meeting with Angela on the sub had made Nature long for conversations that she couldn't get from any lifeform except humans. "If she finds out you were talking to me, she's going to think I'm on your side. You'll end up getting me killed or banished."

Nature stared back pointedly. "Maybe she'll be the one to go away."

For a brief instant, Jennifer almost smiled. Then she turned and headed up the clover path. "Get lost."

Nature watched the girl leave while listening to several others stomp about in the jungle around them. "Have a good night, *Jenny*."

Jennifer shoulders stiffened at not being called the boss. She marched over the path, anger flaring.

Nature was pleased by how it had gone. She turned toward the approaching footsteps with a generous smile. "Let's see how I do with someone who's a little more upset."

2

"Damn him!" Tobias wiped drying blood from his nose. It wasn't broken, but it felt like it.

"Can I help you with that?"

Tobias spun around, free hand coming up to fire a disabling spell. He was hurting all over from Kenn's beating, though only his face showed signs of what had happened. He wasn't in any mood to go through it again.

Nature smiled sexily. “Go on. I need the spare energy.”

Tobias stared at the stunning woman in concern. He lowered his hand when she didn’t attack. He’d been trudging through the jungle toward town to get a drink and drown his pain and humiliation.

Nature struck a pose against the banyan tree, making her antlers blend in and her chest stick out.

Tobias held his throbbing nose and waited. He was angry and in pain, but he wasn’t stupid.

“It’s sad to see such a virile man being refused. Why don’t you just claim the medical female?”

Tobias bristled. “I’m not an animal. I don’t own women.”

Nature stared knowingly. “There’s no reason to lie to me. I approved that design for all creatures.”

Tobias flushed.

Nature waited, sending out more inviting vibes.

“My women are willing! They love me!”

“That wasn’t always the case, though, was it?”

Tobias stiffened. Then he got defensive. “It only took a year for them to love me. They’re happy with me as their master!”

Nature chuckled. “So manly. The medical woman should appreciate you more.”

Tobias grunted and then grabbed his nose. “Damn it!”

Nature smirked again, using his sex-based nature against him. “Let me heal those wounds for you.”

Tobias took a step toward her, drawn by the kindness in her glowing green eyes. Then he stopped. “They’ll know.”

Nature shrugged innocently. “Why would they think of me? Safe Haven has many low-level healers.”

Tobias gave in. He stepped too close to her, breathing in her magical scent. It went up his nose and into his brain.

Nature put a finger on his swollen lip. Healing energy soothed his pain in seconds.

Tobias sighed in relief as the split lip, black eye, bruised nose, and scrapes healed.

Nature lingered, sliding her finger down his stubbly chin.

Tobias shivered, body hardening. He glared at her. “Find another sucker!”

He spun around and hurried up the path before he got in trouble.

Nature grinned viciously. “I have several. You’re not the only medic on this island who’s vulnerable.”

3

Terry came up the jungle path at a fast stride, with a complete unawareness of what was happening around him. His mind was on Jayda’s betrayal. Terry had made a lot of plans for their future while she was gone. It hadn’t once occurred to him that things might change before she got back.

Nature sent a stiff wave of wind carrying desire directly into his path.

Terry walked right through it. He replayed the argument with Jayda and mourned the life he'd thought they would lead.

Nature tried again. She blew leaves down on him in a heavy spiral of green foliage. They covered his head and poked his bare arms.

Terry blinked. He finally felt someone watching him.

Nature was offended when he kept walking. "It's rude to ignore someone who just wants to help you."

Terry dropped his hand to his gun as he turned; he recognized the voice.

Nature smiled. "Much better."

Terry gawked at the gorgeous woman. Her tall rack of antlers drew his eyes repeatedly as she struck a provocative pose. "You make the most magnificent deer seem small and sickly."

Nature chuckled. "A medical opinion from a strong medical man. It's good that the other medic didn't return. His power hunting would have pushed you out and you're very good at what you do. I'd hate to see you replaced."

Terry knew he was in danger, but her presence was calming, welcoming, and he was hurting from Jayda's rejection. "What do you want?"

"To help you. The spirit of nature is always concerned with procreation."

Terry's mood crashed again. "She cheated on me, with a rookie!"

Nature didn't waste time reminding him that she hadn't encouraged life mates except in a few species. "Creatures do not worry over doing the right thing. They take what they need and feel no remorse over that decision."

"I'm not an animal." Terry grumbled. "I wish I were. It would be easier."

"Perhaps you would do well with gifts that give you control over parts of my realm."

Terry nodded. "When I ask Angela to make me a descendant, I plan to pick that."

Nature pushed carefully. "Why wait? She's very happy with you right now."

Terry sighed. "I want her to say I've earned it so I don't have to ask."

"You want to feel needed, appreciated." Nature sent another mild blast of desire-laced wind over his stiff, muscled form.

"Yes." Terry wasn't sure why he was allowing this conversation, but he didn't leave or call an alert. He waited to see what she wanted from him.

"You're not alone. In fact, you aren't even the only medic who is irritated with Angela's leadership." Nature straightened as she heard another set of angry footsteps approaching. "I hope your night gets better."

Terry stared as she vanished, slowly, and with a hot smile that he wanted to see again.

Terry slowly shook it off and lurched back up the jungle path. “Maybe I’m drunk, because that was strange.”

4

Sadie kicked a chunk of dirt out of the clover path. “And all for a piece of strange! He won’t stay with her either.”

Sadie spun around and kicked a nearby tree with a move she’d learned in Neil’s kai class. “He’ll plug any hole. I hope she knows that. Whoever she is.”

“Would you like to know?”

Sadie rolled her eyes. “Go away Snot Lady. I’ve heard all about you.”

Nature was impressed that the blue-haired woman had known she was there and hadn’t cared. She let herself appear in full form. “He plugged Piper.”

Fury went across Sadie’s face. “He said he didn’t think she was pretty!”

“I doubt her looks mattered to Adrian.”

Sadie scowled. “That’s your fault. You made him too manly.”

Nature chuckled, taking it as a compliment. “Someone should teach him a lesson.”

“Yeah, they should.” Sadie stopped kicking the ground and focused on Nature. “You want something from me.”

Nature recovered from another surprise from the wild woman. She stuck with the plan she'd made. "I'm lonely."

Sadie cocked her head, trying to find the trap. Her face lit up as she found it. "You think you can use me against the boss."

Nature was shocked this time. She wasn't used to straight talk from humans or so much vivid intelligence.

Sadie laughed as she stomped away. "I thought you were smart!"

Her laughter went under Nature's skin and brought out anger.

Sadie ducked and spun as a tree branch flew by her. She lifted her hand to fire back.

Nature vanished.

Sadie slowly straightened. "Chicken!"

She headed toward town, now in a better mood. "I'm gonna beat Piper's ass into the ground during matchups. I can't wait!"

Nature reappeared on the path as Sadie got out of sight. The smile on her perfect lips was genuine. "Some of these humans are very unique. Perhaps I'll save some of them in a private garden for my amusement."

Nature was using manipulation techniques that were true so they would be more believable. She was indeed lonely. "But this is my island. I feel better here than anywhere else."

More footsteps approached.

Nature turned with a welcoming smile. “Hello, Pamela.”

5

Pam froze. She knew who she was looking at. Nature was terrifying.

“There is no need to fear me. I exist to help all life achieve a full circle.”

Pam wasn’t sure what to say. She had a nasty hangover and she stank from trudging through this jungle so much in hopes of getting a moment alone with Shawn. Her clothes were filthy and her hair was a greasy layer hanging over her pink scarf.

Nature knew she didn’t have to be as careful with this human. Pam’s heart was already dark. “In the animal realms, reproduction drives behavior. The creatures do not accept refusals. They take what they need.”

Pam’s heart broke all over again. “He doesn’t want me. Women can’t just take a man.”

“Why not?”

Pam slowly thawed. “Men only get hard when they feel desire. I don’t have drugs to make that happen.”

Nature motioned toward the jungle vines that were covering all the trees and most of the ground. “Brew those and put it into his tea. An hour later, provide yourself to him.”

Pam grumped. “The damn kid won’t let me near him.”

“Offspring sleep more than their parents.”

Pam caught onto what was happening, but she wasn't strong enough to resist. “Tell me how to get what I need and I'll help you with whatever you want.”

Nature stepped closer, long, branch-like fingers coming up. She gently brushed the stringy hair from Pam's hungover face. “I wish more of them were like you.”

Pam shivered as death crossed over her shoulder.

Nature stepped back and blended in with the green shadows.

Allison hurried by without talking to Pam despite being friends. She was in a hurry to get back to the QZ so she could dig for more details. “Why won't they tell us how Harry died?”

Allison was gone in seconds.

Nature was still maintaining eye contact with Pam. “You're not the only one who's being denied something they need.”

Pam heard someone else hurrying toward them. She stayed still, staring at Nature as Rico came down the path.

Rico didn't talk to Pam. He wanted to get to the QZ before Tonya left so he could escort her to town before it got dark.

Pam caught his thought absently. “I don't think she's coming back to town tonight. Most of the mates are spending the night in the QZ.”

Rico stopped and turned. “Verdammt!”

Nature winked at him as he noticed her. “I told you that you aren’t the only one here being shunned without a cause.”

Pam scowled. “He was accused of rape. That’s a good reason.”

Rico gestured angrily. “I wasn’t guilty!”

Nature feigned sympathy. “Tell us all about it.”

For that moment, Pam was drawn out of her own misery. Everyone in Safe Haven was curious about Rico’s history.

Rico didn’t know why he was answering, but the memory spilled anyway. “Marri worked in the medical bay. She smiled at me a lot; she was nice to me. That never happened in the lab. It was a harsh place.”

Rico’s eyes grew glazed with the flashes as he relived it. “All women were required to produce offspring. They were often matched to men in other bunkers to maintain genetic diversity levels. I found Marri on the edge of tears when I came in for a test. She said she didn’t want to get married and leave our bunker for some strange land. She wanted me to help her escape. I kept telling her no.”

Pam made a connection. “You weren’t corrupt like the others there.”

Rico shook his head. “I was born prima. No matter what they tried, it didn’t turn me.”

Nature kept it going. “They set you up in a way you couldn’t fight.”

Rico nodded. “I think so now. Back then, I just felt bad for her. When Marri said she’d sleep with

me if I helped her escape, I refused. Then she started crying. I can't take it when they cry."

Pam listened raptly, but she still didn't look away from Nature.

"I held her. She kissed me." He scowled. "I'm a man. I felt desire for her then, but I pulled away and refused. She went crazy. She tore up her clothes, right there in front of me! I told the guard it was a setup. I told my brother, too, but they still believed her! I wasn't guilty and they gaoled me. They hurt me! I was innocent!"

Nature pushed. "That time."

Rico's shoulders drooped. "After I served my punishment, I did what I'd been accused of."

"And where did you hide her body to be sure they couldn't punish you twice?"

Rico refused to answer.

Nature shrugged. "All the souls here have secrets and regrets. You're not alone."

Pam and Rico exchanged quick, guilty glances.

Nature pushed again. "You live here at my whim. It would have been rude to ignore me. You've done nothing wrong by talking to your gracious host."

Neither of them knew if that was the truth, but they still didn't call for a guard.

"Both of you are hunting for an opportunity to connect with a mate. Help each other. The world is a harder place when you're alone." Nature faded further back into the jungle.

She kept going this time. She had one other place she wanted to go before taking a rest down in her ancient threads. She'd used too much energy in her fight on the submarine. She needed to recharge and let the wound-up humans start causing chaos for Angela.

"I didn't kill her." Rico didn't want new stories to start flying through camp, but he couldn't seem to close his mouth or his mind. "I sold her to a trafficker. He might have killed her."

Pam knew she should be horrified, but the thought of him being punished for a crime he hadn't done tempered it. "They were finally able to corrupt you."

"Yes."

Pam shivered, sobering up. "I need a drink."

Rico showered her with abrupt disapproval. "If you stop drinking, Shawn might at least talk to you."

Pam thought about the vines. "I think there's a way I can have both."

Rico also considered Nature's advice. "Can I help you?"

Pam slowly nodded. "I think it will work for both of us. All we have to do is slip them a special cocktail."

Rico eyed the sun that was dropping quickly. "I have to go right now. Catch me later and we'll work it out."

“I will.” Pam waited until he was gone. Then she ripped off a few handfuls of vines and stuffed them into her pocket.

6

“Did you find it?”

Tim shut the church’s main door. “No, and they’re expanding the QZ now. It’s getting harder to search the beach.”

Ed glanced up from the Bible he was reading in the front pew. Guard duty was waiting for him when it got dark. Jennifer didn’t care if they were Eagles or church members. Everyone worked on her schedule. “We have to find it or Jennifer will figure out what’s happening.”

Tim went to the door of the rear room. “Jennifer is easy to manipulate because she wants desperately to be respected as our leader. Angela’s the one we have to watch out for. She doesn’t have that weakness or any others.”

Ralph stood in the aisle, wringing his hands. “She’s busy right now.”

Tim rinsed his hands in the holy water and dried them. “It won’t last much longer. I heard she’ll be cleared by morning.”

Ralph panicked. “That’s not enough time. We have to finish searching that beach!”

“I know. I’m going back there as the Eagles take the next load of supplies down. I’ll do another search then, but there’s a storm coming.” Tim tried

to find a silver lining. “Maybe the waves will pull out all the debris and it’ll never be found.”

Ralph was scared. “We’ll be banished, or worse, if they find out.”

“There’s only one thing we can do.” Ed closed his Bible and stored it in the back of the pew that had been brought up from the cruise ship. He went to the small window on the right side of the church, where he could watch people go by on the clover path. “We’ll keep hiding the boat until the next garbage trip to Henderson Island. We’ll dump it there and they’ll think it’s just normal debris.”

That wasn’t enough for Ralph. “What happens if someone does find it here?”

Tim was already tired of the questions. “Then we’ll probably be banished. Go lock the main door while I make sure things are okay in the back.”

Ralph hurried toward the main door.

Tim pulled a key from the pocket of his sandy slacks. He didn’t want to hide things from Angela, but she’d made it clear that her loyalty was with the other magic users. *Us normals are on our own. If we don’t stick together, we’ll die together.*

Ed followed Tim. “Maybe we should go talk to Angela about it. She can be very understanding at times.”

“No. A situation like this requires a favor credit. I’m still trying to figure out how to earn one from her.”

“You can’t. She’s still pissed over Courtney. Someone else will have to earn it.”

“I feel bad for hiding this from her.” Ralph frowned at both of them as he hurried back from locking the door. “You’re supposed to be leading us into the light, Tim.”

Tim sighed deeply, torn. “I’m also supposed to protect my flock, Ralph.”

Ralph tensed as a small group of well-dressed people came by the church window. “We have a service starting soon.”

“Ed’s going to lead it this time, then he’ll do his shift over the QZ.” Tim unlocked the door to the rear room. “You’ll help him and pass the collection plate.”

Ralph brightened. He enjoyed helping during the services. “Okay.”

Tim and Ed exchanged glances.

Ed shrugged. “It’s always been sheep and shepherds. That didn’t change with the war.”

“Yeah.” Tim went into the rear room and shut the door. Then he locked it from inside.

Ed began straightening the pews and Bibles for the service.

Ralph went to get the collection plate.

Outside the church, Nature watched through the small window and enjoyed knowing the humans were breaking Angela’s rules and conspiring against her even without help. “I’m going to encourage that in every way I can. And when all hell breaks loose, I’ll be there to watch this camp fall.”

Chapter Six
Team Time

1

“**I**t’s feeding time!” Madison came into the large QZ tent with several empty stainless-steel bowls in one hand and a small bag of dog food under the other arm. She had been put in charge of caring for their animals after helping rescue the goats from the abandoned yacht. She was good at it even though she didn’t have any formal training.

Madison was followed into the tent by the much healthier mother goat and both of the energetic babies who jumped over each other and the stacks of gear.

People in the tent observed silently.

Samantha watched in open fear as the animals followed the quiet blonde woman over to where Dog was still laying down with his cats.

The cats rubbed on the dirt-caked goats as the goats sniffed the scarred wolf. They were used to being around the horned animals now.

The Golden Retriever stood up with his tail smacking anxiously against the cot. It didn’t care about the goats; it understood what was in the bag. *Crunchy!*

Dog sniffed Madison's boots while she filled a bowl for him. He wasn't as impressed with the menu, but he was interested in the smells of the jungle on her. Dog had missed the scents of land.

Madison filled a hearty bowl for the large Golden Retriever and set it down next to the new man. "You can give it to him. I don't want to get too close yet because he doesn't know me."

Dario was impressed that the woman knew not to approach an unfamiliar animal. Most females rushed in to pet any animal they encountered. "Duke loves people. He'd never bite anyone."

"Cool." Madison went to get water for the bowls. She still didn't pet the Retriever when she brought the water back over.

The new people liked that. Other people in the tent were worried about Madison because she was so good with animals. It made all of them think of Chris. Their former vet had also been great with animals, as had his son, Chad.

Angela saw terror go through Samantha's eyes before it was quickly hidden behind a shaky smile.

The mood in the tent plummeted. The reminder of Samantha's kidnapping sent the mission men back to their own captivity and while it was a good bond between them and Samantha, it was a bad vibe that Angela didn't want anyone to linger on.

She closed the notebook on the table and carefully stood up, one hand supporting her huge stomach while the other went to the lower back that was very unhappy to be on land again.

She had figured out why her body had that reaction. Her energy was promised to the ocean. Being on the water was like being embraced. Being on the land, where Nature hated her, was the exact opposite.

People looked over as Angela stood up. More tension filled the air as they realized she was about to do what she did best—lead them.

“It’s time for a group therapy session.” She didn’t give anyone time to protest. “We’ll be doing these every few days. You can miss two of them, but any more than that and you won’t be cleared to go on Jayda’s rescue trip.”

Angela pointed. “We’ll use that corner of the tent. Once we’re all cleared, Adrian’s shack or one of the bunkers will be used so we have more privacy.”

Angela gestured toward Adrian, making it clear who was going to lead this session.

Several of the mission men got up. They were already having trouble fighting their urges to break the rules. Scroll diving and dimension hunting were addictive and dangerous. It was hard to resist.

Other people went over in hopes that the session would distract them from the sound of the coming storm. It had increased the strength of the wind and the noise of the waves so much that it was echoing in the tent, making them uncomfortable.

Angela wasn’t finished. “I want my team outside on the benches. Send one of the gophers to find Molly.”

It occurred to many of the mission men that most of Angela's first team was dead. It made them all wonder if she had known that would be the outcome when she gave those women those spots. Despite all the training they'd done, Angela's team hadn't participated together in almost any of the battles Safe Haven had faced.

Some people assumed that was because of the pregnancies that had run through that group; others believed it had been Angela trying to get bad women to turn good so she could save their lives. It clearly hadn't been a complete success.

"Jayda will host a trip meeting right now also, for those who aren't attending the therapy session. I want you to cover the basics of the preparations needed for that trip. Jayda will pick an XO over the next couple of days."

Jayda flushed at all the attention as mission men came toward her. She didn't really want to lead the trip back to America, but she also didn't want to disappoint Angela. "Let's use the boss's desk area for our meeting. I'll tell you where we're going and everyone will get a chance to offer suggestions for the supplies we'll need."

All of the mission men were on their feet now, either going to the therapy session or the trip meeting, even Marc. He was eager to get the next run prepped so they could leave as soon as Angela said it was okay. *I also want this project to keep me focused on staying out of her way like I promised I would.*

Angela headed toward the flap. It was warm inside the tent and starting to smell like body odor. It was turning her stomach.

Tonya came out of the medical area while smoothing her frizzy red curls down. "I'm on a break while we wait for the next test results to come in."

Tonya wasn't going to miss Angela's team meeting. She marched confidently toward the benches and took a front row seat to wait.

Angela glanced over her shoulder at Samantha. She lifted a brow but didn't say anything.

Samantha understood the silent question. She knew no one would think badly of her if she decided she didn't want to be an Eagle anymore.

Neil was proud of Samantha when she slowly stood up and handed Jeremy Junior to him. He gave her a comforting smile and then turned his attention back to the baby. His own son was sleeping peacefully in the bassinet next to them.

Samantha knew Neil and Wade would take good care of the boys, but it was still hard for her to walk out of the tent and leave them behind. She forced herself to do it. *It's just in my head. It's just in my head.*

She sat down next to Tonya to wait.

Tonya put an arm around Samantha's shoulders and gave her a small hug instead of useless words that weren't going to be a comfort.

Samantha was grateful for all of the caring people around her. Without them, she doubted she

would be as recovered as she was. It had been a long, hard month.

Madison left the uncomfortable tent with the goats on her heels.

Samantha watched Madison until she was swallowed by the jungle.

2

Inside the tent, Allison went to the rear medical area while everyone was distracted. She smiled at Lisa, who had stayed in the folding chair next to Dace's cot. "I'm sure the boss would rather you attended her meeting."

Lisa sighed miserably. "I doubt the boss wants me on her team anymore."

Allison sat down next to the sad brunette. "Why not? Before you left, you were doing good in all the lessons."

Lisa kept her voice down, but she didn't try to hide what had happened. In this camp, there was no way to keep a secret for very long. "I stirred up the normals she brought back from the lab and it ended up getting them killed. I still have to spend a week in jail as my punishment."

Allison was a little surprised, but she didn't linger on that. "Last I heard, you were dating Greg. What happened there?"

Lisa put a hand on Dace's warm wrist; a small smile came over her face. "He wore me down."

Allison leaned closer to ask what she really wanted to know. “What happened with Harry?”

Lisa stiffened. “The normals tried to take over while everyone was in the fog. Harry stepped in front of a bullet for me.”

“Wow.” Allison hoped Lisa would volunteer more information. She didn’t know what the woman meant by in the fog and she didn’t care. “What an awful way to die.”

Lisa grimaced. “We didn’t think he could be killed. It was a terrible shock to everyone, especially the mission men.”

Allison’s obsession fixated on a single sentence. “What do you mean you didn’t think he could be killed?”

Lisa realized she was giving away information Angela didn’t want known. “It’s just that he was very talented. We all thought he would be able to bring up a shield in time.”

Allison knew Lisa was holding something back. “You said he was hunting power levels.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” Lisa frowned at Allison. “Why are you asking questions about Harry? Shouldn’t you be more concerned with Zack and all the hell he went through?”

Allison immediately gave a concerned tone. “I am. That’s why I’m here talking to you. I thought you could tell me everything that had happened and then I’d be able to help him without making him relive it all.”

Lisa didn't buy it. "You're using me for information. You don't really give a damn about anything except the whispers in your mind." Before the woman could protest or apologize, Lisa pointed. "You should go attend the boss's meeting and try to remember that it's a bad idea to be selfish in our camp."

Allison was trying not to draw attention from Angela or the mission team. She tried to project a genuine smile. "I'm sorry that it came off that way. If you ever need someone to talk to, I'm here for you."

"Uh-huh." Lisa watched Allison as she left.

"You'll need to be more careful than that in the future."

Lisa jumped at the male voice. She found Jack standing in the corner behind Dace's cot. "When did you come in?"

Jack grinned at the tired woman. "I've been here for hours."

Lisa was impressed. "That's a hell of a shield you have. Cate and Bret are that good, too."

Jack studied Lisa without speaking. He was still trying to figure out how she had switched her attention from Greg to Dace.

Lisa remembered that Jack and Dace had been best friends before this mission. "It's my fault that he got hurt. If I hadn't stirred up the normals, he'd still be hounding me to date him and I'd still be telling him no."

Jack wanted to ask questions, but he refused to act like Allison had. “Now that he’s home, maybe one of the other descendants will be able to heal him.” Jack had already tried, but nothing had happened. He wasn’t a healer.

“I hope so. I miss him.” Lisa refused to cry anymore. She held back the tears and began fussing over Dace’s blankets again.

“If you need anything, let me know and I’ll try to handle it for you.”

Unlike with Allison’s offer, Lisa believed him. “Thank you, but I don’t think you can help me because of my behavior.”

“What do you need?”

Lisa looked toward the flap, where Angela’s team was gathering outside. “I need the boss to forgive me so I can ask her to heal Dace with her magic. She’s the strongest one here, but she hasn’t tried yet because she’s pregnant.”

“I’ll see what I can do.” Jack brought his invisible shield back up, vanishing from sight as Cody entered the rear medical area.

“I’m here to watch over Dace while you go to the team meeting.”

Lisa stared at the boy in surprise. “The boss wants me out there?”

Cody nodded toward the corner, where Jack was still standing behind his shield. “Jack and I will keep Dace safe. You go learn how to protect him as an Eagle.”

Jack's chuckle echoed; he lowered his shield. "The kid's got skills."

Lisa quickly hurried toward the flap that had been tied open to let the breeze in. The tent was too warm for comfort. Lisa was thrilled that she was allowed to attend the meeting. She smiled at people as she went out.

"She's one of the good ones. She just needs somebody to help her stay that way."

Jack agreed with Cody's observation. "Dace can do that for her. He's always been a good person."

Cody sat down in Lisa's chair. "I was talking about you. You both need a friend right now."

Jack didn't want anyone to think he was moving in on Dace's girl. "That's not going to happen."

Cody didn't understand. "You're allowed to be friends. That doesn't mean you want to be her boyfriend."

"That's how it will look to everyone, kid. I have a solid place in this camp and I don't want to lose it."

"Men and women can be friends without being in a relationship."

Jack chuckled bitterly. "You're so young. You have a lot to learn."

It wasn't the first time he'd been told that. Cody leaned back in the chair and began digging into that mystery. He didn't like exploring human relationships because they so often went badly, but Jack was right. It was something he needed to figure out if he wanted to be a good leader.

Jack stayed where he was to watch over the intelligent boy. He didn't feel like Dace was in danger. He couldn't say the same about Cody. As soon as people here found out Cody was going to be their leader, he would become a huge target. *I'm surprised Angela is letting the boy run around without a guard.*

Cate dropped her shield and grinned toward the corner where Jack was standing. "Boo!"

Jack jumped, then laughed. "I stand corrected. You have the best protection on this island."

Cody gestured toward the guards. "The Eagles have more training."

Jack shrugged. "True, but Cate will kill for you at the drop of a hat."

Cody slowly understood. "They have rules to follow."

"Exactly. Cate only cares about protecting your life. She's perfect for the job and Angela was smart enough to know it. Learn everything from her that you can, kid. She's a genius and they usually burn out fast."

3

"This is going to be a short meeting. I need to decide who's going to lead my team while I'm on maternity leave. I also want a quick update on your personal progress." Angela scanned the nervous, restless females in front of her. "There are a few more people joining us."

Allison and the others looked around to see who else was coming down from the main camp.

“Piper.” Angela held the flap open. “Erin, Selina, Isabel. Get out here.”

Surprise went through most of the witnesses, including those who were involved in other meetings and sessions.

Selina was obviously going to join the Eagles, so that wasn't a big deal. Many people had also assumed Erin and Piper would be given a place on Angela's team, so that didn't draw a response either. Isabel was too old to have a spot on any Eagle team; that drew disbelief from everyone. Her wrinkled skin and solid gray hair were a vivid contrast to the shiny Eagle jacket she was wearing over her cast.

Angela motioned toward the empty benches in the rear, aware of their audience. Gophers and den mothers were staring, mission men were listening, guards were observing, and Jennifer was lurking. No one was dwelling on their personal misery now. “Have a seat.”

The women sat down, enjoying the mild breeze blowing in from the choppy ocean. It was pushing the humidity down a little.

Selina stayed next to Isabel, offering support. She considered Isabel a friend. “How ya doin', mate?”

Isabel shrugged. “Gettin' through. Seems like a prima place, so far.”

Now doing duty over the beach zone that had been expanded, Stanley watched Isabel from afar.

Like the others, he doubted she would be strong enough to be on an Eagle team, but he still found himself rooting for her. He'd watched her take care of her babies and then go right back to standing guard over the boss. He was already impressed with her.

Angela smiled at Isabel. "Izzy will be joining us on a limited basis. Like Thomas, she has restrictions, but we're not going to exclude either of them based on things that are out of their control. Both of them are skilled, talented, incredibly brave people and I'm honored to have them on a team. You will be, too, after you get to know them."

Thomas gave her a thumbs up through the flap and then turned back toward Adrian to keep up with the therapy session.

Isabel grinned widely and sat up straighter. "Thanks a heap, Boss."

Angela motioned toward that row again. "Selina has some amazing gun skills, ladies. You will have to try extremely hard to match her. I doubt that any of you can right now."

Tonya grinned over her shoulder at the new girl. "I'm beating your ass as soon as they put the targets up."

Selina laughed with everyone else and then motioned with her purplish fingers. She had dyed her hair last night while everyone else was sleeping and she was stressing about being able to fit in here. She was bright purple once again. "Bring it on, Red."

Erin wanted to join in the boasting, but she didn't have Selina's skills with a weapon. She had already come to that conclusion after helping clean up the aftermath on the submarine. "Thanks for giving me a chance."

Angela smiled back at Greg's girlfriend. "You were a dependable presence that I was grateful to have on the run. You're being considered for team lead, just like Isabel and Selina will be. Other than physical limitations, none of you will be treated differently."

Now people really began to take notice of the two new women who were joining them, and Erin, who hadn't gotten much attention before this because she had been outshined by everyone else.

Angela had hoped taking her along for this run would be enough to convince Erin that she had just as much reason to shine as anyone else in this camp. People were starting to figure out that being the brightest person in the room didn't always mean they were the most loyal or dependable. Erin had proved she could be counted on and that was worth its weight in gold as far as Angela was concerned. "We'll start as soon as Molly gets here."

Angela laughed as the walking steps she'd heard behind her turned into a run.

"I'm here!" Molly was delighted that she'd been called down for the meeting. After her issues with Monica, she hadn't been sure if she was still a member of Angela's team at all. She kept her

thoughts locked against everyone, however. She knew Jennifer was close by.

Angela rubbed her back as she spoke. “There’s going to be a test in a couple of weeks for this position. We will cover your brains, your brawn, your aim, and how well you can get along with your teammates, so bump up that training ladies and remember how to be nice to each other.”

Everyone assumed that was a direct dig against Jennifer.

Tonya glanced around and found Jennifer on the clover path instead of joining them; she was positive Jennifer was listening mentally to the meeting. “Why isn’t she attending?”

Allison scowled deeply. “Because she’s already proven that she can’t lead.”

Samantha spoke up, though her voice was barely audible. “She’s pregnant. She’ll have to go on maternity leave before the boss is ready to take back over.”

That made perfect sense to Tonya. “I bet that was why she wasn’t supposed to get pregnant again yet.” She’d never really been sure why Angela ordered that even though she had been there for that moment.

Allison nodded. “She’s always breaking the rules and then punishing people for breaking the rules. It’s not right.”

Angela cleared her throat to get their attention. “I didn’t invite Jennifer to our team meeting because I wanted to talk to you without you hiding

your feelings from her. She'll be at the next meeting and the ones after that. Jennifer is still my XO."

Jennifer had been listening to the meeting. Angela's words soothed some of her anger. She continued her rounds, mood improving.

The females sitting on the benches had the opposite reaction. Many of them began talking over top of each other, trying to explain to Angela how bad things had been while she was gone.

Angela listened to them and pulled memories of those moments from their minds to compare the words to the actual moment. In most of the cases, she found something that the women had been doing wrong.

In a couple of those moments, Jennifer had overreacted, but none of them were a crime. Angela didn't think anything that happened was too harsh for them to recover from now that everyone knew Timmy had asked to be zapped. Jennifer had followed her orders to the letter on things like canceling the matchups and keeping the peace.

However, Angela wasn't happy with the girl's leadership and Jennifer was aware of it. She had handled people poorly and she enjoyed hurting them. It was a problem that would have to be dealt with. Angela was hoping it didn't have to be anytime soon. She wanted everyone to have a chance to settle back in. *This has been a very long run.* "Bring it over here, Daryl."

Daryl came from his place on the beach with a rookie jacket over his arm. He didn't need Angela

to point out who went to. He handed the jacket to Selina with a deep scowl. “Don’t dishonor it. You only get one chance with us.”

The other women frowned at Daryl for being so harsh with a new person. They hoped Jennifer’s bad attitude wasn’t rubbing off on the stressed-out man.

Angela approved of his stern warning. The celebration would come later. First, Selina needed to understand how important this position was.

Selina knew Daryl was a senior man in Safe Haven. She already wanted his respect. “You’ll be proud of me.”

Daryl was suddenly sure that the woman was right, but it was his job to act like he had no faith in her so she would work hard. He walked away without responding, resuming his guard post on the damp beach.

Men and women clapped as Selina donned the jacket and showed it off. “New duds!”

“Congratulations.” Angela lifted a brow at Erin, putting another small plan into action. “One chance to go to a different team or to leave the Eagles. Pick now.”

Erin laughed. “You knew what I would pick when you called me out here for this meeting. I’m all in with *you*, Boss.”

Angela took her jacket off. She had emptied the pockets out earlier. “Wear this one until I get back from maternity leave. By then, we’ll have the equipment set up for you to have the level two jacket that you deserve.”

Erin was brought to tears. She slipped the jacket on and then gave Angela a careful hug. “Thank you!”

Jealousy went through the rest of Angela’s team again. It was now obvious that Erin was the front runner for the job.

Piper glared and barely kept her mouth shut. She felt left out. Angela hadn’t mentioned her name or even looked at her after calling her out here. She knew it was because of Adrian and she even understood, but it still hurt her feelings.

The Eagles on duty around the beach watched Angela work without grinning, but they were amused. She had learned to use people against each other so well now that it was fun to observe, so long as they weren’t the targets.

Erin returned to her seat with her chin up and tears in the corner of her eyes.

Piper forced herself to congratulate Erin because Eagles were expected to be good sports.

Angela regarded the women. “Who else wants to be considered for team lead?”

Piper beat the pack and got her hand into the air first.

Allison and Molly also lifted their hands. With their cancer in remission and emotional holes in their lives, both females wanted something more to hold them through the recovery phase. They also wanted more responsibility and trust in this camp.

Tonya didn’t.

Angela met her eyes. “Because you already have too much on your plate or you’re scared of it?”

Tonya shrugged. “A little of both, but it’s more of wanting to spend my free time with my son.”

Angela respected that answer. “Who else wants to be considered for team lead?”

Everyone was encouraged when Samantha lifted her hand.

Angela smiled at her. “Keep fighting your way back to us and you’ll have the chance to compete for it.”

“I will.” Samantha looked at Selina. “You *can* beat my ass when we get to the range, but I’ll improve.”

All the women dissolved into laughter at her reversed challenge.

It was a good moment for her and a good moment for them, but it was a great moment for Neil, who was listening from inside the tent. He hugged the baby and shut his eyes. “Things are gonna be a lot better now that the boss is home. You wait and see. You’re gonna get your mommy back!”

Angela caught his thought while everyone else was still laughing. *Yes, they are. I’m going to set her free and then she’s going to fly even higher than she did before.*

That was the best and worst part of tragedies. The human spirit was designed to bounce back from things, no matter how awful they were. In time, Samantha would view her kidnapping as the event that had made her strong enough to complete all of

the other challenges she would go through from here on out. It was both terrible and wonderful, but that was the very definition of life.

“Let’s handle some personal updates now, ladies. Tell me what’s holding you back and how you think we can help you beat it. Samantha, you go first.”

Chapter Seven
Shut It Down

1

Daddy! Autumn let out a string of gibberish that ended in an adorable giggle.

Kyle's heart melted as Daisey carefully handed him the pink-gowned baby. "Come here, Doodlebug."

Autumn hugged him, babbling and smearing drool onto his cheek.

Kyle laughed. "You have two teeth now? Good job!"

Autumn yanked on his hair and smeared more drool over his shirt while continuing to fill him in on what he'd missed.

Roy made a face. "Watch out. She's yucking again."

Kyle knelt and took Roy in his other arm, being careful not to scrape the child with his hard cast. "I like your voice!" Roy hadn't been talking openly before he left.

Roy hugged Kyle. "I had to. The den mothers no read minds."

"Don't read minds." Kyle automatically picked up where they'd left off with the young boy's English lessons.

“Don’t read minds.” Roy kissed Kyle’s clean cheek and whispered, “Please don’t leave again. We need you here!”

Kyle held the kids and tried not to shed the tears that were burning behind his eyes. “I’m staying right here. I promise.”

Jennifer watched from the jungle path. The evil inside was trapped by the love in her heart for her kids and her mate. It couldn’t get through that barrier.

Kyle smiled at her as he noticed her teary gaze.
I missed you.

Jennifer smiled back.

Autumn belched up rancid milk.

It was beautiful.

Jennifer laughed for the first time in weeks.

Kyle groaned, grinning. “Yeah, I missed you, too, Doodlebug.”

Autumn slapped his shoulder. *Bouncy!*

Kyle went into the tent with the two happy kids. “Let’s do cleany first. Daddy needs another shirt.”

Angela saw it and burst out laughing. “I remember those days.”

“You’ll get your turn again shortly, Boss.”

Fear passed over Angela’s face.

Kyle comforted her, sending out a wave of calm even with two chattering kids in his arms.

Angela let his mood charm settle her mind. “Thank you.”

“It’s my honor.”

Outside the tent, Jennifer's fury rose up and tried to smother her. She headed back toward town before her jealousy could take control.

Kyle put Roy down and gave Autumn to Charlie for a moment while he stripped off the gooey shirt and took it over to one of the huge hampers that had been put along the side of the tent near the water barrels. He felt Angela's eyes on his muscles and heard the mutters of the helpers and the church people who'd come back to carry kids, tables, and rumors.

Kenn caught his eye.

Kyle lifted his chin. *I'm not you.*

Kenn smiled at the baby boy in his arms. "Good. We already have one of those."

Kyle snorted as he pulled on a clean shirt from his kit. Kenn was worrying over nothing. Despite Angela's kiss, Kyle wasn't feeling anything. She'd had to send out a desire charm for it to work then. They were good friends and nothing else. Those who saw more just didn't understand their relationship.

Kenn was glad Kyle was so loyal to Jennifer. It made Kenn long for time alone with his fiancé. Tonya had cleaned his bruised knuckles and then handled his medical exam, but she hadn't spoken to him on a personal level. He admired her professionalism, but he needed the closeness with her.

Kenn stared down at his son, marveling at the size of the boy's head compared to his huge hands.

It was hard to believe that something so small could grow up to be his size.

Kenny Jr. snuggled against Kenn's warm fingers, bright blue eyes shutting.

Kenn kissed the boy's fuzzy head, reveling in the feeling of love for his son. This emotion was rare for him and welcome in every way.

"He needs a nap now." Tonya didn't want to break up their time together, but she had to keep the baby on a set schedule. "If he doesn't sleep now, he'll try to sleep while I need him to eat."

Kenn handed the baby back to her, being careful not to touch her.

Tonya glared. "You're allowed. Stop holding yourself back. I'm not damaged—you are."

Kenn waited for her to put the sleepy baby into the bassinet with Samantha's twins. All three boys were small. Then he took her hand and pulled her into his arms.

People clapped or laughed as Kenn kissed her as if they were alone. Kids made faces and noises that drew laughter.

Tonya groaned as he let go of her. "We should take a walk."

Kenn chuckled as he steered her toward the flap. "I'd love to."

Tonya left the baby in the tent without worrying, setting a good example for Samantha.

Kenn knew they needed to talk about the fighting, about Rico, and about the personal wall he'd built between them while he was in the lab, but

he scanned the taped-off beach for a private place anyway.

Tonya pulled him toward the high grass behind the large tent, kicking up sand. “We’ll cover it all later, Grunt.”

Kenn was satisfied with that. He swept her into his arms and jogged into the grass.

Guards laughed and retreated, but they still kept the couple in sight. Jennifer had been very clear about not letting anyone break quarantine.

In the tent, Erin put her notebook down. She was making a training plan that would earn her team lead. She motioned to Greg. “Feel like stretching your legs?”

Greg assumed she wanted a private moment, too. He stood and held out his good arm even though he wasn’t really feeling it at the moment. Being home, where he’d been a whole man, was hard. He could see those images in his mind, with *both* eyes.

Erin led them away from the tall grass, toward the edge of the clover path. She paused before stepping onto it. “Are you okay?”

Greg understood she’d brought him out here to keep from embarrassing him with personal questions. He decided to be honest. “I’m glad to be alive, and to be home...”

“But?”

“I never want to leave here again, so I can’t be hurt anymore, and that’s a problem.” He shuddered as the ocean mocked him with loud waves crashing

onto the beach. “I’m scared to keep being an Eagle. I might need to retire.”

Erin was relieved that it wasn’t connected to Angela. “Is there anything I can do to help you with that?”

Greg put his arm around her shoulders. “Just be patient with me and I’ll figure it out in time.”

Erin kissed his cheek and leaned against his shoulder. “I can do that.”

Greg led them around the tape for a slow walk and time out of the tent. It was difficult to be so close to the object of his desire and never show how much he still wanted her.

Theo came out of the tent next. He saw the guards, Daryl and Debra, and stopped. He didn’t know what to say to Debra, but his heart pounded as she stared back. *I still want her.*

Dari, a rookie guard who’d joined them from the atoll battles, smiled at Theo as she took her spot near the tent. She was 10 minutes late for her shift and she didn’t care. She stared sexily at Theo. “Welcome home, Cutie.” She didn’t mind his burn scars. In fact, she thought they made him look more manly.

Theo’s body lit up. He tried not to show it as he joined her at the post even though he wasn’t supposed to distract the guards. “I’m Theo.”

Dari pursed her lips as she flipped her long blonde hair. “The builder, right?”

Theo immediately tried to make himself sound appealing. "I'm just on vacation right now."

Dari smiled wider. "That means you have free time."

Ed walked by them. "But you don't. Pay attention to the job!"

Dari pouted. "He's so mean."

Theo might have defended Eagle rules at another time, but his hard body was making the choice for him. "He'll get over it. Tell me where you're from..."

"Dari."

The way she said her name made Theo shift to hide his boner. "Nice."

Ed rolled his eyes as he went to join the church group on the beach near the waterline. "She won't be an Eagle for long, Theo. Tap it while you can."

Dari flushed.

Theo grinned. "I'm game if she is."

Greg laughed as he and Erin reached the small guard post. They'd heard it all. He nodded at Daryl. "Shouldn't you be with your wife right now?"

Daryl's amusement faded. "No."

Greg and Erin assumed the newlyweds were already having problems. "Sorry, man. Marriage is hard, I've heard."

Daryl shook his head. "Our marriage is fine; my wife is not."

Daryl looked away from their sympathy in time to see Tim and Ed kicking at the sand.

Greg turned, too, and studied them thoughtfully. “What are they searching for that they don’t want anyone to know about?”

Daryl’s frown was identical. “You noticed that, too, huh?”

They kept watching the church members until Tim realized he had witnesses and quickly herded his group further down the beach. He passed Kenn and Tonya having sex in the high grass without seeing them.

2

Tonya held Kenn’s scarred wrists above his head, grinding her hips. “Wait for me. You better wait for me!”

Kenn shuddered, bucking. He was on the edge and had been since she started riding him. He’d never felt anything so good, so right. “Now or never, woman!”

Tonya ground in circles and reached that peak as he moaned, thrusting deep into her. They convulsed together, groaning loudly. They didn’t care who might be listening.

Kenn released another blast of seed, hoping it took root. He knew Tonya wanted a little girl to round out their set of kids.

Tonya gasped in air and blew out a deep groan. “And that’s why they don’t have a chance!”

She laid down on his burnt, sweaty chest and finished riding the waves. “Perfect.”

Kenn could tell by her fast reactions that she hadn't cheated on him. She was too hot, too willing, to be riding another pole. He hugged her and tried to catch his breath.

Tonya listened to his fast heartbeat and finally let herself relax. She hadn't been sure he was coming home.

Kenn hadn't been either. He kissed her wild curls and rubbed her sweaty back. "I love you."

Tonya fought back tears. "There you go, ruining a great moment. I just wanted to get laid!"

Kenn's laughter rolled across the beach, drawing attention from the man now following the den mothers down with more supplies.

Rico spotted the half-naked couple in the grass and stopped, hands clenching into fists.

Greg saw it. He decided open challenge was the best way to handle it. "Go tell Kenn you want his woman. I'm sure he'll be happy to listen to you. It went well for Tobias."

Rico went toward the tent, not responding to Greg's needling. He'd seen Greg's eye patch and understood it wouldn't take much to provoke the one-eyed bloke. After being in the lab for so long, Rico had learned who to watch out for. Even while injured, Greg was definitely on that list.

Greg shrugged at the furious man who didn't deserve to be wearing a rookie jacket in his opinion. "Kenn will get to you later. No worries."

Daryl kept watching the church people as they went up the clover path and got out of sight. *They're*

hiding something and I'm going to find out what it is.

Daryl hadn't forgiven Tim for betraying the Eagle code they all lived by. He still thought Tim should have been put in jail for it. *Be careful. The boss might not stop with jail this time; she might take your life and I'll volunteer to carry out her order. Traitors have no place in Safe Haven.*

3

“Why are you afraid of Jennifer?”

Tonya froze against his big chest. Her good mood vanished.

Kenn waited patiently, but he wasn't going to let her deny it. Kenn had been around fear too much now to mistake it, though she'd hidden it well.

“Connect to me.” Tonya hadn't gotten into Kenn's mind at all. After the stories she'd heard, it hadn't felt right. She wanted him to have a choice.

Kenn had also been respecting her privacy. He connected to her now with another low groan of pleasure. “Yeah, baby.”

Tonya smiled. “Welcome home.”

Kenn's body tried to restart the fun. He loved the feel of her mind and being connected to someone in love. He forced it to stop so he could concentrate on what she needed to show him. It was obviously something she wasn't comfortable saying aloud.

Tonya let him see her fear, her terror. She replayed the most dangerous thing she'd ever done in Safe Haven.

Kenn froze this time. "Shut it down now."

Tonya switched her thoughts to their son and how much she loved being a mother.

Kenn began moving under her, trying to recapture the feeling. He didn't think about her concern directly, but he couldn't help the apprehension. Gabe's ghost was haunting her; she had every reason to be worried.

Tonya kissed him.

Kenn stayed connected to her as fresh desire ran through his battered body. *I'll handle it.*

Tonya began grinding again. *Please don't leave me alone again. I'm not safe here.*

Kenn kissed her again. *From now on, you go where I go.*

Tonya's relief lit them both up, sending chills over their sweaty bodies.

Kenn rolled them over and made love to her like he'd been dreaming about for months.

4

Angela rubbed her sore back as she stood at the flap. The sun was setting and the coming storm was pushing a cool breeze through the canvas that had drawn her. The tent was crowded and still getting warmer.

"You should take a walk."

Angela didn't look at Adrian. He was lying on his cot, a few feet from her. "Come with me."

Adrian got up and tugged his boots on. He didn't ask why or care that people were glaring at him. He hadn't had private time with her in so long that he felt like he was starving.

Adrian strapped on his gun belt, but left his jacket behind. It was too hot for it and it made his healing burns itch.

Angela stepped out onto the warm sand and waited for him.

Adrian held out his bare arm, locking his mind so Marc wouldn't feel how much he enjoyed her touch.

Angela wrapped her hand around Adrian's thick arm and moved forward. She needed help balancing on the sand. Her pear shape was hard to control on this surface.

Adrian brought up something he'd noticed only recently. "Jennifer got pregnant on her wedding night. You were two months later. Why are you so much bigger than she is?"

"You're the first one to notice that."

"Well?"

"I don't have an answer yet." He wasn't wrong, though. Jennifer was still small compared to her and it should have been the other way around.

Adrian walked her toward the clover path, taking it slow.

Angela inhaled deeply of the salty air, swallowing a groan of pleasure as the cool breeze hit her sweaty skin and brought relief.

Adrian concentrated on the ground, guiding her over the smoothest areas so she didn't trip. Her huge stomach led the way.

Angela tugged gently, redirecting them toward the guards so she could get an update without Jennifer or anyone else knowing.

Adrian snickered. "You're so devious. I love that in a woman."

Angela lifted her chin. "I wouldn't want to get rusty."

Adrian chuckled. "I doubt you have to worry about that."

Angela paused, rubbing her back again. "I'm worried about you."

Adrian kept the smile on, barely. She clearly didn't want to be overheard, but that was getting harder and harder in this camp. "I'm sorry Sadie was hurt."

Angela believed him. Adrian had fond feelings for Sadie. "It might be best if you went on the trip to find Jayda's family."

Adrian finally looked at her. He tried to figure out why she would say that when he was certain she wanted him to stay here.

Angela sent a light current through their connected skin.

Adrian tensed at the weak pain. He forced himself to keep holding her arm as the strength

increased. He sensed there was an important reason for her hurting him.

Angela kept increasing the strength while staring at him as if nothing was happening.

Adrian struggled to match her, but it was hard.

Angela stopped right as he would have shown signs of it.

Adrian controlled his reaction, not even showing relief, but it was in his tone. “Why?”

“Because you deserve it.” Anger came into her voice. “Practice that as much as you can.”

“What?”

“You’ve dug a deep hole for yourself, Mr. Mitchel, and at some point, you’ll be punished for it.” Her emotions rose, showing in her eyes. “When it happens, act like it hurts.”

Adrian understood she was trying to help him build up a tolerance to an enforcer’s zap. *She’s protecting me.*

“I always will.” Angela’s anger flared out, shocking him again. “I’ll also order that punishment, so get ready for it.”

He steeled his body to the light pain while his heart thumped. “I will. Thank you.”

Angela sighed. “It’s my honor. Now walk me around for a few minutes before it gets too dark out here to see.”

Adrian did what she wanted and basked in knowing that she was still supporting him even after all the mistakes he’d made. His heart ached.

Angela liked the rare physical contact, but she memorized the feel of it to fully enjoy when she had time alone. “Take me over to Daryl. Maybe he knows what’s up with the church group.”

Adrian guided her toward the alert, fully geared guards. “I doubt it. He’s probably wrapped up in fear for his wife.”

“As he should be. If we don’t figure something out, Brittani will die and there’s nothing I can do to stop it.”

Greg saw Adrian holding Angela’s arm. He knew she was enjoying it even though there wasn’t a sign of it on her face. He scowled at Adrian.

Erin pinched Greg’s good wrist while smiling at the other guards they were still chatting with as the sun sank behind the cliff.

Greg smoothed out his expression. “Take me back to my cot.” He did fine when it was Marc and Angela, but it was harder when the man was Adrian.

Erin steered them toward the tent before Angela and Adrian reached them. She didn’t look at her team leader so Angela didn’t see her anger and jealousy. She would never get team lead if she blew up over Greg’s emotions.

Debra left her post and hugged Angela, forcing her to let go of Adrian.

Angela chuckled at the deaf woman’s actions. “Very slick.”

Debra grinned as she stepped back. She gestured quickly.

Angela tried to act happier than she felt. “Thank you. It’s good to be home.”

Daryl and Adrian heard the lie, but neither man called her on it. They understood her stress level had stayed high since they landed.

Debra resumed her post in the fading sunlight, wiping sweat from her neck.

Angela saw her gaze go to Theo, who was still chatting up Dari even though the rookie was on duty.

Daryl sighed. “She’s new. We’ll keep trying to straighten her out.”

He didn’t want to push another normal out of the Eagles and into the church. Tim already had too much sway over the camp now. He didn’t need a bigger flock.

“So noted.” Angela waited, listening to thoughts, and feeling the mood slip further as darkness began to settle over the ocean. It rushed toward the island without a pause.

Adrian put his arm back around hers automatically. He hated her feeling uneasy. “You point and I’ll kill it. No worries.”

Daryl put a hand on his holster, also feeling how uncomfortable Angela had suddenly become. “We’ll double the guards overnight, Boss.”

“And keep the rookies in town.” Adrian had felt Debra’s unhappiness while watching Dari flirt with Theo.

Daryl nodded. Dari and the others were being used now to clear later shifts for the senior Eagles.

“Jennifer took one of those posts. You’ll be safe tonight.”

Angela and Adrian immediately felt better. Jennifer’s reputation for being ruthless was a point in her favor for this. Anyone who tried to cause trouble would be sorry.

Daryl realized they liked Jennifer being so harsh. It made them feel protected, safe.

Before he could question them about it, Adrian steered Angela toward the shoreline, where the tide was coming in. “Excuse us.”

Angela didn’t know what he was doing, but she let him lead her into the surf. *I trust him with my life, just not much else.*

“Isn’t that the most important thing?”

Angela groaned as the cold surf immediately began easing the throbbing in her grossly swollen ankles. “Yes, it is.”

Adrian stood there with her, watching the restless waves and her face as the ocean soothed some of her discomfort. He’d figured how to help her through this part of being back on the island. If he could do that for all of their pregnant females, it would be more points in his favor.

Angela frowned. “Is that the only reason you do it now?”

“No. I love them all.” Adrian didn’t hold back because he didn’t need to. Angela understood. “But I’m wired to combine plans. I can’t stop layering them.”

Angela sighed, letting the bond connect them. “Why doesn’t Marc want to be like us? Are we that evil?”

Adrian snorted angrily. “We’re too good, Angie. He sees us as untouchable leaders he can never match. So he refuses to try and be proven right.”

Angela knelt, slowly, and let her hand play in the surf. “Is he right?”

Adrian didn’t want to answer, but he did it anyway. “No. He’d be better than us in every way if he would just commit to it.” Adrian kept a hand on her arm as the tide came in stronger. “Do you want me to push that in the therapy sessions?”

Angela looked up at him with smoldering red eyes. “Yes. And that’s why I want you to go with him.”

Adrian was mesmerized by her glowing eyes. He had to look away so he could think. Then he remembered she never did anything singular. “And the other reason?”

Fear came through her voice. “I’m losing him. If you’re in his face, reminding him that you want me, he might come back when the run is over.”

Adrian didn’t know what to say.

Angela slowly stood up and started the short walk back to the tent. “Go tell Kenn he has 10 minutes left. Other people want to use that tall grass and Tonya has work waiting.”

Adrian made sure the guards were close enough to help her if she needed something, then he hurried off.

Angela wiped away tears and went to her cot to take a nap. The plans her mind was spinning had exhausted her. *But I'll carry them out like I always do. Nothing gets in the way of my schemes now; I use it all to my advantage. Heaven help us when Jennifer figures out how to do this. Even I won't be able to keep up with her.*

Chapter Eight
Way Too Nice

1

“**T**hese muffins are good.” Theo held his burnt hand out for another one. “How do the cooks make them without eggs or milk?”

“We have both now.” Daisey held the tray out to Angela. “It’s only enough goat milk and bird eggs to do a few meals here and there, but it’s a start.”

Angela waved it off. Her stomach was still happy from the full tray of food she’d consumed earlier. “I assume they’re being careful not to use all of the bird eggs?”

“Yes.” Daisey took the tray over to Marc. “Jennifer wants to start a bird farm so we’ll have more, but we haven’t tested the island regeneration theory yet.”

Angela wrote it in her notebook, ignoring the stares from people who hadn’t known or had forgotten that this island was completely self-sustaining for the plants and animals. “Let me know when you’re trying it. I’d like to observe.”

Daisey sat a muffin in front of Angela anyway, big hips swishing in her blue sundress. “I will.”

Adrian and Marc were sent back to observing Angela’s interactions with the ants that had been

following them. Neither man was comforted. She'd been reckless and ruthless.

Angela had almost gone through her patience for the day. "Actually, I was calculated and determined. You should both try it sometime."

Silence fell through the eating people as they scanned to see who she was talking to.

Angela didn't glare and out the men. She didn't need to. The smarter witnesses would know.

Greg didn't try to determine what had angered her. He kept his good hand near his gun and swept the beach outside the tent. He took his duty seriously. When Angela had waved him over, he'd hid his pleasure. Even Erin thought he was annoyed right now.

He glanced her way and delivered a small smile before going back to watching for problems. He knew how to play this scene as long as Adrian wasn't involved. It was easy compared to the lab.

Daisey took the tray of muffins over to Samantha and her family, who were anxiously sitting with the fussy babies who both had stomachaches. "She isn't here. Go do it."

Neil hesitated. "I want to..."

Samantha gave in. "If she catches us, you handle it."

Neil stood up. "I will."

Angela watched, confused, as they bundled the twin boys up and left the tent.

"Jennifer said the boys have to stay on land so they're forced to get used to it." Daisey handed a

muffin to Amy as the little girl pulled Wade along. “The boys get upset stomachs almost every night. Walking through the surf eases it.”

Angela gestured at Greg. “Escort them. Make a set schedule to do it every night.”

Greg followed the family and kept doing sweeps of the beach. He knew without being told that he was protecting Samantha from Jennifer if she caught them.

Some of the witnesses were unhappy that Angela was using Greg and the other men so much when they had obvious injuries, but Angela knew they needed the work to keep their minds from hurting them with ugly replays.

Greg saw a group of colorful flashing lights coming down the clover path. He chuckled as he realized it was Eagles carrying clear canisters with lightning bugs inside.

“That was Jennifer’s idea to cut down on how many candles and torches we’re using while traveling at night. We let them go each morning in the bushes where the kids catch them again as it starts to get dark. It gives us a renewable light source and helps wear the kids out for bed time.”

“It’s genius.”

Neil frowned. “Yes.” He followed Samantha into the rough surf and stayed right by her so she wouldn’t be as jumpy.

Greg understood Neil was disappointed in Jennifer. She had brilliant ideas but terrible execution.

Wade followed Neil and Samantha. He forced his feet into the angry tide that was rushing over the dark beach.

Fear clogged his throat, preventing breath. He retreated, paling.

Amy took his hand. She didn't speak. She was too busy reading his thoughts of being under the ocean for a hurricane.

Samantha and Neil turned toward him in surprise. They hadn't understood why he feared the water now.

Wade let them see what had happened, how Angela had saved him and scarred him.

Samantha cried silent tears. "I'm so sorry for your pain."

Neil had had a few moments where he'd envied Wade being able to get away from Samantha's misery for a while. All of that fell to the wet sand and vanished. "Welcome home, Wade. You're safe here."

Wade tried to lock it back up. He hated to show weaknesses.

The ocean crashed nearby, hitting the cave wall in a loud slap.

Wade's hand dropped to his holster as he ducked and turned.

Guards followed his lead, searching for the threat they'd overlooked.

Neil realized Wade had come back more than damaged. "Here. Hold the baby for a minute."

Neil used this strategy on Samantha each time they slipped out for a surf walk, though he was aware that he hadn't needed to do it so far tonight.

They didn't do this often. Neither of them wanted to deal with Jennifer's anger.

Wade was instantly distracted as Neil put the infant into his arms. He smiled down at the sleepy baby. "Is that better, JJ?"

Neil groaned. "He did it automatically. We're screwed."

Samantha chuckled, for once not feeling terror as cold water hit her ankles. "We've been fighting the camp over that nickname, but we're losing."

Wade stood in the surf with his family and enjoyed the moment. His stress level lowered, allowing him to tolerate the water without reacting to it. But he didn't forget it was there or how deadly it was. He'd survived, but he would never be the same.

2

"Welcome home!" Eagles entered the QZ tent with gift boxes from the camp and genuine greetings for the returning teams.

"Who's ready to lose all their money?" Daryl tossed decks of cards toward people. "We're setting up tables outside because there isn't enough room in here."

The lanterns in the tent were keeping it bright, but Daryl didn't think that would be enough for

outside playing. It was pitch black all around the tent. “Unless you want to help me move some cots around?”

Mission men came over to help with that. Few of them wanted to be outside in the dark and listening to the ocean.

Angela went outside while they worked so she didn’t get accidentally bumped. Stanley was helping with the cots, too.

Greg moved closer to guard her as more Eagles came down the dark clover path carrying jars of fireflies. It produced a constant symphony of colorful light.

Angela laughed. “That’s pretty. I want one!”

Morgan handed her his as he entered the tent. He didn’t stop to chat; he went to the medical area and handed the newest test results to Tonya.

Tonya took them. “Hang on. I may have a response.” It was difficult to communicate across the island with so few radios set up, but they were making it work through notes, word of mouth, and foot travel.

Morgan swept the tent while he waited. It would have fooled the camp. The happy noises and cluttered calmness was very realistic, but Morgan saw the hand twitches, the agitated eyes, and the constant nervous looks among the team members. Those signs were more subtle than the scars, the casts, and the bandages, but they spoke to him just as loudly.

“I’m good. You can go.” Tonya smiled to soften the words.

Morgan wasn’t offended. She’d been here all day. She had to be tired. He scanned her reddening face and found a small hickey on her neck. He laughed. “Carry on.”

Tonya shoved his arm to get him out of the medical area. Everyone had been smirking at her and Kenn since they’d come back from their walk. *I don’t know how to be quiet during sex and I don’t want to learn.*

Kenn leered at her. “Don’t you dare change a thing, woman.”

Morgan was happy their reunion had gone well. He drew in a deep breath and hoped the next one would, too.

Shawn felt him coming.

So did Missy. She stepped in front of Shawn, blocking Morgan’s path.

People paused, watching in alarm for another scene that might bring their enforcer back to the beach before her shift was due.

Morgan neatly scooped the wild girl up and tossed her over his big shoulder.

Missy laughed as he bounced her around in a circle. “More!”

Shawn chuckled. He was glad Missy had made peace with Morgan while he was gone.

Morgan lifted a brow. “What about us?”

Shawn had never been that upset with Morgan anyway, but he now had a larger tolerance for men

with obsessions. “We’re good. I just needed a break.”

Morgan eyed the scarred, burnt man and caught bits of his thoughts. He put Missy on her feet and gently pushed her toward the flap. “Get the kids working on the garbage, squirt.”

“You got it.” Missy hurried off to gather the other idle kids.

Morgan was horrified as Shawn opened his thoughts. *Now I understand why I could hear Missy’s screams all the way up at the little clinic.*

Shawn tried not to linger on it as he itched a mosquito bite on his arm. “The boss, and Harry, gave me some hope. We’ll see how it goes.”

“Ay.” Selina patted Shawn’s other wrist. “We’ll work on it as soon as we get to our hotel, mate. This one doesn’t even have a dunny!”

The men laughed, both appreciating her sense of humor.

Selina got up and walked toward the flap. “You blokes play nice.”

Morgan knew that was her way of warning him not to upset Shawn. “She’s cute. Love the purple hair.”

“Wait until you see her shoot.”

Morgan had heard she was like Angela used to be. “You’ll have to tell me how that happened sometime.”

Shawn had been having flashbacks all day. Remembering Harry’s death sent anger into his tone this time. “It’s very meet cute. I was fogged. She

was part of Harry's harem. Our eyes met over his body and we've been together ever since."

Mission men turned toward his sarcasm.

Angela came back into the tent.

"I'm sorry." Shawn laid down on his cot and shut his eyes. "It was a long day."

Angela went to the cot next to Shawn and stretched out. She didn't force him to talk. She just stayed there in case he wanted to.

Shawn reached out and found her hand there waiting for him; sadness filled the air.

Their company and guards disapproved. They'd heard the stories about Angela and Kyle. This didn't look good.

The mission men were glad. They knew Angela would stay with Shawn until his bad moment passed. She would do the same for any of them.

Morgan backed off, observing in concern. The rumors flying through camp hadn't been exaggerations. The mission team was fried, literally and figuratively.

Isabel joined Selina near the flap, where she'd paused, drawn by Shawn's misery. "I wish there was more we could do for him. He's a good bloke."

Selina did, too. "We're all lucky to be out of there. I'm sorry Sasha didn't make it. She might have been able to help him. She was beaut with patients."

Isabel scowled. "She did it to him."

Selina shrugged. "She followed Reicher's orders. Don't blame her for that, mate. If she'd

refused, she would have been killed. Or worse. You're allowed to remember your sister with love."

Isabel sniffed. "I try to. We both wanted out of there more than anything else."

"She died helping us. Let go of the bad. She redeemed herself."

Morgan glared at them as he came by. "You can't be redeemed after doing something like that. All you can do is atone."

Isabel dropped her eyes, face turning red.

Morgan had recognized Isabel. She'd been the one who killed Harry in his dream. It didn't fit with the story of Harry dying while saving Lisa's life, however. Morgan wanted to know the full story, but it would have to wait until he could get a mission man alone who trusted him enough to share the information.

Morgan studied Isabel as he paused in front of the women, stopping the steady flow of traffic. He tried not to feel bad for her, but the healing bruises, scarring slices, and cast made that hard. "You were hurt by Harry." It was in her thoughts.

Isabel shivered at the awful memory. "He shoved me. I went into labor. All three of us almost died."

Morgan couldn't place the Harry he'd known with the stories everyone had returned with, but there was no way it was all a lie. "Safe Haven is a place of second chances. Follow the rules so you can stay. If you don't, the Eagles will remove you."

"That's enough!"

People gawked in surprise at her unexpected defender.

Stanley pointed. "Leave her alone. She's been through enough."

Isabel stared in surprise...and interest.

Morgan shrugged. "Okay."

He went out to help Daryl bring in the tables, mentally laughing. Angela had wanted Isabel to get a reminder that she had to behave here, so she'd told him to grill the older woman a little, but Morgan saw the double benefit now. "You're a total badass, Boss."

Angela's hand tightened on Shawn's burnt wrist, sending more comfort. *You've got one part of that right.*

Shawn was already feeling better. "I don't see you as bad."

Angela didn't answer. It didn't matter how they saw her; it was how she saw herself. *And that's never going to be good. I gave up that life when I took this job.*

Adrian hated it when Shawn didn't counteract that with something positive. He kicked Shawn's cot. "They're setting up a grill. Go help them feed us something edible."

The adults frowned at Adrian, except for Angela and Marc.

Angela put a bright smile on her tired face. "Make mine rare."

Shawn sat up. "You don't even know what they're cooking."

Angela shrugged. “Don’t care. Make mine rare.”

“You got it.” Shawn stepped around Adrian without being snotty. He didn’t want to be sad and he certainly didn’t want Angela to feel that way. He just had too much going on to comfort other people right now.

Adrian waited.

Angela opened her eyes. Tears rolled out, quickly soaking her neck and the cot.

Marc stiffened as her wave of pain traveled the warm, smelly tent.

Angela shivered. Then she wiped her face and sat up. “I’m good now. Fuck off.”

People gasped at her harsh language.

Adrian laughed. “Come on. You can count down to that rare burger.”

Mouths watered.

Angela stood up, nostrils flaring. “We’re having burgers? Life is good.”

Marc knew it was all fake. Angela was miserable inside, but she refused to have a breakdown, just like her team. Marc was proud of her. He was also a little bitter that she was able to change emotions so easily. *Maybe life would be easier for me if I was a woman.*

Laughter rolled through the tent from everyone who caught his thought.

Marc chuckled with them. “You’re right. I’m way too nice to be a girl.”

Angela nodded, serious. “Yes, you are, but we’ll fix that.”

Marc didn’t speak again for hours.

3

“This is nice.” Kyle gently rocked the chair with a sleeping child in each arm.

One of the den mothers had draped a blanket over them. It was adorable to see the mobster that way. The guard’s gazes kept coming back to them, grinning at the sight.

The sky was empty of stars and dark; gentle light flickered over them from the lightning bugs and the grill fire. There was a cool breeze and the smell of fish to keep their senses entertained. If not for the kids in their arms, it would have been too much like Howland Island for comfort.

Kenn also rocked carefully. “I agree. Good idea.”

Kenn was covered in kids. His orphans were piled on one side of him in the wide wooden rocker that had been brought down from Luke’s cabin. Cate was on his other side, holding Kenn Jr. They’d also been covered in blankets. All five kids were sleeping soundly.

Neither man had wanted to join the card tables or to be split from their team. This way, they were within ten feet and still felt peaceful.

Kenn had been dreading nightfall. He hadn’t been certain that he wouldn’t try to scroll dive. This

was perfect because it was so warming and distracting. The orphans were snoring just loud enough to dull the sound of the ocean. “We should do this every night.”

“I’ll see if I can arrange it.” Kyle had been worried about spending the night without Jennifer, but his heart was full of peace and love. They were all well-guarded right now. It was great.

Kyle felt Jennifer’s eyes on him from a distance. She was also on duty over the beach, keeping people in line and making the returning team feel safe.

Kyle didn’t try to find her post or communicate. She would see him enjoying time with the kids and being grateful that he’d made it home. It appeared good because it was real. He hoped it would soften her a little and make her want to talk to him. Their reunion had sucked so far.

Laughter from the card players drowned out the ocean, improving the mood. Two dozen men and women were playing half a dozen card games, all filled by smiling, well-fed people who finally felt like coming home was a good thing. Even Marc was at a table with Adrian, beating the blond man’s pants off. Isabel and Selina were also at that table and doing surprisingly well considering the company.

“Do you think the boss will mind if I restart the campfire group?”

Kyle considered that while listening to the laughter of the card players. It sounded like the Eagles had missed them. “Probably not. Just don’t

get all sappy every time you do it. Let the ghosts go after the first night.”

Kenn knew that was good advice. Of all the original members, only four of them were still alive. “I’ll ask her about it.”

Kyle started to doze. As he began to drift off, it occurred to him that he now considered Kenn a friend.

“If you make me cry, you have to wipe my snotty nose.”

Kyle chuckled. “That’s a hard pass.”

They’d both handled nighttime care on the kids, from quick washes to ear clean outs, supervised by Daisey. It was exhausting and gross.

Kenn looked at Biff, who was in a chair nearby with Jayda sleeping on his lap. Her scarred arm was curled around him so tightly that he couldn’t move without her feeling it. To keep her from waking, Biff was using his mind.

Biff concentrated, bringing up another two foot high dust whirl. It crashed into the first one he’d brought up from the sand, shattering them both.

At the top of the hill, Parker watched it without concern. He was glad Ralph wasn’t seeing it, though. The camp didn’t need more stories about one of the descendants making monsters.

It didn’t bother Parker. Biff’s scarred, stitched, burnt body said he needed that defense.

Parker turned back toward the church before he was noticed.

Biff was a little bored and very restless. He was keeping himself occupied by making the small defenders rise from the damp sand.

Conjuring. You're a conjurer.

Biff sighed at Angela's comment. He knew what he was. He just didn't like the name.

Angela lifted her second hamburger to him and then took another bite.

Biff grinned. *I'm okay, Boss.*

Angela scanned Jayda. *Is she?*

Biff wasn't sure. *She feels bad about hurting Terry.*

Do you?

No. Biff brought up another small sand whirl. *They weren't a couple. He surprised her with that kiss.*

True. Angela smiled at the sandy, scarred man. *Enjoy your downtime.*

Biff noticed she hadn't told him to enjoy the time with Jayda. Fear ran through him. The miniature sand demon collapsed back into dust. *We're not going to stay together, are we?*

Angela sighed. *That has not been revealed.*

Biff tried not to panic. *Do I die? Does she?*

Angela shook her head. *It's not death that comes between you, Biff.*

Then what? Tell me so I can fix it!

Jayda's family is alive.

So? That's great news.

Yes...

Tell me!

Her husband is also still alive.

4

Ed handed Angela a stack of papers. “Do you need me for anything?”

Angela stayed by the flap of the bathroom tent so she didn’t give him away. “No. Go on now so no one sees you.”

Ed wanted to join the partying team, but the job came first. “Welcome home, Boss.”

“Yeah, I keep hearing that.” Angela lumbered back to the small bonfire they were keeping alive with trash. The card games had been going on for hours now, with no signs of stopping. None of their minds were ready for deep sleep, though a few of the men were finally nearing that point.

Angela’s guard kept pace and refused to think about Ed’s fast visit. Greg had suspected Ed was one of her spies, but it still didn’t fit. Greg was suddenly sure Ed was up to something dangerous.

Angela sat back down near the fire and groaned at the smell of meat juice burning onto the hot coals. Her appetite had definitely come back.

Tonya came from the medical tent where she’d just finished cleaning up and restocking things. “You’re clear, Boss.” Tonya dropped into the chair next to Angela.

“You’ve done good work.” Angela meant that. Tonya had only taken two breaks. She’d cared for

her kids and her man and then returned to work each time without complaint.

“Thanks. It’s not over. I’m going to the clinic in a few minutes to make sure things are in order there.”

The dark path and hillside gave Angela a chill. “Take a guard.” Angela didn’t think anyone was free right now, but Tonya was well liked. She was certain one of the card-playing Eagles would volunteer.

“I have an escort.”

Angela followed Tonya’s gaze to the lone man standing on the clover path. He blended in so well that she hadn’t seen him at first.

Kenn opened one eye and kept a calm tone so it didn’t wake the kids. “What’s the deal with you two?” He’d been listening to the women talk.

Angela lifted a brow. She wanted that answer, too.

Tonya was too tired to spare anyone’s feelings. “He’s a Brady.”

Angela got it right away.

So did Kenn. His other eye opened. “You picked a replacement.”

Tonya scowled at him. “Like you didn’t do the same thing with Courtney!”

Kenn chuckled, but he wasn’t amused. “We really are the perfect couple.”

Angela grunted. “Yes, you are. It makes the rest of us sick.”

Kenn’s eyes went to Rico, who was clearly waiting for Tonya. “What happens now?”

Again, Tonya went with brutal honesty. “That depends on you. Are you staying? ‘Cause I’m tired of being alone and he’s so much like Marc that it’s scary.”

“He’s a Reicher.” Kyle didn’t think Marc wanted those two names to mix even though they were blood related.

“He’s a Brady and you damn well know it.” Tonya wasn’t in the mood for semantics. “That’s Marc’s uncle.”

Kenn saw through it all at once. He laughed, making the kids flinch.

Tonya flushed. “Are you laughing at me?”

“Yes, you big faker.” Kenn grinned at her. Then the amusement fell and the Marine glared. “Get rid of the double or I’ll do it for you.”

“No.” Tonya stood up. “You didn’t say you’re staying. When you aren’t here for me, Rico will be.”

Kenn watched her leave without getting angry.

The witnesses were surprised. Angela couldn’t let it go. “If that had been me, my face would have been too busted for anyone to want me.”

Kenn swallowed the guilt and the old anger. “I’m not that man anymore. And she’s right. She’s protecting herself like she’s always done. Her ability to land on her feet is one of the sexiest things about her.”

“So you’re not going to give Rico a taste of your fists like you did with Tobias?”

“Tobias wasn’t a direct threat. A quick beating was all he needed to take the hint.” Kenn’s eyes lit up bright red. “Rico will have to die.”

Chapter Nine
Alternate

1

“**Y**ou should be sleeping.” Tonya smiled at Angela as she walked by the desk to reach the coffee pot.

Dawn was about to break. Birds were singing and a cool wind was ruffling the flaps and trees. It was nice for this moment, but both women knew it wouldn't last.

“I got a few hours.” Angela didn't say she wasn't comfortable being back on land. She didn't want to talk about it.

Tonya didn't push. She was barely awake and the vibes in the tent were good. She was positive it was because Angela was watching over the team. After the stories she'd heard and the injuries she'd treated, Tonya understood they needed the extra care.

The cots were full of the teams and their friends and family. Almost everyone had stayed, defying Jennifer's order not to do this when Angela got home. Tonya had slept at the clinic to keep from attracting Jennifer's attention. Then she'd come down here to feed her son and get back to work.

Angela kept reading through the notes that had been dropped off for her yesterday. Light was coming over the island in slow motion, reminding her that another day was arriving, but Angela hadn't shaken off the previous day yet. Too many things had happened. She was taking this time to update the notes and clear her mind.

Angela scanned the campfire sleepers through the open tent flap, meeting the eyes of each guard like she did every time. Jennifer hadn't had enough manpower for doubled protection, so Angela had asked the gophers and brawlers who were off duty today to cover it. She needed her team to feel secure while they slept.

Angela smiled at Kenn and Kyle, who were still covered in kids. Wade was nearby and also wearing kids like a blanket. All three men were sleeping deeply.

Next to them, Samantha and Neil were drowsing. She'd had a nightmare, but hadn't woken everyone with screams this time. She had looked around, spotted all the kids and the protection, then laid back down without letting it ruin her day. According to Daisey's notes, that was progress for Samantha.

Marc was on the other side of Neil and Samantha. The twins had body piled him, but the trio was awake. They had been even before Samantha's nightmare. Angela didn't know what had caused their unease, but she was watching for it.

Biff and Shawn were in the tent, surrounded by their loved ones. Missy's face was swollen from all the crying she'd done. Even in sleep, she was puffy.

Selina looked over from the cot next to Shawn, yawning.

Angela moved on. Selina was going to be a great Eagle.

Greg turned over in his cot. He didn't want Angela to think he was watching her. He just wasn't sleeping well. That pattern had started in the lab. Unless he had a long day of mental and physical work, it was hard to rest.

"What are your plans for today?" Adrian was on duty over Angela, though she'd moved him to the flap to help guard the outside area as well.

"Bathroom, food, bathroom, a private session with Kyle, bathroom, rounds, bathroom."

Adrian realized she was leaving the QZ today, but that wasn't what drew a reaction from him. He scowled. "Stop flirting with Kyle! Your reputation can't take it."

Greg tensed, listening.

Marc also opened one eye and observed. His sense of being watched by Nature faded under the distraction.

Angela laughed.

Adrian had been watching her since they landed. Every time Kyle was around, she smiled at him and sent out waves of warmth so the guards would carry tales back to Jennifer. "You're stirring her up for nothing. Stop it!"

Angela quit laughing. She turned those cold blue eyes on him.

Adrian refused to back down. “You’re hurting Marc...and Greg!”

Angela knew Adrian was the only one having a problem with her act so far. He was stubbly, stinky, and sassy. He hadn’t slept long either. “What about you?”

“Yes! Stop it now!” Adrian snapped his mouth shut so hard that his teeth clicked together.

Angela put her notes and pen down. She leaned back in the chair and studied him.

Adrian couldn’t take it. “You’re paying me back for Piper, right? Stop it!”

Piper flushed and kept her chin down as people turned her way.

Marc observed Adrian’s meltdown in contempt, but he didn’t get involved. All of the team knew Angela was working on a plan to help Jennifer. Adrian knew it, too, but he still couldn’t control his emotions. *He’s obsessed. So am I, but not like him. He’s dangerous.* Marc shut his eyes and held his twins close. *Staying out of it this time is another way I can prove to her and to myself that I trust her.*

Adrian fought for control and lost. “Angie!”

Angela resumed scanning her notes. “Switch out. Now!”

Thomas limped over. He was already missing the pain pills; he’d stopped them cold turkey instead of weaning off like Tonya wanted. As a result, his mood was rough. “Go do something else!”

Adrian didn't have a choice. Humiliated to be switched out like a rookie, he marched toward the cots, mouth opening.

“Leave Marc alone! Unlike you, he's making progress.”

Angela's sharp order stopped Adrian in his tracks. He glanced over at Greg.

Greg snorted in disdain. “You're on your own, dude.”

Adrian's lips tightened. “Fine!”

He went to his cot and dropped down with a rebellious pout.

Tonya brought a cup of coffee over to Angela. “Why do you tolerate him?”

Angela was annoyed now. “I'm sick of that question.”

Tonya shrugged. “We'll stop asking it when we get an answer that makes sense.”

Angela chuckled and then sipped the coffee, but she didn't answer.

Tonya swept the sleeping men and kids. “I love Kenn so much. Thank you for bringing him back.”

“Yep.” Angela pinned the beautiful redhead with a hard stare. “Where's your alternate?”

Tonya flushed. “He escorted me back down here, then went to the cliff cave to stand watch. He's still there.”

Angela's brows came together as she tried to figure out that odd relationship. “What do you guys talk about?”

Tonya frowned. “We don’t talk at all. He’s closed to me mentally, even without Jennifer’s enforcer lockdown.”

“And the guard he’s supposed to have?” Angela had been paying attention.

Kenn realized he’d overlooked that. He fought hard to keep his mind blank so Tonya wouldn’t know he was awake.

Tonya shrugged defensively. “You’d have to ask Jennifer why she rescinded that order.”

“I will.” Angela waited.

Tonya stiffened. “It’s too early for a grill out.”

Angela laughed. “Fair enough. Get back to me later.”

“Topic?”

Angela didn’t pull any punches. “Why you’re really keeping the alternate when Kenn already said you go where he does.”

Anger ran over Tonya’s face. “He told me I was on my own!”

She calmed down so it didn’t wake the Marine. “I know it was while he was being held captive, but I could have been killed and he told me I was on my own!” A tear rolled down Tonya’s face. “When I get over that, I’ll tell Rico to go away. Until I do, the alternate stays!”

Angela sighed as Tonya left the tent.

Kenn didn’t watch as Tonya hurried by. He also didn’t stare at the cliff cave, where he was certain he would be able to spot Rico on duty. He looked at Angela. *Help me.*

Be patient. She'll see you were trying to spare her feelings with a clean break in case you died.

Kenn stared. *That's not what happened.*

I know that, but she doesn't.

Kenn realized Angela had given him a good excuse to use. *Why?*

Angela sipped her coffee and resumed reading through the notes that had been dropped off.

When Kenn would have asked again, Marc faked a groan and stretch to get his attention. *Let it go.*

Kenn wondered how many of the mission men had caught the exchange. As he glanced around, he saw subtle signs that all of them were awake. *Everyone knows.*

Marc yawned. *Only this team. She hasn't let Jennifer reconnect us to the hive for a reason.*

You think it's because of me.

Not just you, but yes. Angela has plans rolling. Be patient and let her work. She's very good at what she does.

Kenn couldn't deny that. He shut his eyes and tried to have faith that things would work out for him in the end.

So did Marc.

Adrian stayed awake and tried to figure out what Angela was doing with Kyle so he could stop it before his guts boiled over.

The radio lit up with Daisey's cheerful voice, making people jump and waking most of the kids.

“Are you guys ready for more food and fresh coffee down there yet?”

Angela reached the radio before anyone else could. “You bring it, I’ll eat it!”

Daisey laughed. “We’ll be down in a few minutes. Good morning, Boss.”

“Right back at ya.” Angela could feel Jennifer’s anger coming down the beach at the name. She pushed out a wave of calm that drowned it.

2

Jennifer was in the small beach tent, starting the day like Angela used to do. She swallowed another blast of anger and waved the next nervous camp member over. “What can I do for you today?”

Angela listened to that conversation as she went to the bathroom tent. She was sure that Jennifer was doing a good job with camp requests, but she was curious about what they were asking for.

Kyle didn’t look at Jennifer as he went to the chair across from Angela’s desk to wait for his therapy session. Daisey and her helpers were coming down the clover path now, carrying milk, coffee, and more trays of muffins to go with the cold cereal and powdered juice that had been sent down yesterday. They were smiling and happy, killing the tension that Jennifer’s displeasure had caused.

Benches and tables outside the large QZ tent began to fill up as the mission men heard fresh coffee was here. Kids ran for the bathroom while

adults stretched and wiped sleep from their eyes. Most of them had rested well. They smiled at Angela as she returned from the bathroom, grateful that she'd kept watch over them.

Pam hurried toward the tables, carrying a jug of milk. She'd taken it from Dari, who hadn't wanted to make the walk back down here.

Stanley, one of the guards Angela had asked to stay, stepped in front of Pam. He took the jug from her, not giving her a choice but to let go of it. "Go back to camp."

Pam already knew he wouldn't change his mind, but she still had to try. She fingered her pink scarf anxiously. "Please. I just want a minute to make sure he's okay."

"He's not. Go back to camp."

Pam felt Missy watching. She scowled deeply. "I want to talk to him!"

"Shall I call the boss?"

Pam froze at Stanley's calm question. Her eyes went to the small beach tent, to Jennifer. "No."

"Good. Go on now."

Pam reluctantly left, but everyone knew she would be back.

Stanley turned in time to see Missy's eyes were bright red. He frowned at the girl. "Control yourself."

Missy morphed back into a sweet little girl, even adding a smile as she went to get Shawn a mug of coffee; men were moaning as the smell hit them.

Stanley watched the little girl in concern. *Something's not right with her.*

Selina saw Stanley's stare. She flashed a glare of her own. *Stay away from her!*

Stanley approved. *That one has her priorities right. I like her already.*

Theo had just finished his early morning workout in the surf. He was drenched, wide awake, and fighting his body. He joined Stanley and kept his voice down. "Is the service level of the cruise ship still open?"

"No." Stanley stared at the man without revealing his discomfort at the topic. "I thought Dari would handle that for you."

Theo chuckled. "I started the getting to know you part yesterday, but I'm hoping for something a bit...faster."

Stanley snorted in disapproval. "I've heard she's very fast."

Theo brightened. "Really." He'd had a good spark with the well-built rookie. "I guess I can wait a day or two."

Stanley laughed despite not liking Dari's loose attitude. Maybe Theo could straighten her out. "She's on a wild path." He grew serious, trying to plant the seed. "She needs someone to show her the ropes."

"Rope wasn't what I had in mind." Theo headed toward the wash up area to get changed.

Stanley didn't laugh, but he also didn't tell Theo to stop acting like a guy. *I'll talk to Ed about it. He'll know what to do.*

Theo grinned at the two astounded subjects from the lab who were staring in shock at the full tray of food that had been given to them. The kids were gathering at a table together already, eager for the rare muffins. He noticed Cate and Bret sitting together and assumed the boy's parentage test hadn't come back yet or Marc would have put a stop to those two spending time together. "Good morning."

Gio pulled his attention away from the tray to focus on Theo. "We have to split this, right?"

Gio had never been given so much food at one time.

Theo chuckled as he went by. "Enjoy the grub. You'll work hard for it in this camp."

Gio and Nero sat down, almost crying.

"We don't mind hard work, mate."

"I'll work until I drop for this much food!"

"Too right!"

Their words carried, reminding Safe Haven that most people hadn't been so well-cared for. The guards gave Jennifer a respectful nod.

Everyone else smiled at Angela or sent a good mental word her way.

Jennifer swallowed an ugly growl and motioned the next camp member into the beach tent. "What can I do for you today?"

Quincy tried to sound sincere. “I’d like you to help my sister.”

Jennifer was drawn from her own mental misery. She studied the handsome black man who was probably five years older than she was but appeared much younger. He didn’t even have a mustache yet. “Who’s your sister?”

Quincy had been expecting that reaction. He’d been quiet and careful since they’d joined these people. “Brittani.”

As soon as he said it, Jennifer could see the resemblance to Dwight, but not to Thelma. He had Dwight’s wider eyes and his perfectly squished nose. “We’ve been trying. I’m sorry it’s not working as well as we need it to.”

“No, I want *you* to help her.”

Jennifer was confused. “I’ve tried to give Brittani energy, but she’s immune to my power now.”

Quincy leaned forward, lowering his voice. “What about your daughter?”

Jennifer stilled. Her mind narrowed, concentrating on only this moment. “What about her?”

Quincy knew he was walking a fine line. “I’ve heard stories about babies being so strong they have to be locked.”

Jennifer ran through her memories of Safe Haven moments and came up with a few instances where one of the infants had done something special, but it hadn’t been anything like this.

“I’m sorry.” Quincy could tell she was about to start zapping him. “I wouldn’t ask but she’s dying.” His voice broke. “We lost Lou on the way here. If we lose Brit and her babies, my folks will leave. They’ve already said they won’t stay here if she dies.”

Jennifer’s anger was shoved out by concern. If Thelma and her family left, most of the other black people would also leave. Race relations weren’t bad in this camp, but Thelma and her husband were good role models who could be trusted and counted on. It only made sense that they would be followed. “I’ll try harder.”

Quincy wanted to be satisfied with that, but he adored his sister. “If the camp finds out there’s a chance to help her, they’ll insist.”

Jennifer immediately bristled. “Are you threatening me?!”

Quincy nodded solemnly. “Yes, I am. Ask your daughter to save my sister or I’m going to tell everyone the kids are stronger than all of you.”

“That’s not true!” Jennifer tried to think around the anger and panicked fear. “It’s never been tested. They might not be able to do anything for your sister.”

“But they might be able to help her hold on until the birth. We won’t know until you let them try.” Quincy stood up. His expression was sad, but his tone was determined. “I’ll expect a response on that by sunset tonight.”

Jennifer watched him walk away, terrified. *I have to protect them!*

Her fear drew attention from the mission men. All of them were surprised by it. Jennifer didn't act like she was scared of anything.

Kyle knew what had caused it without having heard it. "He threatened her with the kids somehow."

"Yes." Angela sat down at the desk across from him. "She'll make a deal with him to buy time."

"Is it a dangerous deal?"

"To her, yes. To the baby, no. Quincy is bluffing. He knows it would endanger all of the kids and he doesn't want that."

Kyle was confused. "Why doesn't Jenny know he's bluffing?"

"Because he found a rare weakness."

"Her kids."

"Yes. Just like myself, Jennifer loves her children enough to do almost anything for them." Angela folded her hands on the table and smiled warmly at the handsome mobster. "We'll help her when it's needed. Right now, tell me how you're feeling about being home, Kyle."

3

Gus left the tent and headed for the sandy tables. He had a cool cup of coffee and a hangover. The Eagles had brought beer last night; he'd enjoyed too

much of it. *I just needed to drown my misery.* Brittani's lack of health was getting to him.

"Can we join you?"

Gus peered up in surprise as Bernice and Crissy came over to the table. They were clean, dressed in bright colors, and wearing welcoming smiles that were reserved just for him. "Sure."

Gus didn't understand why they wanted to be around him. *Don't they know it's the end of the world and I'm not good enough?*

Bernice wasn't ready to talk about it yet. She just wanted to spend time with him. She was tired of not being happy and Gus made her feel better.

"You look tired."

Bernice was grateful for him. Other men told her she was beautiful. Gus saw her unhappiness. "I am not sleeping well."

"Me either." Gus grinned at Crissy. He didn't tease her by pulling her cute pigtails like a lot of other people did. He knew she didn't like it. "How are you?"

Crissy stuck out her tongue at him, and then giggled.

"Still wild, I see." Gus grinned back at the girl. "Good. You have to be a little wild to survive in this camp."

It was a good moment for them and the witnesses. Most of them hoped it held all day.

"Can we get some food in here for Dace now?!"

Lisa's angry shout broke the mood and made heads turn toward the medical area. Dace was being

kept alive through a feeding tube. Lisa had been diligent about making sure he was cared for, but her nasty attitude was wearing thin.

“Terry’s bringing it.” Tonya understood more about Lisa and Dace now that she’d heard stories of their adventures. She wasn’t upset with the woman; she was still confused about how those feelings had changed, but she certainly understood caring for a mate. “He’ll be here soon.”

Lisa stopped herself from grabbing the radio and telling Terry to hurry up.

Erin had slept in a cot; she was still there. She eyed Lisa. “What’s your major malfunction?”

Lisa glared. “They haven’t helped him.”

Erin sighed. “The boss told you he might never wake up. Descendants can’t fix everything.”

Lisa fought back tears. “I have to keep trying.”

People felt bad for Lisa. Erin patted the cot next to her. “Come get some sleep. Someone else will sit with Dace for a while.”

Lisa hadn’t been to sleep since they arrived. She needed the rest, but she didn’t want to leave him alone.

Jack let go of his shield, appearing in a cot next to the medical area. “I’ll cover it. You sleep. I’ll wake you when I have to leave for my gardening shift.”

Lisa switched places with him gratefully. She didn’t know Jack very well, but she did trust him.

Erin laughed. “I need to start feeling around on these cots. I didn’t even know you were there.”

“That is my goal.” Jack stood and stretched. “It’s good practice.”

He went into the medical area and saw Dace’s burn box was still beneath his stretcher. It hadn’t been opened, improving his opinion of Lisa.

Jack tucked the small box into his jacket and brought his shield back up. He’d left the box here as a test. It could be stored in his locker now.

Erin got up and helped Lisa get settled into a cot. She covered her up with a clean blanket and then patted her arm. “Give it some more time. Stressing yourself out won’t help him or the baby.”

Jack stared in surprise. He hadn’t known Lisa was pregnant.

Lisa yawned. “I’ll try.”

“Good.” Erin headed for the bathroom, flashing a smile at Greg as she went out.

Greg delivered the required leer, but he still wasn’t feeling it. He was now stewing on Adrian’s words to Angela about her reputation. He wasn’t sure if Adrian was right. He planned to check on it and help her fix things if it was going to be a problem. *I can’t have a romantic future with her, but that doesn’t mean I can’t help out as her friend and as an Eagle.*

“Coming in!” Terry and Timmy entered the tent with full hands.

Lisa started to get up and micromanage Dace’s feeding.

“Leave them alone. Go to sleep.”

Lisa frowned at Greg's order, but she did as she was told.

Terry lifted his chin as he went by Jayda. He was horribly hurt by her choice; he also ignored Biff. *I'll treat him the same when I do my rounds, but I don't have to like it.*

"What about me?" Trent was still protective of both Jayda and Biff.

Terry stared. "You're a descendant."

Trent gestured with his broken wrist. "You'll probably be one of us, too, at some point. Start watching those snotty thoughts now."

Terry chuckled. He refused to apologize; he couldn't help how he felt about Biff and Jayda. "You're all right. We'll still play cards."

Biff scowled at the double standard.

Trent groaned. "Not me. I'm done after last night. Kenn and Marc took my shirt and my pants."

Terry laughed as he entered the medical wing. "It's good to know some things never change."

Outside the tent, Angela finished her food and waved off another cup of coffee. "No, thanks."

Daisey laughed. "Too many bathroom trips?"

"Yes, but that's not why." Angela stood up and began collecting her trash. "I'm leaving the quarantine zone in a few minutes."

Silence fell from those around her. It traveled into the tent and brought quiet there, too.

Jennifer also looked over, brows coming together as she replayed the last ten seconds and heard Angela's announcement.

Daisey reluctantly spoke up. "Jennifer wants all of you to stay here until everyone's cleared. She has plans to blend you back in over the next week."

The mission men were fine with that.

Angela wasn't. "I was cleared hours ago. Now, I'm leaving."

She looked around, finishing the moment with a hard tone. "All I need is an escort. Who wants to come along?"

For a minute, no one spoke or moved... Then mission men and rescue team people began moving her way.

Across the beach, Jennifer's eyes turned red; she stood up.

The brawlers on duty around the beach moved toward Jennifer, drawn by her anger. They dropped hands to holsters, heads swiveling in search of the threat.

Angela didn't back down from Jennifer's red-eyed stare. "It's time to rattle a dragon and blaze a path for others to follow." Angela strapped on the gun belt that Greg had adjusted for her overnight. "Let's roll."

Chapter Ten

You Made Your Choice

1

Thick tension filled the air as the two leaders stared at each other.

The brawlers followed Jennifer's line of sight to Angela. Their faces tightened.

The mission men didn't like the way the brawlers were acting. Several of them rose from the tables and lined up even though they weren't going with Angela on rounds. A show of force might be enough to get the brawlers to remember who was actually in charge of this camp. If not, the mission men had no problem drawing blood to prove it.

Selina and Isabel came to Angela's side. Almost all of her team joined them. The two new rookies were already being followed. It was encouraging to the people keeping track of that.

Angela waited calmly for Jennifer to make a decision. "Do not engage while I'm gone, no matter how tempted you are or who provokes you."

The mission men who weren't going with her got that order loud and clear. It was enough to keep them in line, though it might not keep them out of trouble. Between her and Jennifer, Angela was the bigger threat and they were wise enough to know it.

Jennifer's little minions would figure that out in time.

Angela glanced into the open QZ tent. "Get out here."

Adrian hurried out but didn't meet her eyes. They were both still upset about his earlier outburst. He was surprised that she wanted him to come along.

So were Marc and Greg. They didn't understand how she could be mad at him and still want him around.

Kyle understood it completely. Another bond strengthened his connection to Angela. *I really do get her.*

Jennifer picked that up. It hurt her a little. She sat down and dropped her eyes back to the notes in front of her instead of challenging Angela further. *We're married. I'm having his baby. Why hasn't he connected to me like that?*

The brawlers all moved toward the clover path as Angela and the two dozen people now escorting her headed in that direction.

The mission men who were staying waited to see if they were needed.

Dog felt the disturbance and came from the tent. He took in the situation quickly. He snarled, lips coming back to show angry yellow teeth.

Always willing to support whatever he wanted, the cats came out and joined him in a show of support. They leapt onto his back at the same time, digging their claws in deep.

Dog yelped and took off down the beach. *Too much help! Too much!*

Laughter broke some of the tension, but not all of it as Angela and the brawlers came face-to-face on the clover path.

Angela didn't smile at any of them. She also didn't get aggressive. "I'm going to town first and then I'll probably make stops at several other locations, as long as my back holds out."

Adrian gently pushed Isabel over to take Angela's right side as Stuart, the leader of the brawlers, came forward.

Selina put her hand on her holster and took Angela's left side.

Adrian remembered how quickly Selina had fallen into protecting the boss. He liked it, but he didn't trust it.

Stuart eyed Angela from top to bottom with a blank expression. "You shouldn't be out of quarantine yet."

Angela lifted a brow. "Says who?"

Stuart looked over his shoulder toward Jennifer, who was pretending to work but was still pondering the differences in their relationship with Kyle. "She really doesn't want you guys out yet."

"I'm aware, but I have work to do. If you aren't busy here, why not come along and keep track of me?"

Stuart broke into a wide grin. "We'd be honored, Boss."

Mission men laughed as the brawlers surrounded Angela and her group in a wide circle of muscled protection.

Jennifer's anger rose back up and tried to tempt her into doing something stupid. "Hey! Adrian can't be in town. He's banished!"

No one answered her or even looked back.

Jennifer's mouth opened.

Kyle shook his head once. *Don't do it, Jenny. I really can't take the stress right now. It was a very long run.*

Jennifer was hurt all over again that Kyle thought she would be the cause of his stress. It also bothered her that he was so different from the man who'd left. That Kyle never would have told her he was having trouble adjusting to being home in such a blunt manner. Jennifer was very sorry that she hadn't tried harder to stop him from going on the run even though she was positive it wouldn't have mattered. She hated to see him so upset, so scarred.

Angela and Kyle were both encouraged by Jennifer's reaction. It told them she wasn't completely gone yet, but it also said their plan would work if given enough time.

Angela's spine began to ache as soon as she stepped onto the jungle path. She sighed. "Maybe someone can give me a ride."

Stuart laughed as Adrian's face turned red. "Whatever you need, Boss. We're here for you."

Angela looked toward the beach tent. "All of you?"

Stuart frowned. “No. Watch out for that one. She’s very unhappy you’re home.”

2

Marc had also heard Kyle’s thoughts about Angela and Adrian. It bothered him just as much as it bothered Jennifer. He excused himself for a bathroom break and then kept going down the beach for a walk. He didn’t want anyone to know how upset he really was.

It was a horrible humiliation that Kyle, who had only known her for 18 months, understood Angela better than he did after having spent time with her throughout their childhood. The last 18 months hadn’t been enough to catch him up, but Kyle knew who she was already. It was frustrating.

“Maybe they really are having an affair.”

Marc stopped. Nature was sitting in the tall grass next to the beaten-down area where many of the couples had been coming for their private moments. She was stretched out in such a provocative manner that he couldn’t think for a moment.

Nature hated Marc. He had gotten the better of her more than once; he was arrogant, stubborn. He was also beautiful from his head to his feet, even with so many burns and scars. The waves of desire that she sent out were absolutely real.

Marc forced his brain to restart. He didn’t ask why she was here. He already knew the answer. She

was here to trick him in some manner to get what she wanted—Angela’s death.

Marc had spent time on the submarine considering what might happen after the ugly fight they’d barely survived. He had put himself in Nature’s shoes and come up with one possibility. He spoke it aloud now. “If that had happened to me, I would have made it my life’s goal to remove the person who was able to do it.”

Nature slowly uncrossed her legs, allowing him to view her inner thighs. “And?”

Marc swallowed thick saliva. His body was rock hard, but his brain was still functioning at a higher speed because he was a byzan. “I would have made a plan to bring them down and it would be something ruthless as well as unexpected.”

Marc forced his eyes away from the pink flesh that he had no doubt would feel better than any sensation he’d ever had. “I’ll never help you kill her. You’re wasting your time, though I do appreciate having something to jack off to later.”

Nature smiled seductively and opened her legs all the way. “I don’t need you to help me kill her. I don’t want anything from you except for this moment.”

Heavy lust flew through the air between them. Marc’s good hand clenched into a fist as he caught her intimate scent. “I won’t cheat on her either. Like I said, you’re wasting your time.”

Nature left her legs wide open, allowing him a view that she was certain he really would use later

during a private moment. “I’ll bet your son won’t refuse this offer.”

Marc’s anger came through his voice. “I’d stay away from Charlie if I were you. When Angela finds out you’ve already been violating the truce, she’ll make a plan that will end in your death. When Charlie finds out you’re trying to use him against his mother, he’ll come straight for your throat and she’ll be right there to back him up. Be very careful. That final battle could happen a lot sooner than any of us are expecting.”

Marc turned and marched awkwardly back to the tent.

Nature watched him go. She was positive he was correct. She reluctantly vanished from view even though Charlie was getting ready to come and stare at the ocean like he’d been doing on his breaks since they arrived. She really didn’t want to trigger that final battle yet. *I have to make sure Angela’s dead first. Without her, none of them stand a chance against me.*

3

The news that Angela was out of quarantine flew through the camp faster than she was able to walk from the beach to town. People began appearing long before she reached it.

The brawlers kept them all back so Angela didn’t have to stop and start, stop and start. It was obvious from her huge stomach and slow pace that

she needed to get there as soon as possible so she could rest. All of them were surprised that Marc had stayed behind instead of escorting her.

Angela wasn't upset about that. Marc had always been on shaky ground with the camp members, but the story of his parentage was now sweeping through like fire. It would have been very uncomfortable for him to accompany her on these rounds. She was used to Marc putting his feelings first.

People called out greetings and stared at the condition of the returning team as they went by.

Most of them returned the greetings and stares calmly. A few of them flinched or glared, adding to the rumors that the mission men were severely damaged. Greg's burnt skin and eye patch were proof that the run had been just as bad as the stories implied.

Angela was glad to finally reach town. Walking through the jungle sucked anyway, but the extra weight in front and her swollen ankles made it even worse. She wasn't gasping for air yet, but she was in serious pain that she tried to hide from everyone. She went to the new bunkhouse first and leaned against the wide porch rail in relief.

It was warm and humid with only a light breeze to give any relief. Angela hoped it was cooler inside the bunkhouse, but she didn't go in and find out yet. She stayed where she was so everyone could see her while she recovered.

The bunkhouse railing hadn't been painted yet, but it had been covered in a waterproof stain that made it a shiny beacon. The bunkhouse had two levels as far as she could tell from the outside; she was eager to explore them, but her body wasn't. Angela lingered near the doorway as camp members surrounded her and her uncomfortable escorts.

Daryl came out of the bunkhouse and stood in the doorway to block anyone else from coming out and bothering her yet. He often employed the same tactic when too many people wanted to visit Brittani. He had figured out that pregnancy was the most dangerous time in any female's life.

“Dace will be brought up soon, probably at the same time as Trent. They'll need an escort to carry medical supplies and to remind Trent that he's supposed to be using crutches for at least another week.”

Daryl motioned several people to handle that as Angela continued.

“Lisa will be staying with Dace to cover anything he needs. When she's ready, she'll join the den mothers. Trent will also be joining the den mothers.”

A lot of people were surprised to hear that, since both of those people had been fulltime Eagles before they left to rescue the mission team.

Angela didn't give them time to ask questions. “Samantha and her family are also moving in here

today. Try to give them an area off the main path. Don't crowd her."

The den mothers liked hearing that. It was easier to keep an eye on people if they lived in the same place. They had only tolerated Samantha living in the cabin because of what she'd gone through with Chad.

Angela motioned toward her nervous escort. "I brought some new people back. They're good souls, like us, and I want them treated with respect. This is Isabel, Selina, and Bret."

Angela smiled at the man who had limped along behind her on his crutches without complaining even though the jungle had tried to trip them both with every step. "That's Thomas. As soon as he recovers, he'll be a level three Eagle."

Camp people welcomed all of the newcomers, but most of that was reserved for Thomas. Because he was starting out at so high a level, they understood he had done something special on the run to earn that. Angela rarely gave away level jumps unless it was deserved.

While they were distracted, Angela stepped by Daryl and entered their new den.

The bunkhouse was over a hundred feet long and held rows of cots and bunkbeds on each side. It ended in a wide hallway that went to a large bathroom that wasn't connected to their septic system yet. Because of that, only the ill people were using it right now. Everyone else was using the outhouses near the barn.

Next to that hallway was a small kitchen setup where coffee and breakfast foods were waiting. Cords ran up the white walls, connecting overhead lights that were being powered by the bright sun. Signs hung on the walls, reminding people to turn off the lights when they came out of the bathroom and to unplug the coffee makers at night.

The far wall held a deep row of shelves and lockers that were filled with bags and boxes of every size and shape. The supplies they used the most were in those containers. More bags and crates sat at the foot of the narrow stairs to the second level. It had a wide rail that prevented Angela from seeing what it looked like up there, but she was certain it was a smaller mirror of down here.

Camp members moved through the living space in clean clothes, with freshly washed hair, and healthy bodies. They looked good considering everything they'd all been through since leaving America. Angela allowed herself to feel proud, but only for a minute.

She scanned the people on the cots and found Candy and Brittani next to each other. She went to them, wishing she had energy to spare to help.

Candy was thin, missing hair in places, and observing everyone with terrified eyes that said she didn't expect to survive. She scanned Angela's thoughts openly, not caring that she was invading the boss's privacy.

Brittani was huge, sweaty, and obviously miserable, but she had something to hold her

mentally that Candy didn't. The church females, all wearing long dresses that made Angela sweat even more, were gathered around Brittani, offering comfort and scriptures.

Brittani had a Bible in her hand that had been bookmarked in dozens of places. She was surviving, but it was clear that she wasn't going to last for another three months.

Brittani tried to smile. "Jennifer's working on it."

Angela understood. Brittani was a Jennifer convert because that was where her hope rested.

Angela sat in the empty chair between the two beds and propped her hurting feet on a green trunk that held their personal items. She put a hand on the wrist of each female to offer comfort, but that was it. She wasn't going to pick anyone over her unborn child this time. "I have a plan. I need you both to be strong enough to hold on until it happens."

Neither of them asked what it was, but both women immediately felt a little better mentally. Angela's plans almost always succeeded. Both of them promised they would try hard to hold on until she was able to help them.

Conner was in the chair on the other side of Candy's bed, holding the sleeping babies. He asked a question that he'd had for a month. "This bunkhouse was one of your plans, right? It wasn't just a random suggestion from Tobias that you decided to accept."

Angela smiled at the exhausted boy. “Yes. A family den is the trunk of my breeding tree.”

Conner frowned. “Where are the roots?” The bunkhouse didn’t have a basement, only a second floor that was half the size of the first level.

“On the entertainment deck of the cruise ship. Why do you think I left it open?”

Many people had wondered that, including Candy and Brittani. They were distracted from their misery by the conversation.

Angela rubbed her ankles together. “It used up resources we couldn’t spare, stretched security tighter than it should have been, and allowed various addictions and social troubles to restart that we didn’t need. Tell me why I left it open anyway.”

Conner looked down at the sleeping infants. “Babies.”

“Yes. We need these kids. The radiation sickness took a horrible cut from our future. I’m trying to regrow those branches.”

Both women were comforted by her words, but Brittani the most. She had been worried that Angela would try to talk her into terminating the pregnancy, like Daryl did every time they had a private moment together. She didn’t think she could take it from both of them.

Angela’s light grip on Brittani’s wrist tightened. “I would if I thought it would work. As much as I want your children, I want you even more.”

Before Brittani could get upset, Angela smiled at her. “I will stick to our agreement, however. I owe

you for saving my life as we left Ciemus. You made your choice and I'll try to help you through it."

Brittani shut her eyes as her stomach rolled over and began hurting again.

"I'll get you some soup." Daryl hurried toward the restaurant. Their cooks had duplicated the recipe Adrian gave them. All of the pregnant women now enjoyed that meal. Some days, it was the only thing Brittani was able to keep down. Thelma brewed a pot of it every morning for that reason.

Angela finally asked something that had been bothering her for more than a month. "I've never been upset that you used your personal life force on Candy when she was shot. That's your choice to make. It has always bothered me that you had one to give at all. Only parents get those."

Conner had expected that question right after saving Candy's life. "I hit puberty in the lab and they took advantage of it. Experimenting on Mitchels was one of their favorite things to do."

Angela winced, but she wasn't surprised by that after everything she'd seen in Reicher's facility. "And the baby?"

Conner's face darkened. "Used to keep someone else alive, I was told. I only found out after I escaped." Satisfaction came into his voice. "For a while, I took after my sister and hunted anyone who left the bunker where I'd been held. They didn't know very much, but at the time I didn't care about anything except revenge."

Angela thought about the thumb drive that had a copy of the lab records. She wondered if it contained information from labs that were in other countries, but she didn't mention it. "Thank you for telling me."

"I don't mind answering your questions. I know *you* won't use it against me."

Angela caught the tone and sighed. "Jennifer?"

Before Conner could reply, that one word sent bad vibes throughout the bunkhouse and caused a wave of complaints to fly toward her.

Angela listened to them the same way she had listened to the complainers in the quarantine tent, but she didn't pile on or validate their anger. She believed in getting both sides of the story.

That was one of the things she had loathed about the old world the most. She hated cherry pickers. She wanted all of the truth, no matter if it went against what she believed. In the end, the truth was the only thing a society could depend on. Once that was gone, everything else soon fell behind it.

Complaints trailed off when Angela didn't respond. People slowly resumed what they had been doing.

Angela regarded Conner. "You were saying?"

Conner didn't want to add to the tension, but he also wasn't going to hold back now that Angela had reopened the conversation. "She hates me because of who my dad is. She said if it was up to her, I would have been left behind."

Anger laced his words now. “When I said that would mean Candy died, she just shrugged! She doesn’t care about us the way you do.”

Their witnesses nodded, while Brittani and the church women shook their heads.

Angela felt him leaving something out and waited.

Conner had already caught her thoughts. He looked away. “She said someone else would have saved Candy.”

Angela smiled at the frustrated boy. “Always tell me the full truth, Conner Mitchel and you’ll always have a place in my camp no matter what anyone else thinks.”

Candy sighed in relief. “I told you the boss wasn’t going to let Jennifer drive us out of here.”

Angela understood the couple had been considering leaving. She doubted it was entirely due to Jennifer’s leadership, however. Candy’s fear was front and center in her mind. She was afraid she was going to die during the surgery. “You don’t have to do it. Even if it’s the wrong choice to make, Candy, it is still your choice. You’re not going to be forced to undergo any procedure. This is *not* a government lab.”

A tear rolled out of Candy’s eye and splashed onto her t-shirt. “Thank you.”

Conner quickly explained when the church group and a few other people frowned in their direction again. “She knows it needs to happen. We were both hoping that one of the descendants would

have the ability to help her so she didn't have to have the surgery at all."

"Don't give up hope on that. I haven't finished digging through all of the information we brought from the lab. There might be something in there that will help." Angela slowly stood up to prevent them from asking questions about what type of information she had brought back. She still didn't want anyone to know about the vials Adrian had secured. "I can feel people at the restaurant getting upset that I haven't stopped by yet. I'll come back here in a little while. You guys rest, if you can. It will be noisy for a little while as people move in and we rearrange for space."

Candy wiped away her tears. She felt a lot better now that Angela had talked to them. "Just go slow, Boss. With all that rain overnight, it's slippery. Don't fall."

Angela waddled toward the door. "I'll hold on to someone." She reached a hand out and took Gus's big, scarred arm. "Say hi to Brittani and then walk me to the restaurant."

Gus was grateful that Angela was steering him out the door. He waved to Brittani, biting down on awful curses at her appearance. "Get some rest. We'll be back."

Brittani felt better just from seeing Gus, even though his new scars bothered her. The stories going through camp about the injuries the mission men had returned with were awful. It was a relief to know that Gus wasn't the one who had lost an eye.

She waved and then settled back to rest until Daryl arrived with the soup.

As soon as they were outside and out of sight of the open doorway, Angela turned to Gus and opened her arms.

Gus hugged her, unable to hold in the tears. “She’s dying!”

Angela rubbed his large shoulder, but she didn’t lie to him. It was obvious just from looking at her that Brittani might face the Grim Reaper sooner than Candy.

Gus tried to get control of his emotions. He was aware of how many people were staring at him. He retreated and wiped his face. “I’m going back to the beach tent. Unless you need me?”

“I’ll always need you, Gus.” Angela smiled at him. “But it’s fine. I have plenty of escorts right now.”

Angela watched him leave without hiding the worry on her face. If Brittani did die, they would lose her parents, her siblings, and Gus. *There has to be something I can do for her.*

Adrian came to her side. “Do you want me to go work on it?”

“Yes.” Angela didn’t reveal what work that would be. Adrian would go to the lab and either start experimenting with one of the vials or start reading through the information on the thumb drive. Either way, both of those things needed to happen. “Nothing living.”

Adrian hurried off toward the clover path so he could go to the cruise ship; he assumed the secondary lab they'd set up after the fire was still in use. He understood her words. Angela didn't want him to experiment on people or animals yet. That would seriously limit what he was able to do, but he understood the order. *She doesn't want us to be like Reicher. I respect that.*

Adrian faced the truth. *I also don't agree. The labs, as bad as they were, sometimes produced amazing results that would not have been possible without those methods.*

Angela knew that, but she still refused to cross that line. *Without ethics and morals, we might as well be the government.*

Chapter Eleven
I Forgive You

1

“**I** wasn’t ready to move yet.” Samantha snapped the suitcase shut and continued to grumble as she opened the next one to finish packing their clothes. “I mean, I’m glad she’s home, but why did we have to do this so soon?”

Amy looked up in surprise from her coloring book. She and Missy were taking a break now that they’d gotten all the toys put into the boxes. They’d already helped pack Neil’s drawings. It had made the kids want to be artistic.

Neil smiled. He noticed it, too. Samantha hadn’t openly complained about anything since she’d been kidnapped. “Eagles don’t question the boss. We just follow orders.”

Amy grinned and resumed drawing before Samantha noticed.

Missy snatched the crayon from Amy’s hand and scribbled a mustache onto her drawing.

Amy eyed the picture. “That’s ugly.”

Missy made a face. “It’s Pam. She’s ugly.”

Amy giggled and snatched the black crayon from Missy’s hand.

Missy wadded up the drawing and threw it toward the fireplace. "I'm happy you're moving into the bunkhouse. I missed you."

Missy didn't spend time with Leeann anymore. Leeann was always with Mike now and Kimmie was gone. The other kids weren't as wild as she was. Missy had been lonely while Shawn was away.

"Me, too." Amy glanced at Neil again, sharing his hopeful feeling. Samantha hadn't allowed her to have visitors here either. This was a big difference in her behavior.

Samantha caught it this time. She stared between them. "What did I miss?"

Wade came through the open cabin door, carrying a stack of empty boxes. "You missed some gardening supplies out front."

Samantha threw her arms up as she headed that way. "I knew I forgot something."

Neil and Amy gave Wade a grateful glance for the distraction. They were afraid if Samantha realized she was recovering, she would shut down again and revert. Fear was odd that way.

Wade chuckled. "So sneaky. I like that in a family."

Wade was thrilled to be home. He didn't mind this manual labor. "The boss gave me a message for you."

Now Neil understood why Wade had distracted Samantha. "Go on."

“She wants your next project rolling today. She said Samantha doesn’t need you to babysit her anymore. That’s what I’m here for.”

Neil laughed. “I think she read my mind.” Now that Wade was home, a lot of his previous activities could be resumed. Neil missed most of it. Jennifer had forced him to show up for the kai lessons, but everything else had been skipped.

Samantha paused outside the door, listening to their laughter. The twins were in town, making her worry, but having Wade home was a huge balm to her nerves. She fought another round of grateful tears and went inside to put the trowel into the gardening box.

“The boss wants Neil working on the clinic. He has to go now.” Wade opened his arms. “I’m all yours. Use me as you see fit.”

Samantha chuckled, blushing. “All in good time, playboy.”

Her men laughed in surprise. Wade knew she hadn’t been making many jokes like that just by Neil’s glazed eyes. He had more than one stuck in the chamber.

“I will miss this cabin.” Samantha couldn’t help trying to get them to support her in protesting the move. “All the bunkers on the island have been claimed now for special projects. The privacy here was nice.”

Wade automatically scanned the cabin for threats and exits, relieved to be here. The walk through the humid jungle, alone, had freaked him

out a bit. He was sure someone had been watching him the entire time. “Let’s get these boxes packed and then you can take a break.”

Wade motioned at the coloring kids. “Get Neil to the clinic and then go to the restaurant. They have a welcome home party going with cookies and sweet tea.”

“Yeah!”

“Cookies!”

Both girls jumped up and grabbed Neil’s hands, not giving him a chance to stall.

Neil let them drag him outside. As they reached the path, he gently shook them off. “Go on and have your fun. Stay together.”

“We will.”

“Love you, Daddy Neil.”

The kids raced off, laughing and wild, like kids were meant to be.

Neil turned back toward the cabin, curious about why Wade wanted time alone with Samantha. He didn’t suspect anything bad, but he wasn’t secure enough yet to let it pass.

In the cabin, Wade began opening the boxes so Samantha could fill them up. “Why has Neil let Jennifer run your lives for the last month?”

Samantha froze. Her eyes went wide. “She knows I was part of the murders.”

Wade stared at her. *Now I understand. They’re both terrified.*

Wade quickly redirected the conversation. “I can take you to town if you want, and then come back here and finish packing and moving everything. You can have tea and cookies, too.”

Samantha understood he was changing the topic so no one walking by would catch the thoughts. “I’m almost done. Some of this stuff was already here. I’ll leave it for whatever Angela has planned for this cabin.”

“I think she wants to use it as a honeymoon spot for new couples.”

Samantha smiled. “That’s nice.”

“I think so, too.” Wade was curious how Samantha felt about weddings and romance now, but he would never ask her that while she was still so spooked. *She’s like me.* He sighed, closing the first box. *Or I’m like her.*

Samantha felt it and hated it. She tugged on her short curls again. “What can I do to help you?”

Wade didn’t have an answer. “I think it’s something I have to work through on my own.”

Samantha understood that completely. She reached out and rubbed his scarred hand.

Wade fought the hot stinging tears behind his eyelids. He used humor to deflect. “Don’t waste a rub on my hand!”

Samantha laughed aloud. Neil didn’t make sexual jokes with her anymore even though she hadn’t been raped by Chad. It was the one way he hadn’t wanted to hurt her.

You still belong to me.

Samantha's humor fell to the dusty floor.

Chad's voice in her mind was cruel. *You know it and so do I. I'll be with you forever.*

"Sam?" Wade recognized a mental moment. He took her hand and kissed it, trying to distract her.

Samantha was tired of being scared. She slammed that mental door and smiled at Wade. "Don't waste a kiss on my hand!"

Wade was surprised and encouraged. He slowly leaned toward her.

Samantha kissed him back, groaning at the feeling. *I missed you!*

Wade hardened instantly. *I love you!*

Outside the cabin, Neil watched in approval. It was another sign of Samantha's recovery. They hadn't even gotten close to making love since her ordeal. He couldn't stand the way she flinched and shuddered. Samantha was prepared to force herself through it; he wasn't.

Neil headed for the clinic as his body responded. He looked down as he reached the jungle path. "No! I don't care what you want. Until she can cum on my face, you're not going in!"

Nature appeared on the path ahead of him. She struck the same pose she'd used on other men in Angela's camp.

Neil stopped, staring. His mind flew in several directions, but he didn't follow any of them. He admired her beauty distractedly and waited for an attack.

Nature eyed his bulge with a sexy leer. “Can I help you with that?”

It backfired; Neil’s anger erupted. “Where were you when Sam needed help?!”

He didn’t give her time to answer. He drew power and started to fire.

Nature vanished before he could throw it, laughing to cover the sting of yet another rejection.

Neil absorbed the blast and marched through the jungle. “I can’t wait to watch Marc kill you.”

2

Neil broke into a wide grin as he reached the treehouse clinic and found a group of workers there. His brief encounter with Nature was already forgotten. This was her island. He’d accepted that they had to live together. “Now I know the boss is back.”

People laughed. The teams had only been home for a full day, but Angela was already putting them to work on her special projects. Jennifer had done a good job at keeping people busy while Angela was gone, but nothing said the boss is home like being sent to work on a project alone and then having 10 more people show up to help with the labor. Angela was infamous for that design.

Ian tiredly handed Neil a clipboard. He hadn’t worked this much in a while now. “She said she wants a complete plan drawn up before we leave here today.”

Neil scanned the clipboard to see if she had sent any notes for him.

Do not let anyone disturb the work happening here.

Neil automatically assumed that meant Jennifer and her strict rules.

He scanned his labor force and noticed all of them were smudged and sweaty. He spotted stacks of gear next to the clinic. “How does she get it all together so quickly?” Neil was also a byzan, but he wasn’t nearly as skilled at organizing.

Ian shrugged. “I don’t know, but we should get rolling. The restaurant is making a special dinner to celebrate the return of the teams. I was told we don’t want to miss it.”

Men groaned in anticipation of another great meal. Their cooks always turned out good food, but everyone was thrilled that Angela was home. It was sure to be a taste sensation.

Neil led the team into the clinic while trying not to enjoy himself too much. He hadn’t gotten a lot of time away from Samantha and the boys in the last month. They needed him; he’d felt bad about taking any personal time.

Patients and medics looked up as they all entered, but no one was surprised that it was a work crew. Everyone knew Angela wanted the clinic expanded. They needed it. No one wanted to walk through the jungle anymore to reach the cruise ship. They had adjusted to being on land.

They had also started to get lazy while on the cruise ship, but that hadn't changed. Living on a tropical island made them want to relax and play in the sun. If not for Jennifer's leadership, Neil doubted the bunkhouse would have been finished yet.

Neil began examining the walls of the clinic, searching for a place where one could be knocked out and then built onto without weakening the foundation. "Let's get their garbage out and see where Tonya wants these boxes put so we have more room to work."

People began following his orders. It wasn't the labor that they had been sent here for, but at the same time, it was. Everyone knew Angela loved a twofer. This way, the clinic would get cleaned and restocked while they were working.

Terry gestured toward the few waiting patients. He had duty over the front desk today. "Anna, you're next."

Neil was a little surprised to see one of Tobias's wives here without him or her sister. As far as he knew, those women didn't go anywhere unless it was together. He continued to examine the wall of the clinic while listening. He was curious about what had made the middle-aged woman break her normal routine.

Anna didn't need her locked gifts to know she was being observed. "Everyone else is busy helping the medics or the cooks. I have a bug bite on my leg.

The den mothers want me to get it checked out now.”

Terry led her toward one of the rear rooms, white coat fluttering from his normally fast stride. “That’s no problem. We should be able to get you in and out quickly.” He had heard the nervous tremor in her voice and assumed she was eager to be back with Tobias and her sister.

Anna followed him into the exam room and then gestured in Eagle code. *Shut the door.*

Terry was too surprised to react for a moment. He’d had no idea that she knew the Eagle hand code. It was usually the last thing rookies learned, except she wasn’t even an Eagle.

Terry recovered as she waited. He shut the door and then faced her curiously.

Anna’s hand went to her flat stomach. “I think I’m pregnant.”

“That’s wonderful!” Terry sat on the stool next to the exam table and took out a blank patient card that would be added to her file. “I’m sure Tobias will be thrilled.”

Anna sighed. “I don’t think so.”

“Why not?”

“It isn’t his baby.”

3

Neil wasn’t able to hear what they were talking about through the closed door. He didn’t believe the bug bite story for a minute. He didn’t try to pry into

their thoughts, but he did store it for later in hopes of figuring it out with just his brain. Observing the behavior of others was deeply ingrained in his mind now. When someone broke a routine, he made it his business to find out why.

The clinic door opened. Adrian held it for a group of men carrying out bags of garbage. He spotted Neil. "I was told the main lab is here now."

Angela had let him go to the ship for nothing. Adrian assumed she had been buying time for him to miss something, but his burning lungs and legs said she might just want him to work on getting back in shape. It was embarrassing.

Neil connected Angela's note to Adrian, assuming she had him on a special project. Neil pointed at the hallway. "Tonya decided one exam room at a time was enough for now. She didn't want to leave all the samples on the ship without being there at night. We rigged up a couple of coolers and put in some new counters. It's the second door."

Adrian was impressed with the work they'd done. "Let me know if there's anything I can do to help."

Neil understood he meant that personally and as an Eagle. He eyed Adrian's almost healed burns. "I may want to talk to you later about updating some of the information in the books I'm putting together."

Adrian paused. "Like what?"

"Alphas can't have magnetism or be Keepers isn't accurate. You're proof of that."

“Yes, but not naturally.” Keeping had been gifted to him by Marc. “There are no documents on a natural born Keeper.”

Neil shrugged. “Maybe that job has to be given.”

“Maybe. What else?”

Neil lowered his voice. “I want to know if burns are another magic limit we have, like not being able to heal broken bones.”

Both men were flashed to Tonya’s words before they left, about putting that into Neil’s book so they could test it later. No one had wanted to burn someone just to collect the data. The mission men had now gone through that experiment, unwillingly, but they still needed the information.

“I think the thumb drive will have a lot of information for the books you’re working on. You should also talk to Isabel. She was a medic in the lab.”

Neil had already been observing that woman because she had an Eagle jacket. Her advanced age had implied it was only for show, but he had now heard some of the stories and understood she really was one of them. He still expected to see her working here with the other medics once the boss decided she’d been shown off enough. “Let the mission men know I’d like to have any details they feel comfortable giving.”

“I will.” Adrian went toward the rear room so he could get busy working on the vials that had been brought from the lab.

“Adrian?”

Adrian stopped but didn't turn. He was expecting something nasty. “Yes?”

“Welcome home.” Neil was positive the man hadn't heard that from anyone but Conner.

Adrian swallowed the lump in his throat and responded like an Eagle. “Stop sucking up. Just tell me what you want.”

Neil chuckled. “Fair enough. Here it is.”

Adrian turned around in case Neil wanted to use Eagle code for something private.

Neil opened his mouth and blew them all away. “I forgive you. I'm glad you're here with us now. Do everyone a favor and stick close for a while.”

Neil left to check the wall from the outside as people stared.

Adrian tried not to get emotional, but it was almost impossible. Neil had been the first Eagle to walk out on him, long before they left America. Knowing Neil was willing to give him a second chance made Adrian even more determined to keep doing things correctly. *The mission team thinks I screwed up with Piper intentionally because I'm afraid to be put back into leadership. Piper thinks that, too. They don't understand.*

Adrian entered the lab and found Tonya staring at him. She was on a stool, wearing the white medical coat that had been signed by most of the camp. She was movingly beautiful to his eyes, but she still couldn't compare to Angela.

Tonya had been monitoring Adrian's thoughts since he entered the clinic. "You did do Piper intentionally."

Adrian quickly shut the door. "Yes, but not for the reasons they assume."

Tonya studied him, using her sharp mind and an educated guess. "It's not so you can get a chance with Angela. You already know that's never going to happen. The only other thing you would want as much as her would be control of Safe Haven... You did it to get back into leadership somehow."

Adrian was impressed. "When did you get this smart?"

Tonya glared. "Shortly after I was used for a quick relief moment and then made into a camp outcast."

Adrian connected that comment to the thought he'd had yesterday about her still holding a grudge. It was obvious that he was correct. He just didn't know what to do about it yet. "I need a sample of any cancerous masses you've save from bodies or surgeries."

Tonya frowned. "She has you on a special project."

Adrian nodded. "Though I suspect it was another twofer. The boss wants me to help you."

"I don't want your help or anything else. You can't be trusted!"

Adrian sighed. "Is there anything I can do or say?"

Tonya was surprised that they had even gotten to this moment. Adrian wasn't the type to have open regrets or apologize to anyone except Angela. "That's very unlikely."

Because she hadn't shut it down, Adrian tried again. "Will you think about it? I'd really like to be able to bury the past. I'm not the same man who treated you that way. If it's possible to make amends, I want to."

That wasn't nearly enough to appease Tonya, but it was enough to allow her a small bit of triumph and compassion. "I'll think about it and get back to you."

Adrian knew better than to push out a good mood charm. He stuck with being genuine. "Thank you. Now let's talk about your alternate."

"That's none of your business!"

Adrian went over to the unlocked cooler and began hunting through the vials. "Kenn is my XO. His happiness matters to me almost as much as my own. It's very much my business."

Tonya liked hearing that, as would Kenn if she decided to tell him about this conversation. She didn't let herself be swayed. "Mind your own business or you can forget about a truce between us."

Adrian did push out a charm this time, looking over his shoulder with glowing blue eyes. "I don't want a truce with you, Tonya. I want peace. I want forgiveness. I want you and Kenn to be the happy

couple that you were before Courtney stepped in and screwed us all.”

Tonya wasn't affected by his charm. She'd had a shield up since he entered the clinic. She did understand he knew more about why she had Rico around than anyone else did, including Angela. “I'll tell you one more time. Then I'll get mean. Mind your own business!”

Adrian got a fast glance into her mind. She had an intricate plan rolling that immediately reminded him of the boss. He laughed, impressed again. “You're not the same person either.”

Tonya nodded. “And we should all be thankful for that.”

“I am. The old Tonya would have already tried to kill me. Kenn has been a wonderful influence on you.”

Tonya snorted. “Kenn hurt me, just like everyone told me he would. Angela is the one who believed in me. She's the reason I have a better life now. Without her I'd still be the same whore you used and tossed away like trash.”

Adrian understood where she was coming from. “She did the same thing for me. I'll never be able to repay her for teaching me how to be a good man.”

Tonya stared at him.

Adrian shrugged. “I didn't say I practiced it. Just that I learned it.”

Tonya busted out laughing despite wanting to stay mad at him. The new Adrian was honest and blunt. Tonya respected that. As far as she was

concerned, the world would be a better place if no one was ever allowed to lie.

Adrian stared at her knowingly. “But you’re not going to play by those rules, are you?”

Tonya gave a fast shake of her head. “No. That part of me hasn’t changed. When I want something, I go after it and I don’t let anything stand in my way. If you’re smart, you’ll forget about this conversation and move on.”

Adrian reluctantly ignored her advice. He lowered his voice. “I caught Jennifer’s thoughts yesterday while you were ratting her out to the boss about Timmy being zapped.”

Tonya stared back impassively, but her heart began to thump. “So?”

“So, she found out that Gabe’s death might not be the accident we were all led to believe it was. You have Tobias to thank for that. He told her our demons never kill without permission.”

“They don’t.” Tonya had already suspected that Jennifer knew her secret. She wasn’t sure why the mean teenager hadn’t pressed charges or tried to punish her for it yet. “I told Trent I did it to prevent another mass shooting. That story is also going around.”

Adrian scanned the information on the vial and wrote it on a piece of paper. Then he put the vial back into the cooler so it would stay at a constant temperature. He sat down in the chair.

Tonya waited for him to speak. She knew he was about to tell her something else she didn’t want

to hear. She could feel him trying to find the right way to say it so it wouldn't break the small truce forming between them. Tonya huffed impatiently. "Just get it over with! I hate it when you beat around the bush."

Adrian turned toward her with pity and regret on his face. "She was thinking about telling Angela and insisting that the charges against you be reinstated. She also wants to lock you down and lock you up so you can't run away without facing justice."

Panic flew through Tonya's mind. She didn't have bags of supplies packed anymore because that had already been used against her once. Kenn was in rough shape and her son, while doing well now, was still too young for them to all be out on their own.

Adrian hated the panicked vibes that were coming from her. "I'll think of something. I just need a little time to figure out what I can use to bargain with her."

"You believe I'm guilty."

Adrian shrugged. "It won't matter what I believe. Your happy life here will be destroyed with one sentence from her. Mobs rarely care about the truth."

"I care. It matters to me. Do you think I killed him?"

Adrian slowly nodded. "I know you did. I can tell because this is the first time I've ever felt fear from you on this level. You killed Gabe in a reckless

moment and now you may lose everything you love because of it.”

Tonya’s voice lowered. “Would it matter if I had orders?”

Adrian sighed. *Damn Angela and her intricate plans!* “Yes, but Eagles aren’t supposed to use that excuse. They can still be punished.”

Tonya turned the stool and resumed working.

Adrian didn’t ask if she’d had orders. He got back to work and tried to think of something that would clear Tonya even if she hadn’t been told to do it.

Chapter Twelve

My Favorite People

1

Daryl hefted a shovelful of dirt from the garden that had just been cleared of weeds. It was time to plant now; they had to get the rows dug.

Next to him, Panaji was also digging a row, but his attention was on Sadie, who was opening the seed packets they were going to use. Panji smiled at her and dumped his shovel of dirt.

Light clouds rolled over the island, with the occasional sun blast breaking through. Rain was coming later. They needed to get this done today so the weather would water the seeds they planted and save them the resources and manpower of doing it by hand.

The garden plots were twice as long as the barn and three times as wide. This one was surrounded by crates, bags, and piles of weeds that had been pulled. The steady breeze blew pieces of withering foliage into the jungle as people walked by.

All the farm workers had been given overalls and straw hats for this shift, but few people were wearing them. Almost everyone preferred their jeans and tank tops, though the camp members often ran around in shorts during their free time. Only a

few members wore skirts or bikinis. The stores on the cruise ship still had a large stock of both. They were inappropriate for working on such hard ground. The Eagles on this shift were also wearing their jackets and sweating heavily. They didn't like Jennifer's rule about being fully geared, but they didn't break it. Even Sadie was obeying.

Sadie wiped sweat from her forehead, then eyed the man helping clear the rows. She blushed when Panaji smiled at her.

Sadie lost control of the packet. Tiny seeds fell onto the walking path next to her.

Sadie used her shoe to cover it with dirt so no one would notice.

Panaji scooped another shovel of dirt and dumped it without looking away from Sadie.

Daryl emptied the shovel into the wheelbarrow and turned, bending down for another load.

Daryl frowned at the row he was working on. It was filling up instead of emptying.

He looked at Panaji, then shoveled the fresh dirt out and dumped it into the wheelbarrow.

Nearby, Ray struggled to get the corners of a raised bed to line up so the screw would go through both pieces. The frame wasn't bent, but it still wouldn't line up.

Ray hadn't wanted to be on a ship today even though Grant had to be. Ray was hunting for a hobby, so he'd volunteered to help with farming. He grunted as the boards refused to line up. *I thought this would be less stressful.*

He pushed on the stiff boards while sweat rolled into the crack of his ass. *I was wrong.*

On the other side of the barn, a few teenagers and camp women were opening supplies or reading through the garden manuals that had been printed out for them to use today. The adults and teens eyed each other warily.

In the barn, Stanley hefted another bag of the fertilizer they needed. The barn was dim and cool, with a breeze pushing the heat out through the open doors. A dozen people were moving through here on assigned shifts. Most of them were helpers, though a few were gathering supplies for Jayda's run.

Megan carried a heavy box into the barn and slid it onto the table next to Molly, who was swinging a hammer while Jack held the potting station boards together.

Allison came down from the loft, where she'd been sleeping until her shift. The sense of things about to go wrong was too clear. She hurried out to meet Madison, who was just coming from the bunkhouse. "Thank you for trading shifts with me. I was up way too late last night."

Madison sidestepped a baby goat. "No problem. It's great that the teams are home."

"I couldn't agree more." Allison had stayed at the QZ and helped out all day yesterday. Then she'd stayed up with Zack when he couldn't sleep, talking about whatever would ease his mind. She was beat. "I'll be in the loft snoozing, so I won't be far away."

Madison tugged nervously on her ponytail. “Okay.”

“It should be an easy shift. You’re just overseeing the gardening work that needs to get done today.”

Madison still wasn’t sure how she’d let Allison talk her into trading shifts even though Jennifer had forbidden all trades, but she was determined to do a good job so their enforcer wouldn’t be mad at her for it.

“Samantha might stop by later to check on the progress.”

“Really? That’s wonderful.”

“Exactly, so keep people moving.”

“I’ll try.” Madison much preferred to care for their few animals. She’d already found out she didn’t like being an Eagle or anyone’s boss. She swallowed a complaint about being guilted into doing this.

Allison went up the steps to the loft. “Just do rounds on the areas and help if they need it.”

The loft held two cots, a small table, and two folding chairs that were all covered in a layer of dirt and sand. Every thunderstorm they had brought parts of the beach up here in the wind gusts and coated the furnishings. There was no way to stop it. They were all getting used to gritty tables and beds.

Allison dropped into one of the sandy cots and groaned, shutting her eyes. The work crew was already on site; this barn was the hub. All the supplies were in here, as well as a small work station

with several tables. Workers were carrying boxes and bags in and out, while Molly and Jack assembled planting tables that would be used for transplants and mixing fertilizer. Allison was looking forward to sleeping through all of it.

No one noticed Madison as she came out to the work area. She scanned to see if anyone needed help.

Panaji dumped another shovel of dirt into Daryl's cleared row.

Ray let out a growl of frustration as the two boards still refused to line up.

The yapping puppy ran through the cleared rows, scattering dirt back into them.

Sadie fumbled another packet and scattered seeds all over the ground by her feet.

Madison eyed the stack of empty packets. "Did you plant all of those?"

"Yep." Sadie scuffed dirt over the ground with her shoe as Madison moved on.

"That's enough!" Ray took the nightstick from his belt. He hit the boards repeatedly, dripping sweat. "Get in there!"

The puppy hiked a leg on the stack of bags Stanley had put against the barn.

Sadie moved the sign for the seed crop into the walking path.

Ray swung harder. The two boards slammed together. The screw went into the hole... then the entire bed collapsed into six pieces.

Ray put his stick into his toolbelt and walked into the jungle. “Sometimes you just have to beat it.”

Panaji dumped another shovel of dirt into Daryl’s cleared row.

Daryl dropped the shovel and went to the wheel barrow. He lifted it and rolled it over to Panaji. “Hey!”

Panaji glanced up.

Daryl dumped the wheelbarrow on the rookie, covering him in dirt up to his knees.

Madison sighed. “It’s better than I expected. Carry on.”

She headed for the other side of the barn as shouts echoed.

Madison sidestepped the puppy that was now attacking the fluttering pages of a gardening manual that someone had left on the ground.

A teenager sniffed the bag of fertilizer he’d just opened as Madison went by. He promptly threw up on the camp woman next to him.

The camp woman began to scream.

“Looking good here, too.” Madison went back into the barn.

Stanley came by carrying a heavy bag. It had a hole he hadn’t noticed. Stinky fertilizer followed him in a thick trail.

Megan came in with another heavy box and dropped it onto the work table, hitting Molly’s arm.

Molly missed her swing and cracked the hammer into Jack’s hand.

New screams echoed.

“Nice work, crew.” Madison calmly climbed to the loft.

Allison peered around in sleepy confusion. “What’s going on?”

Madison bent down and grabbed the edge of the cot. She hefted it up and over, spilling Allison onto the dusty floor. “Get down there and take it like a man!”

Madison went back down the steps, ignoring the shouts, the tears, the mess, and the smells. She scooped up one of the goat babies that was trying to eat a bag. “Let’s go see if the alligators are out today. It’s safer with them.”

2

Loud screams and shouts coming from the garden area drew attention from the guards around town, and from Angela and her team. None of her people were as spooked as the camp members, however. The screams weren’t horrible shrieks of terror, though one of them sounded on the edge. It was very likely that someone had just been injured, but Angela and her team understood the difference where the guards and camp members didn’t. It wasn’t life-threatening.

Guards quickly hurried toward the noise.

Angela gestured toward the restaurant, where the music was now being shut off and people were coming to the doors and windows to see what was

happening. “Take our new rookies to the welcome home party while I take a tour of the tunnels. I need to get down there while my body will still allow it. Let the wonderful cooks know I’ll stop by after I’m finished with my rounds.” Angela waved all of her escorts along.

Adrian stayed near her. He’d returned from the clinic with a few ideas, but until Tonya picked the tissue samples he needed and cleared him an area to work in, there wasn’t anything else he could do right now. Guarding Angela was a productive use of his free time.

The large group around them reluctantly went toward the restaurant, surrounded by den mothers and brawlers. The new people immediately became uncomfortable, but they didn’t argue with Angela’s decision. They knew they needed to start fitting into Safe Haven and what better place to do that than at a welcoming party?

Angela didn’t send comforting waves out to any of the uneasy people. They really did need to learn to adjust to things on their own, but she didn’t like them being upset. It was just as hard for her to walk away from them as it was for them to walk away from her.

Adrian swept the busy town and hid a frown. He was impressed with a couple of the things they’d gotten done here, but he was disappointed overall. Angela had put five people in charge; frankly, he’d expected more to be accomplished.

He didn't know if it was because of Jennifer's leadership bringing down morale or if people had just been stretched too thin to cover it all, but he made mental notes on the things that still needed to be accomplished before they settled in for winter.

No one expected that to be bad here, but it could be if they didn't get enough done. The fact that none of the garden plots had been cleared and planted until now was a big issue for him. They only had the small banana plants the kids had put in the ground so far and none of them were fruiting yet. All the people Angela had left in charge knew they needed to get their food supply going as soon as possible. In Adrian's opinion, that should have been more important than building the bunkhouse.

"That's part of why you're not in charge anymore. You don't look ahead."

Adrian flushed at Angela's sharp comment.

Camp people nodded agreement, casting dirty looks at him.

The Eagles felt sympathy and glanced away so he wouldn't see it.

Instead of getting upset, Adrian tried to figure out why the bunkhouse was more important than a food supply. He flashed to her conversation with Conner and assumed she was trying to save those women and their babies, but it still didn't match up. Even if all of them were lost, it still wasn't more important than everyone else in camp. *I think the needs of the many should outweigh the needs of the few.*

“Exactly. And you’re wrong. The few are just as important as the many.” Angela controlled her rising temper as she headed toward the nearest tunnel entrance. “Morgan?”

Morgan had been in the bunkhouse to verify the paint was dry on the top level. As soon as it finished drying, they had a lot of gear and furniture that needed to be moved up there. He stepped closer to Angela, hoping she wasn’t about to embarrass him or yell at him. He hadn’t slept well last night. He didn’t think he could handle it without having an emotional response. “Yeah?”

“Give me a tour of the tunnels.”

Morgan hurried toward the hatch, glad that whatever she was about to say wouldn’t be overheard by the dozens of people around them.

Adrian followed, uneasy at the thought of her large stomach going down the ladder, but he didn’t protest.

Morgan descended the ladder first, pondering the new bonds they’d come home with. It was expected that teams would grow close, but the rescue team hadn’t gone through as much. *They shouldn’t be this attached to each other.*

Angela grunted as she moved her heavy body carefully down the ladder. “You’ll understand after Adrian connects you to our hive.”

Adrian quickly came down and shut the hatch. “Are you sure you want to do that?”

Angela shook her head. “No, but I trust Morgan to keep his mouth and mind shut when it’s needed.”

Morgan liked being brought in on the secrecy, but it was worrisome to find out there was a separate hive. “Jennifer won’t like it.”

“And that’s exactly why it has to happen.” Angela began walking through the tunnel, slowly, examining what was left to do down here. “Brace yourself. It wasn’t an average Eagle run.”

Adrian brought up a shield around Angela. There was no one else down here in these dim tunnels as far as he could see and hear, but he refused to take a chance on her safety while he was distracted.

Adrian connected Morgan and let him see everything the rescue team had gone through since destroying Reicher’s lab. He also shared the memories of what the mission men had suffered.

Morgan stumbled as the connection went through and horrible flashes began to roll through his mind. The first thing he saw was a huge hound biting off Harry’s thumb and two of his fingers. “Oh, my God!”

Adrian and Angela both winced.

Morgan didn’t speak again until the awful images began to fade. He was shocked, horrified, and extremely grateful that most of them had made it back alive.

The thing he was most shocked by was Harry’s death. He had indeed taken a bullet for Lisa and saved her life. The reason that story felt like a lie was because Angela had known it was coming and

allowed it to happen. “How could you do that to him after everything he went through in that lab?!”

Angela paused at the first intersection and turned to face him. “Harry was going to challenge you as soon as we got home, Morgan. After all the evolutions he’d gone through, I wasn’t sure any of us would be able to handle him, including Jennifer. I had to make a hard choice.”

Guilt flooded into Morgan’s mind. “You picked me.”

Angela smiled at Morgan. He was one of her favorite people in their camp. “It wasn’t just based on my own feelings or even the feelings that Jennifer is hiding from you.” The softness drained from her face, becoming determination. “At some point, Harry was also going to challenge me. One of the subjects from Reicher’s lab had already been twisting him up about female leadership. Harry would have grown so powerful that he could have taken over and sent females back to the kitchens and the fields and there wouldn’t have been anything I could do to stop it. He was almost invincible.”

Morgan, now connected to Angela through the team hive, saw the conversations and moments that had determined Harry’s fate. It was obvious that she wasn’t lying. Morgan was glad he hadn’t had to face Harry or be responsible for a teammate’s death. “We need to make sure Allison doesn’t find out any of this.”

Angela nodded. “That’s why I can’t let Jennifer connect us all into the main hive yet. It’s also part

of why Zack is avoiding her. As soon as Allison finds out, she'll start hunting those power levels the same as Harry did. It will endanger everyone, stir up the normals, and get her killed. That's the last thing I want to happen."

"I'll be careful around her."

"I believe you." Angela headed for the center tunnel, not hearing anyone else moving around down here. Most of the furniture was gone and only a couple of the lights had been left on. She assumed it wasn't used much anymore and was glad.

Adrian trailed the pair and listened for problems. Angela was going slow; he knew her body was giving her problems, but she also had more to say to Morgan. Otherwise, she would have already sent him back up to work on the top level of the bunkhouse with the other helpers. They had to get the furnishings up there next.

Morgan also knew there was more ugliness coming, but he didn't have the patience to wait for it. "I'm sorry."

Angela kept walking through the damp, dank, dim tunnel. "For what?"

Morgan knew he could trust Angela. He gave Adrian a sideways glance and then decided to trust him as well since they were already connected mentally. Adrian was probably pulling thoughts out of his mind right now without him knowing it. "I'm sorry for not keeping Jennifer under control. I know you're disappointed and probably angry about some

of the things that happened. I'm sorry I didn't try harder."

"I did expect the other leaders to put their foot down when she began crossing lines."

Even though she hadn't shouted at him or even gotten nasty about it, Morgan still winced. "It's very hard for me to go against her on anything."

"Your honor as an Eagle and your duty to this camp should have come first, Morgan. Because you couldn't put your feelings aside, the Eagles will probably insist that you be removed from leadership. I've already received notes about it."

Even though he'd been expecting that, Morgan still scowled. "What about Neil? And Tonya? They let her run over us, too!"

"The same punishment should be handed out to everyone who didn't do their duty while we were gone. However, I'm not angry with Neil. I already know he spent most of his time trying to help Samantha recover while still caring for their twins and keeping Amy happy. Daryl was doing the same thing for his family, while getting the bunkhouse built. I shouldn't have asked either one of them to share leadership. That makes their mistakes more forgivable because it was actually my error in judgment that caused it."

Angela went on before Morgan could protest again. "As for Tonya, she had just been accused of a serious crime. Kenn turned his back on her during the run and made her feel like she was on her own. I don't blame her for not wanting to openly

challenge Jennifer and possibly get thrown back into jail for it.”

“So I’m the only one who gets in trouble even though all of us failed?” Morgan blew out a bitter sigh. “I thought I was one of your favorites!”

Anger flashed across Angela’s face. “You are! That’s why you’re the one being held responsible. I expected more from you!”

Angela got control of herself and continued the tunnel tour. “Kyle will handle your punishment. Be ready for it. Take it like an Eagle.”

Morgan understood he’d been dismissed. He spun toward the nearest hatch while swallowing some nasty words that she didn’t deserve. The entire time the teams had been gone, Morgan had been telling himself he was going to get into trouble for not keeping Jennifer in line. He was a senior Eagle and he had failed in his duty. He deserved whatever punishment the boss decided on.

Adrian waited until the hatch closed and they were alone again. Then he put a gentle hand on Angela’s wrist and guided her toward the nearest stool. He knew she needed to sit down and rest. “You’re going to give him a second chance, right?”

“Of course. Morgan really is one of my favorite people in this camp.”

“Is that because he’s a medic?”

Angela blew out a frustrated breath. *It figures that Adrian can’t see why.* “It’s because of his honor. Morgan beat himself up the entire time we were gone. Now that he knows a punishment is coming,

he's telling himself to suck it up and take it. He's one of the few people in our camp who rarely ever needs to be corrected by any outside force because he's constantly evaluating his behavior and punishing himself. I'd really like to let it go and not punish him at all."

Adrian studied the shadowy tunnel while they conversed. "Why don't you? You're the boss. You are allowed to let it slide."

Angela's face darkened. "Because Kyle isn't going to. He's furious and not just because Morgan didn't keep Jennifer from breaking Eagle rules. Morgan let her go to the dark side and didn't try once to stop it. Kyle thought he could trust Morgan with Jennifer's life. The rage he's feeling from being proven wrong has to have an outlet."

Adrian realized she was right. "Maybe set it up to happen during a match?"

Angela grunted. "It's going to happen right when we can least afford the distraction. That's a Safe Haven trend."

Adrian laughed. "Fair enough. It wouldn't be one of our chaos moments without everything that can possibly go wrong going wrong."

Angela grunted again as she stood up. "Yep."

The noise above the tunnel settled down as the guards finally got control over the garden area. Adrian gestured toward the hatch. "Are you ready to go up and tour the work sites?"

Angela made a face and slowly headed toward the next intersection. "Only a crazy person would

enter that area without senior Eagles in charge. Send someone who needs a lesson in chaos theory. I'm staying down here in the dark with the bugs and snakes.”

Adrian's laughter filled the tunnel and lightened Angela's mood. She didn't initiate a personal conversation and neither did he. Just spending time together while doing rounds was enough.

3

Morgan spotted Jennifer as soon as he came out of the tunnel. She was at the barn, reprimanding Allison and Madison.

Allison was holding her scraped arm while a thin trickle of blood ran down her elbow.

Madison was holding a baby goat and cringing against the door of the barn.

Both women were almost shaking in fear of the coming punishment. It was clear that the enforcer was about to zap them in front of everyone.

Morgan's anger blasted out of his mouth, loudly. “Stop it!”

Jennifer spun around in surprise as Morgan stomped toward them. “What?”

Jennifer's curls blew in the breeze, but they didn't distract him this time. Morgan glared, pointing. “You heard me. Leave them alone. You've done enough!”

Shocked silence ran through the witnesses. All conversations and work paused.

Morgan motioned to the two scared females. “Get to your posts. The Eagles will deal with you later!”

Allison and Madison fled, casting grateful glances over their shoulders.

Morgan pinned Jennifer with a nasty glower. “Safe Haven doesn’t do this! You know better, but you just can’t control yourself. No more, Jenny! You’re done!” Morgan stomped off, furious.

Jennifer’s anger rose as well, but she clenched her teeth against the punishment she still wanted to give. She wiped her gritty hands down her jeans and marched into the jungle, taking the opposite path.

Morgan went into the bunkhouse, spewing acid with every step. “Get those cots up the stairs! You know we have mission teams moving in here today. This isn’t a holiday. Get your asses to work!”

People hurried to do as ordered so he would move on. Morgan’s anger wasn’t as dangerous as Jennifer’s, but it was still something to be feared.

Morgan didn’t care about their feelings right now; he cared about his own. *I disappointed the boss!*

He took the steps to the top level two at a time, muttering about losing his place because of emotions. “I won’t ever do it again. I don’t care who they are. From now on, anyone who breaks the rules will hear about it!”

Hannah was on guard duty over the bunkhouse. She’d been waiting for a good time to talk to Morgan about her stomach issue. *This isn’t it.*

She went outside for a patrol so she didn't draw his attention.

Morgan didn't notice.

Chapter Thirteen
It's Your Fault

1

Jennifer was stunned that Morgan had embarrassed her that way. She stormed through the jungle, barely noticing the people going back and forth along the same route. Morgan had yelled at her in front of everyone, but worse was the feeling of betrayal. “I thought he was proud of me for the way I’ve been handling things. Why didn’t he say something sooner?!”

People coming up the path hurried to get out of Jennifer’s sight. It was obvious that she was in another bad mood.

Jennifer continued toward the clover path so she could check in with the guards around the quarantine zone, but her mind stayed on Morgan. “He could have at least waited until we were alone, like the boss did with him!”

Jennifer hadn’t been able to listen to that conversation. She still wasn’t good at penetrating the ground or the water with her gifts, but she knew Angela had reprimanded Morgan just based on his reaction. “She won’t stop causing problems!”

Jennifer’s nose alerted her to Kyle before her eyes did. The warm breeze carried his scent straight

to her, slowing her down. They hadn't had a real reunion yet. She wasn't sure if she wanted to have that now, however. She didn't think she could keep her jealousy under control. Too many stories were going around about him and Angie.

Kyle had been aware of Jennifer for almost a full minute. He'd spotted her coming down the path at a fast pace and slowed, hoping she would talk to him. He stared at her in open longing. *I can't believe how much I missed her.*

Jennifer caught that thought, but it wasn't enough to counteract her jealousy. She glared. "Where are you going?"

Kyle's eyes narrowed at her combative tone. "I need your permission for this supply requisition."

Jennifer calmed a little as she realized Kyle was looking for her. She took the paper he held out and scanned the list. "This is too much. It will take a quarter of our total supplies."

"I told Jayda that, but I also ran the numbers and she's right about these totals if they're going to be gone that long."

Jennifer saw the trip was expected to take at least a month. There were 15 people going, with the hopes of two dozen more refugees being brought back to join them.

Jennifer didn't like it. She hadn't even known Jayda had family alive in the States. She forced herself to scribble her initials on the paper. No one was going to listen to her complaints. Her anger

went up another notch as she handed the paper back to Kyle.

Kyle stored the paper in his jacket pocket and waited, still hoping for a personal moment. He resisted the urge to immediately start transferring the power back to her. For this one moment, he didn't want to force her into anything. He just wanted to hold her in his arms and tell her how happy he was to be home.

“Where are you going now?”

“I still need to get the boss to sign off on the requisition order.” The words were out of Kyle's mouth before he thought about it.

Tiny flames flew across Jennifer's skin. “I just signed it!”

Kyle realized their brief truce was already over. “It's standard procedure to get approval from multiple senior staff for requisitions this size. You know that.”

Jennifer scowled at his patronizing tone. “I think you just can't stand to be away from her.”

Kyle kept a blank face even though he celebrated inside. “What are you talking about?”

Jennifer waved angry hands toward town. “You and Angela! I've heard the stories. You're cheating on me!”

Kyle laughed at the absurd accusation.

Jennifer couldn't stand being laughed at; the voice inside said to zap him in payment for that humiliation.

Jennifer stomped around him and went toward the quarantine zone without saying anything else.

Kyle knew they needed to keep her jealous for Angela's plan to work, but he couldn't let her leave without hearing the truth from him even if she didn't believe it. "Jenny!"

Jennifer spun around, glowering. "What?!"

Kyle sent out a wave of the deep longing that he was feeling inside. "I would never do that to you."

He strolled up the path toward town, fighting the need to scratch his wrist through the cast.

Jennifer stared, tears coming to her eyes. She wanted desperately to believe him.

The voice inside couldn't allow it. *That's what all cheaters say to keep from being caught. You can't trust him. I'm the only one you can count on.*

Jennifer headed to the beach while listening to the evil inside even though she knew it wasn't telling the complete truth. The last month had almost proven that voice right. Morgan's flip today was the last straw in her being willing to trust any of them. *I really thought he was on my side.*

The evil voice inside offered comfort in the form of lies. *You don't need him. All you need is me. I'll always be there for you no matter what you do.*

2

"The boss will always be there for you." Cody had led the therapy session, under Wade's supervision. Only half of the team was here. "We all

see how much Safe Haven is like being in the lab. It's starting to bring out the worst in people.”

Mission men agreed. They had all been tempted. They hadn't told each other that, but everyone knew. None of them had the extreme supervision they required right now.

Wade nodded toward the boy.

Cody ended the session. “That's all for now. Jayda still needs help with her trip plans. Everyone else should start packing.”

Mission men looked at him in surprise.

“Packing for what?” Gus was happy to stay right here even though he hated the sound of the ocean. He didn't want to be anywhere near the bunkhouse.

“The boss is moving us all into the bunkhouse tonight.”

Tension and mental protests went through the quarantine tent, but nobody spoke against it. If Angela had ordered it, it was going to happen. Mission men got up and went toward Jayda or went to their cots to start gathering their gear.

Cody was proud of the job he'd done in this therapy session. It didn't bother him that the guards and gophers were observing with large frowns. They were starting to realize he was important.

Marc motioned at the empty space behind Cody. “You should let them know you're here.”

Cate let go of her shield and enjoyed the surprise of their witnesses. Then she made a face. “How can I protect him if they know I'm here?”

“Let your shield down every now and then so they’re never sure if he’s alone or not.”

Cate glared at their witnesses to drive in the point, then brought her shield back up.

“Very good.” Marc went to Jayda now that the therapy session was over. Angela had wanted him to give Cody support if he needed it, but the boy had done well on his own. He’d gotten Wade and Zack to talk about their fear of water, and Trent had even joined in toward the end. Cody was a natural leader, just like Angela.

Jayda saw Marc coming and smiled. She’d been waiting for a moment to talk to him. “How would you like to be my XO for this trip?”

She wanted someone strong and dependable to support her, but also to verify that she was making the right decisions.

Marc reluctantly denied the scarred woman. “I can’t be anyone’s go-to guy right now.”

Jayda was disappointed, but she did understand his choice. “Will you recommend someone?”

Marc scanned the tent, trying to remember who all had said they were going and who was staying. “Gus is dependable, and Greg is quick on his feet.”

“Good ideas!”

“Evaluate both of them over the next few days. Focus on making sure they’re going to be able to give you what you need for that position. If not, evaluate the rest of the crew.”

Jayda wrote the names down. “Thank you.”

“No problem.” Marc remembered his talk with Adrian.

You don't have to make a choice yet. Just do what will make you happy and we'll go from there.

Marc liked helping in these simple moments. He liked it that Jayda respected his opinion. *I also liked helping Angie and Kendle become stronger. I could probably do that again with Jayda, just without all the personal drama.*

Jayda caught his thought. “I would love that. It doesn't have to be open support if you're not comfortable with it.”

Marc held his good hand out for the clipboard. “Let's see what jobs you have everyone placed in.” He'd already gotten a small look at the list and knew that was what she was working on now.

Jayda handed it over gratefully. “I'm really glad you're going with us, Marc.”

Marc sighed. “So am I.”

Outside the tent, Debra and Ian were on duty over the beach. Ian was grumpy from doing a double shift, but most of it came from watching supplies being packed and gathered while the team talked about their coming trip. It bothered Ian that he had put in for approval for his trip months ago and yet this new mission was already approved and being stocked.

Debra was keeping an eye on the quarantined people and thinking about how hard it would be to be out on their own in the world without Safe Haven

to depend on. She was also feeling guilty about leaving Laura's nieces here alone. They hadn't really bonded with anyone else yet, but Ian had refused to take them along because they couldn't speak.

Missy came to the flap of the tent. The furious expression on her face made Debra and Ian turn toward the clover path in resignation. They already knew what had caused it.

Pam marched straight to the tent flap, pink scarf bouncing with her heavy steps. She stopped in front of the little girl. "I want to see him."

"Go away!" Missy crossed her arms over her chest and refused to move.

Pam was drunk again and out of patience. "You c-can't stop me from s-seeing him!"

"You have to follow the rules!"

"It's not up to you!"

"It's your fault he even went on that run! I hate you!"

"Shut up, you little brat!" Pam realized she had gone too far as Selina hurried toward them and the guards turned her way. She stumbled off to keep from being punished.

Missy's eyes glowed bright red for a moment and then faded back to normal. She turned toward Selina and pretended to be sad. "I don't know why she doesn't like me. All I'm doing is protecting Shawn. She wouldn't do it!"

Selina hugged the little girl and watched the drunken woman disappear into the jungle with

narrowed eyes. “I’ll help keep her away from Shawn.”

Missy hid a smile and held onto her new mother in triumph.

Selina scanned the beach and found a group of church men kicking at the wet sand while trying not to draw attention. She didn’t know what was going on with them. She hadn’t been here long enough to know if they were good or bad, but their behavior was suspicious. She led Missy into the tent while making a mental note to talk to Angela about it. “Let’s help Shawn pack so he’s ready for the move, eh? We’re going to the bunkhouse tonight.”

Missy ran over to Shawn’s cot to get started.

Selina lingered in the entrance of the tent for another minute, still observing the church people. She noticed several of the guards on the beach were also observing their behavior. She was comforted by that. Reicher had also kept a close watch on the people in his lab. *This almost feels like home.*

Mission men overheard her thought and nodded even though they understood it wasn’t a good thing. Angela and Reicher could have been related. Being back in Safe Haven had reinforced the common thought. Their methods were almost identical.

3

“What happened?!”

“Just let us know if you need anything. We’re all here for you.”

The mission men tolerated the well wishes of the hundreds of people in the bunkhouse who were observing as they moved in. They tried hard to keep their cool as they inched through the crowd that was blocking the steps to the upper level where the returning teams had been assigned.

It was dark outside now; they had all pushed this to the last minute. Angela had insisted on giving them the top level so they would have a little more time to adjust. She hadn't planned on blending them in this quickly, but the situation with Jennifer had made it impossible to give them more time in the quarantine tent.

"I'm so sorry about your eye."

"Do you want to talk about it?"

Greg forced a smile onto his lips. "Maybe another time."

Erin could feel his patience slipping. She pushed through the crowd, trying to reach the stairs. "Clear a path, people. These bags and boxes are heavy."

They really weren't. The heaviest gear had already been moved upstairs, but the observing camp members didn't know that. They retreated a few feet while staring at the scarred men. Some of them recognized Erin's jacket as Angela's, but that wasn't enough to distract them with the mission men in sight.

Erin could tell how much Greg needed to be away from all these people. She was happy that everyone was giving the teams a nice welcome, but

these men definitely weren't ready for it. She hoped it didn't continue throughout the night. They needed some peace and quiet now.

Angela wanted to go over and insist that everyone leave them alone, but that wasn't the way to handle this. Despite being surrounded by so many people, this was actually a very small moment in their recovery; they needed to handle it themselves as much as they could.

Angela was observing from the small kitchen area, while tolerating her own group of curious supporters that had surrounded her. They kept pushing food into her hands that she was passing off to other people as much as she could. Her stomach was extremely upset. She had no doubt that it was because she was back in camp already. Much like the mission men, she also would have benefited from more time in the quarantine zone.

Dust fell as someone opened the cabinet next to her for a plate.

Angela shivered. It was impossible to hide the signs of trauma. She quickly offered a distraction. "Tell Morgan that Dace is ready for a checkup now."

Dace was settled on the first floor near Candy and Brittani so people could keep an eye on him and Lisa. Lisa wasn't under guard anymore from Cate. Angela had ended that part of Lisa's punishment, but she would still be watched because she was surrounded by camp people.

Samantha and her family had been assigned to the top level, making Wade happy. He knew

Samantha wasn't ready to be surrounded by people and neither was he. Cody was up there helping the family unpack and get settled, while absorbing some valuable Eagle lessons from Wade.

Bret and the other teens were enjoying a light snack and fending off adult questions near the main door. Angela was proud of them for controlling their urge to run into the jungle.

Someone hurried off to pass her order. It didn't occur to anyone other than Angela and Adrian that Morgan should have already been here. They assumed Morgan was still upset over being chewed out. The story of Morgan yelling at Jennifer had already spread. Morgan didn't know it yet, but his reputation had improved with the camp. They were all impressed that he had finally stood up to her. Only Angela and Adrian knew Morgan had been angered into it.

Angela looked through the crowd of people and found Kyle slipping out the front door. She knew where he was going and approved.

Angela spotted some of the people from Port Stanley gathered around Dace and Lisa. Somchai and his son, Bo, were not with them. Neither was Renard.

The normals from Port Stanley were all part of the church group now. They still hadn't forgiven Somchai for lying to them about being a descendant. Many of the descendants were also avoiding Somchai because he was a relative of the founding families of Ciemus. Because of William,

they didn't trust those names. Angela was certain that Somchai and his son were feeling like outcasts.

She made her way over to them and carefully eased down in a chair. She struck up a conversation with Somchai that implied they hadn't had much contact since he joined Safe Haven. She hoped her intrusive questioning would allow him to provide answers that settled some of the descendants and allowed them to make overtures of friendship. She hated any of her people to feel left out unless they deserved it.

Kenn walked through the crowd with a fake smile and kind words. Inside, he wanted to explode. He forced himself not to bump into people who were standing in the way while offering sympathy and encouragement. *If you knew how I really felt, you'd run.*

Greg stayed on Kenn's heels. He nodded to well-wishers and ignored the dozens more who stared at his eye patch. For one moment, Greg considered lifting it and shouting that he'd sacrificed an eye to keep them all safe, the least they could do was move aside.

Shawn knew Greg was on the edge of causing a scene even though he seemed perfectly calm. He connected through their private hive. *We're almost there. Hang on.*

Gus didn't know who Shawn was talking to, but it helped him. He forced another smile at Brittani and then didn't look at her again. She was worse

now than she'd been earlier. The pregnancy was killing her; it was too clear to miss.

Biff also concentrated on reaching the steps instead of knocking people out of the way. They were all carrying things; polite people would have moved and saved their pity for another time.

The church men were making things more awkward by praying and passing hands over the returning teams as they went by. Everyone shied from it while wondering where God had been while they were being abused.

Marc reinforced Shawn's message. *Keep it cool. We're almost there.* He knew most of them were on the edge of an emotional moment. *We made it through daily lab sessions. This is nothing compared to that.*

All of the men regained control of themselves. Marc was right. This was a walk in the park compared to being tortured with electric batons and hungry hounds.

Marc was a bit surprised about the welcome he was receiving, but he also caught their thoughts about his family line and was glad none of the camp members were stupid enough to ask him questions about it.

He headed up the steps with Cate and Cody right behind him. All of them were carrying their kits and a box from the QZ. The quarantine zone had been taken down. The beach was once again clear, though the mild rain outside was keeping it from being peaceful.

That was one reason Angela was glad they were moving into the bunkhouse now. She didn't like the idea of Eagles standing in the rain on duty when it wasn't necessary.

Somchai observed Angela while being careful with the answers he gave. He and Bo had already gotten months to adjust to the way things worked here, but the trauma they had gone through in Port Stanley wasn't easily put aside.

Angela focused on Somchai and his son, but her ears were tuned into the mission men in case they had problems. The hive connection stayed bright in her mind.

4

Kyle paused in the doorway of the bunkhouse, scanning for problems while trying to count and make sure everyone was here. They were only short a few dozen people now. Most of those were on the cruise ship or closing down the various projects that had been rolling today.

Kyle smiled at the kids who were catching fireflies in the drizzle, under the supervision of Allison. She had been given an extra shift by the Eagles as her punishment. Madison had been given a shift on garbage duty.

Kyle went to the restaurant. It was almost deserted as he stepped inside. Only the cooks were still here, cleaning up from the party that had included grilled surf and turf.

Kyle nodded to Troy, the teenager from the sub. The boy had joined the cooks today and was doing well so far. Kyle hoped it stayed that way. He sat down on a stool at the counter and glared at Brittani's brother. "I want to talk to you."

Quincy cringed, knocking a cup over. Water spilled across the counter and dripped down his leg.

"What did he do?" Thelma knew Quincy had made a mistake. He'd been sullen and quiet all day, something that was unusual for her lighthearted, always talking son.

Kyle didn't know exactly what had been said between Quincy and Jennifer. He used what he was sure of. "Quincy threatened my kids."

Quincy immediately gave himself away. "I had to. If it was your sister, you would have done the same thing!"

Dwight and Thelma were completely caught off guard. They gawked at him in disapproval.

Kyle pulled the conversation from Quincy's mind. He tried not to get more upset about it than he already was. Angela had told him Quincy was bluffing and he believed her, but he was still furious that the man had tried it. "I'm not going to beat your ass like you deserve. All of our kids are locked. You have to go to the boss about something like this."

Quincy scowled, throwing his hands around. "I did go to the boss!"

Kyle snorted. "You know Jennifer isn't the boss of Safe Haven. You're just treating her like she is so

you can get what you want from her. It's not going to work."

Quincy began begging, on the verge of crying. "Please! You have to help her!"

"Absolutely not. We're not using our kids to heal people, no matter who they are." Kyle nodded politely to Thelma and Dwight, who obviously hadn't known what was going on. He turned and found Ralph standing in the doorway behind him.

Kyle groaned. *Now everyone will know.*

Ralph hurried off, eager to spread the word.

Kyle glowered. "The church people have reached their limit with me. One more screw up and the Eagles will shut them down."

He went outside and found Jennifer standing on the porch of the restaurant. He expected her to be mad at Ralph. "Don't worry about it. Angela will handle him."

Jennifer was furious, but not at Ralph or Quincy. "I had it covered! You didn't need to get involved!"

Kyle walked toward the bunkhouse, shaking his head. "I hate it when you lie to me, Jennifer."

Kyle went to Angela to update her on the situation.

Jennifer listened to the happy people in the bunkhouse and headed for one of the cots in the little clinic instead. She couldn't stand to be there while everyone was welcoming Angela home and filling her mind with stories. "Why did she have to come back at all?"

“Come on, kids! Back to the bunkhouse!” Allison was exhausted. She tried to get the kids lined up so she could count and make sure they were all here. “Wipe those muddy shoes on the cleaning rock before you go inside!”

Selina smiled at Missy as the wet girl came over and took her hand. “Just slide your shoes off when we get to the porch. I’ll clean them while you go in and get ready for bed.”

Missy hugged Selina tightly. She already loved having a mother.

Shawn put a burnt arm around Selina’s strong shoulders and waited with them as Allison rounded up the other kids who’d been brought over to the outhouse after gathering fireflies. At moments like this, he could almost see a good future ahead for him.

“Well, isn’t that sssweet.” Pam’s drunken voice drew attention from everyone as she staggered toward them. Her dirty pink scarf flapped in the wind as she approached.

“The happy wittle family standing in the rain. You look ssoo cute together.”

Shawn frowned.

Missy glared.

Selina stepped forward. She’d had enough. “I will press charges against you. Stay away from us.”

Pam’s eyes turned redder than her nose. She lifted her hand to fire.

Missy brought up a shield over her new mother.
“Do it! I’ll fry you!”

Pam was drunk, but not so much that she couldn’t feel death sitting on her shoulder. She lowered her hand and glared at the woman who’d taken her place.

Selina felt invincible with Missy’s protection surrounding her. “I’ll talk to the enforcer in the morning, mate. You’ll look beaut behind gaol bars.”

Shawn felt bad for Pam at that moment. “Maybe you should go sleep it off in your cabin on the cruise ship.”

Pam’s eyes filled with tears. She turned away, almost falling in the mud. She slipped and caught her balance. Then she stumbled into the dark jungle with tears running down her face.

Missy lowered her shield. “Don’t tell Jennifer.”

Selina was confused. “Why not?”

Missy acted sad for their audience. “She’s all alone now. It’s hard on her. Be nice and give her more time.”

People smiled at the girl.

Missy waited between her parents and stared at the window of the bunkhouse, where Angela had been observing.

Angela gave the girl a small nod and turned away.

Missy hid a savage smile and hugged her new mom again.

Chapter Fourteen
If You Say So

1

“**T**his sucks.” Kenn sighed quietly. “I felt better on the sub.”

The bunkhouse was quiet except for one part of the bottom floor where all of the people who snored had been assigned together. Their sounds rolled through the large room, providing static noise for those at the other end. Restful sleep and peaceful dreams coated most of Safe Haven.

The kitchen area had been cleaned and the lights were turned off. Even the kids were knocked out, dreaming about elusive lightning bugs and their next adventures on the island. The peaceful ambience of the first floor did not extend upstairs.

All of the mission men were awake, as were many members of the rescue team. Being back beneath a wooden roof should have been calming. Being back with their friends and family should have been a relief. Instead, their nerves were shot.

Kenn slowly rose from his cot, so it didn't make enough noise to attract attention. The camp members had been wonderful about trying to allay their fears. He didn't want them to think they had

done anything wrong. They didn't mean to be insensitive. *It's all in my head.*

The Marine slipped his boots on and then fastened his gun belt around his lean hips. He didn't go anywhere without a weapon now, not even to the bathroom.

He eased down the stairs, trying hard not to wake anyone. He was glad the camp was able to sleep, but he was also a little jealous. Some of these people had been through rough times since the war, but none of it compared to what the mission men had gone through during those eight weeks in Reicher's lab. The differences were staggering to anyone who was paying attention.

Kenn stepped out onto the damp porch of the bunkhouse, scanning for guards. He spotted a few of them and quickly slipped around the side of the building. He wasn't in the mood to talk to anyone who didn't understand how he was feeling.

Kenn stopped suddenly, coming face-to-face with Greg. Their matching scars were a relief and a curse.

Greg leaned against the side of the bunkhouse and resumed staring toward the jungle with his one good eye.

Kenn saw the sheen of sweat on Greg's fried skin and understood he was having the same problems. Kenn joined him without speaking.

Greg tried to feel better now that he wasn't alone out here in the darkness, but it barely put a dent in his mental madness. His brain kept replaying

his time in the lab, like it did after any run, but he couldn't handle it. The normal time an Eagle spent replaying decisions and actions after a mission was too painful.

Both men glanced over as footsteps approached.

Thomas and Biff came around the side of the bunkhouse together. They weren't surprised to find Kenn and Greg already here. Both of them had noticed the empty cots, though vaguely. They joined the two men against the wall and tried to find solace in their teammates; none of them spoke. Their minds were busy tormenting them. Talking about it wasn't going to help.

Gus joined them next. He couldn't stand to be in the bunkhouse listening to Brittani's moans and groans as she tried to find a comfortable position on the hard cot. *I never should have gone on that run.*

All of the mission men felt that way. None of them were sure they would recover from it.

In the bunkhouse, Shawn came down the stairs with silent steps and a chaotic mind. He walked by the rows of sleeping people with a nasty wave of jealousy. *They can sleep because they haven't been tortured!*

Shawn's bad mood paused as he reached Missy's cot. She was on her side, snoring softly.

Her shoes caught his eye. They were muddy again. *She went out somewhere.*

He and Selina had cleaned off the mud after the bathroom trip last night.

Shawn quietly picked up Missy's shoes and went outside. He didn't want her to get in trouble for tracking mud into the bunkhouse or for roaming while people were asleep. Hopefully she'd just made another bathroom trip.

Shawn's mental chaos had been pushed aside by concern for Missy. He barely noticed when Marc came out and walked by him.

Marc went around the side of the bunkhouse and joined his team. The cool night air blew over his sweaty skin, but it didn't bring real relief. The constant flashes of everything that had happened were rough, but seeing the empty cots and knowing he was partially responsible for the misery these men were going through was worse. He had no way to explain how badly he felt about failing them.

Kenn moved over to make room for Marc. He wasn't surprised when Dog trotted out of the jungle and came over to sit down by Marc's untied boots. Even the wolf was having trouble adjusting to being back on land. It was clear in his bushed out fur and laid back ears.

Kenn reached down and rubbed the agitated wolf without fear of a harsh reaction. In this moment, they were the only ones who understood how the animal felt.

Dog whined low in his throat and then laid down with his head on Marc's boot. He let out occasional moans and whimpers as they all waited miserably for dawn to arrive.

The darkness over the island was complete right now. If not for the solar powered lights around the front of the bunkhouse and the restaurant, it would have been pitch black. That didn't scare the mission men. The soft drizzle did bother them, but it was the sound of the ocean even from this far away that drew shudders and tremors from their tired bodies. Their fear of water wasn't getting better.

A soft squeak echoed through the darkness. Everyone turned.

Angela staggered around the side of the bunkhouse. Her haunted expression told them why she had come out.

Angela shivered. "Shark."

Thomas shuddered and put his good arm around her. The other stayed on his crutch to keep his balance. He understood completely.

The large group continued to grow as members of the rescue team also came out, unable to stand the quiet in the bunkhouse. They hung out together, trying to find comfort.

Angela was once again extremely sorry that she had ordered the run. She knew Marc and some of the others were feeling guilty over the choices they'd made, but in her mind, it was completely her fault. *I'm the boss. I did this. I'll never be able to make it up to them.*

Fast steps echoed, making everyone tense. They all knew who it was before she arrived.

Jennifer came into view with a huge frown on her face. “What are you all doing out here? It’s bed time!”

Angela quickly brought up her shield in defense. She was unable to deal with Jennifer’s displeasure in any other way right now.

The mission men followed her lead and brought up shields until all of them were smothered in layers of protection.

“I just asked a question!” Offended, Jennifer stomped off in the other direction.

She spotted Adrian and growled. “Get out of town today! You’re not allowed to be here!”

Adrian didn’t answer as she went by.

Kyle had been watching all of them from his post in the window. He came out now, scowling at Angela. “You’re stirring her too hard.”

Angela kept her shield up. “No, she’s letting her need to control things wind her up. We’re not doing anything wrong.”

Kyle was torn between them. He didn’t know what to say.

Angela motioned, still not lowering her shield. “Let’s go to the restaurant and find some coffee. I want to talk about shark hunting.”

Many of the men were looking forward to that, including Thomas and Kenn.

The group slowly moved toward the restaurant. As they went by the bunkhouse door, Wade came out, with Cody and Cate on his heels. That trio was also jittery. They brought up shields and sighed in

relief as they realized the layers muted the sound of the ocean.

The group went by a single person inside the barn doing a workout. No one interrupted, not even Kenn when he realized it was Tonya.

Tonya watched them go by, but she didn't stop. She could feel them all wondering if she was doing extra training so she would get chosen as team leader when Angela went on maternity leave. She didn't offer anything that might disabuse that notion, but that wasn't the reason. Tonya was doing it because she was scared. *I have to get in shape so I can handle a run.*

Conner came out of the bunkhouse next and joined the group. He was drained again, almost to the point of being withered.

Adrian came from the guard post where he had chosen to spend the night instead of trying to sleep in the bunkhouse. He shot energy into Conner.

Angela frowned at the weary boy. "Don't do it again or I'm going to split you up."

Conner was grateful and guilty for that order. There was very little he was able to do for Candy now, but he loved her too much to just sit back and watch her suffer. Angela's order would help him in that way, but it wouldn't help Candy.

Panaji was in the restaurant. Angela saw him through the window and pointed at Adrian. "Go handle that."

Adrian reluctantly went. He didn't want to talk to Panaji about his new relationship with Sadie, but

Panaji was obviously feeling bad. He'd been avoiding the returning teams for days now. He didn't have anything to feel guilty about, but Adrian would still have to suffer through a conversation where he had to convince the man of it. Adrian was already low on patience. He wasn't sure how he was going to force himself to be polite.

Angela wasn't going to tolerate anyone being rude to Panaji. He was one of the nicest people in their camp. "Pretend you're still an Eagle."

Adrian's shoulders stiffened as he walked away. He wasn't used to Angela being outright cruel to him. *But I deserve it.*

Adrian went inside the restaurant and joined Panaji at the table. "Let's talk."

Angela looked at the guard on the barn. She stared coldly at Rico. His presence was a constant reminder of Reicher.

Kenn had also been watching the man. He decided now was a good time to handle that problem.

Marc put a hand on Kenn's burnt wrist to stop him from engaging the enemy. "I get him first."

Kenn stopped. Marc was obviously upset with his uncle. Kenn didn't expect it to go well. "Perfect. You warm him up and I'll set him on fire."

Marc didn't laugh as he joined Rico. He didn't speak to the man yet, waiting for everyone else to go into the restaurant so they would have the impression of privacy.

Rico had tensed as soon as the mission team started coming out of the bunkhouse. He suddenly regretted his decision to have Jennifer lock his gifts. He was almost certain he was going to need them here.

Angela led the group into the restaurant and took a seat at the front counter. Everyone else followed her lead, trying to give Adrian a little bit of privacy by avoiding the tables in that corner.

Thelma was behind the counter, getting things ready for tomorrow. She waited until Angela sat down and then came over to her. "Please don't hurt my son for threatening Jennifer's kids. He's a stupid boy who loves his sister."

Angela smiled at the upset woman. "I won't. None of us will. We understand what made him do it. We also know he was bluffing."

Thelma reached out and took Angela's hand. "I'm sorry. Please use your kids to help my daughter!"

Everyone frowned at Thelma.

"I can't do that. I *won't* do that."

Thelma had been expecting it, but she still couldn't contain her disappointment at the answer. She slapped a sheet of paper onto the counter and quickly left.

Angela hated it that Thelma was upset. She wasn't going to change her mind, however. They had to protect the kids, otherwise every time there was an issue, the camp would demand their children be used in place of medicine, time, or wiser

decisions. It would turn Safe Haven into a lab and they were already walking a fine line on that.

Small conversations began while people raided the coffee pots. They were joined by Ray and Trent. A few people started the morning meal from the list Thelma had left on the counter. The others just enjoyed being around people who understood what they were going through.

Angela watched the Golden Retriever come in and settle down next to Adrian's feet. She wasn't surprised. He had a way with people and animals. *It just isn't always a good way.*

Angela let the calm of the room soothe her nerves even as she kept an ear out for problems with Marc and Rico. She seriously doubted their first meeting would go well. In fact, she was counting on it going badly. Marc wasn't in a forgiving mood. *None of us are.*

2

"He's making plans to kill me." Rico didn't look away from Kenn's glare as the Marine stood on the porch of the restaurant, watching them.

Marc didn't accuse Rico of having his gifts back. Any idiot could see Kenn's mind was spinning out death and destruction. "Well, you are stalking his mate."

Rico didn't answer.

Marc faced his uncle. He saw the resemblance to Reicher in the graying hair and the shape of his

face, but he was shorter, heavier, and seemed like much less of a threat. Marc knew better than to let his guard down despite that impression. “I have some questions.”

Rico didn’t feel sympathy for Marc’s burns or his ugly mental scars. He considered them a rite of passage for their kind. “Why should I give you more information than you already have?”

“We’re family.”

Rico shrugged. “That won’t work on me any more than it worked on my brother.” Rico had spent most of his life in that lab. He knew exactly how Marc’s time there had gone, even down to the word games they’d played.

Marc tried a different tactic, suddenly feeling like he was talking to Reicher again. “You like it here. It feels like home to you. It would hurt you to be banished.”

Rico didn’t deny it. The way Safe Haven was run did indeed feel like home to him, minus who the leader was. “Your mate and my brother could have been born from the same egg.”

Marc didn’t deny it either. It also felt like home to him now, though he hated that. “I have some questions.”

Rico finally met his eye. Angry humor twinkled at him in dangerous warning. “We will never have a personal relationship because of what my brother put you through. Don’t insult me by trying to create a bond that won’t ever be real.”

Marc understood Rico was intelligent as well as dangerous. “That doesn’t change my need for answers.”

“Just as long as you don’t bullshit me, Marcus. I won’t stand for that.”

Marc smothered a chill at the tone. In his mind, it sounded exactly like the demon who haunted his sleep. “Tell me how the Roberts family tree branched out.”

Rico hadn’t been expecting that. He turned toward the restaurant, ignoring Kenn’s glare in favor of studying the two teenage boys who were at a table near the window. “That line is fragile to mental health issues. It only had a few branches and all of them were sau weak.”

“More details would be good.”

Rico had heard about Marc’s cursed relationship with the woman named Kendle. “The Roberts branches were carefully nurtured to keep that tree from dying. No match ever produced a stable offspring, not even with a Reicher. Those two distant cousins will not be different. The glint of madness is already in their minds, as I’m sure you know.”

“Yes, but how do you know?”

Rico turned for a sweep of the barn, where Tonya’s alluring shadow was now doing fast pushups. “The stories of their actions on your submarine have spread.”

“All they did was get drunk. A lot of teenagers do that. It doesn’t mean they’re mentally ill.”

“Do you not see alcoholism as a mental illness?”

Marc wiped drizzle from his face. “No.”

“And yet, it is. The mind knows the behavior is bad, but it insists on it anyway. All addictions are mental weaknesses.”

Marc couldn't argue that point. “They haven't tried to get drunk since then.”

“They haven't been given the opportunity.”

Marc's unease deepened as his mind began planning a simple test to see if that was true. “How can I help them?”

“Isolation and strict routines are the only reason any Roberts branches survived. Breed them quickly and concentrate on curing their offspring. Perhaps you will have more success than my brother did.”

Marc stored that advice and moved on. “Why did you really come here?”

Rico saw no reason to hide the truth. “I was going to beg your leader to destroy the lab and kill my brother. She was already handling it, so there was no need to bring it up.”

“You're happy he's dead.”

“Yes.” Rico couldn't lie. “I also miss him. He was the only family I had. Even now, I prefer his coldness and honesty to your attempts at sneaking a bond into my mind.”

“That's not what I'm doing.” Marc wanted that clear. “You're a stalker and maybe a rapist. You're a bad person who has no place in this camp or any other.”

“You’re also planning my death.”

Marc snorted. “That’s not my job here.”

Rico’s lips curled. “Yes, your wife is very skilled at that. She doesn’t need your help.” Rico’s tone grew colder. “In fact, she doesn’t need you at all.”

Marc didn’t let the words wake the tiger inside, but he still felt the blow. “She loves me. That’s better than needing me.”

“If you say so.” Rico looked Marc in the eye. “Ask what you really want to know so this moment can be over.”

Marc did. “How do I fix them, us? Reicher had to have a way to repair all the damage he did to people.”

“Nee.”

“Don’t lie to me! He experimented with everything. There’s no way he didn’t try to put the subjects back together.”

“Oh, he tried, but it never worked. The labs were designed to push souls over their breaking point. Once they reached that line, there was no going back.”

“Surely there—”

“No! A shattered soul cannot be glued back together like a plate!” Rico calmed his voice as Kenn stepped off the porch and came toward them. “You all have to accept your mistakes and forgive yourselves. I was never able to do it.”

“What about your brother?”

Rico grunted. “My brother didn’t feel guilt. He was an evil bastard who delighted in the pain of others. You are nothing like him.”

Marc enjoyed hearing that. “Are you?”

“In more ways than I ever wanted to be.” Rico looked toward Tonya again. “But she’s wearing me down.”

“How? We were told you don’t talk to her.”

“I don’t. I watch her. She has a good soul. I’m letting it rub off.”

“And what happens when she finally tells you to go away?”

Rico didn’t answer. He didn’t know, but it was clear as Kenn joined them that it was going to happen. He’d never seen Tonya as happy as she’d been since the scarred Marine came home.

Standing between the two abused men sent Rico back to the lab, to his brother. “Did *you* kill him?”

Marc shook his head. “My twins did it.”

Rico wasn’t surprised. “He always said his past would come back to haunt him.” Rico asked a question of his own. “Why hasn’t she been told of the accusation against me?” Rico had expected Kenn to do that as soon as he landed.

Kenn’s voice was furious under his careful control. “Safe Haven doesn’t punish people for crimes unless they know the person did it. And it would backfire if I tried to turn her against you.”

Rico smiled. “Yes. You are limited. I see that now.”

Kenn leaned forward, letting the rage show through the scars. “But I’ll cross that line and kill you in front of everyone, Rico Reicher. I loathed your brother and I detest you. I haven’t killed you yet for only one reason.”

Rico swallowed fear. He rarely felt that emotion anymore. “Marcus is now the sole leader of the UN and the labs. He told you see.”

Marc was surprised that Rico knew. “Where did you hear that?”

“I pulled it from your wife’s mind before you left. She planned it all.”

“You’re right about that, but not about my reason.” Kenn straightened and looked toward the restaurant. “Angela told me not to. My life belongs to her.”

Rico sneered. “She’s a woman!”

Both Marines understood Rico shared his brother’s contempt for female leadership.

Kenn suddenly felt better. “Angela will give a kill order on you soon. I’m sure of it. She won’t let you contaminate everyone with that attitude. I can’t wait to hear her say it even if I’m not the one called on to handle it.”

Kenn went to the restaurant and joined Angela at the counter.

Rico finally got worried.

Marc shrugged. “He’s not wrong. It might be best if you left and stayed gone.”

Rico swept the woman in the barn again. “Only death will get me to leave her.”

Marc smiled coldly as he followed Kenn. “Just remember that you chose it.”

3

Tonya came out of the barn.

Rico prepared to follow her to the clinic, where she usually went to clean up after her workouts.

Tonya locked eyes with Rico and came over to him.

Rico sighed. “It just isn’t my night.” He assumed she’d been listening to the conversation.

Tonya was curious about what had been said, but she’d followed the magic rules and hadn’t snooped. She couldn’t afford to draw the enforcer’s ire. She didn’t ask what had been said during the brief encounter, either. She had another topic on her mind. “I may have to leave.”

Rico stiffened, getting another flashback.

“I don’t want you to follow me if that happens.”

Rico wanted to relax since it was the opposite of the past, but her request made that impossible. “You won’t be safe out there alone.”

Tonya knew that was true. “I won’t be alone. Kenn will be with me.”

Rico sneered and kept his ugly thoughts to himself.

Tonya sighed. “We need to talk.”

Rico shook his head. “I’m not good at emotions and feelings.”

“Neither am I, but this has to happen.” Tonya put her hand on her hip. “Why are you stalking me?”

Rico retreated in denial. “I keep you safe. This is a dangerous place, a dangerous world.”

“You’re lying. I hate liars.”

Rico didn’t want her to be angry with him. He chose his words wisely. “You know I care for you.”

“You want a relationship.”

“I want you to be safe.”

Tonya understood he was just going to repeat those same answers, like he always did whenever she tried to have this conversation. She decided it was time to get serious. “We will never be together because you won’t let me in. As long as you keep me at arm’s length, I’ll always see you as a threat.” Tonya walked away.

Rico was crushed. He hurried after her. “Wait! Please.”

Tonya stopped, hiding her smile. “Answer my question. Give me the truth.”

Rico clammed up again. He knew she wasn’t ready to hear his declaration of undying love.

Tonya studied him, still resisting the urge to read his thoughts. “You have to give me something, Rico. Let me in!”

His mouth opened. Nothing came out. His shoulders dropped and his body language filled with regret. “I’m sorry.”

Tonya felt bad for him. Shyness was a problem a lot of men suffered, but after seeing the mission team’s scars and mental issues, she assumed Rico

had gone through the same things and maybe even worse. She pushed anyway, delivering an ultimatum. “Let me in or go away. I’ve had enough.”

Rico stared in longing and refused to answer.

Tonya shrugged, turning away. “I’ll talk to Jennifer in the morning about filing charges. Have a good night.”

Rico growled in frustration. He grabbed her arm and pulled her back. “Don’t go!”

Tonya stared into his eyes, heart thumping as she curled an arm around his stiff neck. She waited for his next move, not caring that everyone in the restaurant was staring in shock at their embrace. “Let me in.”

Rico leaned his cheek against hers, breathing in deeply of her scent. “Nee. You’ll hate me.”

He slowly let go of her. “File your charges, it won’t matter. I’ll still keep you safe, even from me.”

He hurried off into the jungle.

Tonya headed for the treehouse clinic to get cleaned up and sleep. She refused to look at Kenn as she went by the restaurant. He needed to know she had other options and she needed to know there was at least one man out there who would stay with her no matter what else was happening.

Tonya felt Rico fall in behind her as soon as the town fell out of sight. A small smile played on her lips as she walked.

Chapter Fifteen
So Could You

1

“**W**hen you give the order on him, I don’t want it.”

Angela regarded Kenn. “That’s not what I expected.”

Kenn fought his need to chase after Tonya. “She’s bonding with him. It’s different than it was with Peter and Gabe. She didn’t want them. If I kill Rico, she’ll never forgive me.”

Angela was glad he was rational enough to know that. She was also bitter.

Angela usually tried hard to never think about their past, but the stress and lack of sleep broke that control. The old Kenn would have already made plans to drive his knife into Rico’s guts. It was more proof that Kenn had changed. Even without the scars, his unshaven face and wild hair would have driven in the differences. The Kenny she hated was meticulously neat and clean at all times and he demanded the same of those around him. “I won’t give you the order.”

Kenn forced his eyes away from the window. He sipped the cooling coffee and tried to find

something else to stew on. He knew Angela would handle it; he just needed to be patient.

“I have a job for you.”

All the mission men at the counter and tables froze for an instant. No one liked hearing those words from her.

Kenn thawed, grunting. “I’m your guy.”

He assumed it would be something ugly in payment for her getting rid of Rico.

“We need a detective and a sheriff. You’ll do the first one, starting now, and pick a few people for me to evaluate for the other.”

Kenn was pulled from his dangerous thoughts. His mood began to improve. “I get to be Safe Haven’s dick?”

Angela laughed with everyone else. “You’ve had the unofficial title for a year now. Might as well make it legit.”

Kenn laughed, thrilled. “I’d be honored.” He and Charlie had talked about it on the sub, but Kenn hadn’t thought about it since then.

His happiness faded a bit. “We don’t really need it, though. Jennifer’s good at her job even if people don’t like her methods. We won’t need a detective or a sheriff here.”

Angela’s mood plummeted. “Have you ever known me to waste manpower on a job that isn’t needed?”

Kenn frowned. “No...”

Angela resumed sipping her coffee.

Everyone else tried to figure out what horror was coming for them now.

2

Adrian shook Panaji's hand, smiling tiredly at the relieved man. "We're good."

Panaji was grateful that Adrian wasn't upset. He and Sadie had only shared a table at mealtimes, but it was enough to convince him that she was his soulmate.

Panaji stood, heading for the bunkhouse. "I will sleep well now."

Adrian kept a smile on, but he grimaced mentally, along with everyone else. Sleep was something this team would be light on for a while.

"Jayda's coming over." Gus had been standing near the door to keep an eye on things. They'd been here for an hour now. Dawn was slowly starting to show up in the eastern sky.

Biff stiffened.

"Charlie is right behind her, with Wade and Piper."

Angela sighed. "Well, that's all of us."

"Isabel and Selina aren't here." Kenn glanced around. "Is Bret?"

Angela pointed toward the outhouse. "They all made a pit stop first."

Not a single member of the mission team or the rescue crew had adjusted to being home.

“Maybe the infants are handling it.” Adrian wanted them to have hope.

The sound of a crying baby put a stop to that notion. Adrian watched Isabel hurry back into the bunkhouse to tend to her baby. He sighed. “What are we doing wrong?”

Angela didn’t have an answer for that. “Maybe we just need something else to take our minds off the run.”

Adrian felt Biff preparing to confront Jayda. “I don’t think that’s what she meant.”

Biff snapped his mouth shut as the line of people came in and found a seat at a table. The counter was full.

Jayda felt Biff’s glare before she saw it. She stopped by his table, confused. “Are you okay?”

Biff didn’t have enough sleep beneath his belt to wait until they were alone. “Why didn’t you tell me you’re married?!”

Silence went through the witnesses; people turned to observe.

Jayda flushed under her scars. Her eyes swung to Angela. “You told him.”

Angela shrugged. “He’s planning a happy future with you and you’re planning something different. He has a right to know.”

“I would have told him!”

Angela glared. “Before or after you left for the run?”

Jayda dropped her eyes. “I was going to tell him on the way there.”

Biff's anger boiled over. "You should have told me your husband is alive! I can't believe you didn't tell me that!"

Jayda sat at the table with him and tried to explain. "I didn't know for a long time. It's only been the last few months."

Biff's curls flopped over his scarred face as he slapped the table. "That's not an excuse!"

"I'm sorry."

Any other time, her one-piece pajamas would have caused the blood to leave Biff's brain. He loved flannel on a woman. Tonight, it was a reminder that someone else had the right to ogle her bedclothes. "Why didn't you tell me?"

Jayda hated it that there were so many witnesses to this moment. "I didn't tell anyone. The boss got it from my thoughts during one of our fog-dead moments. Until that last fog, I wasn't going back at all. He was dead to me."

Biff stared at her, hurting. "He's the reason you need to go. The rest of it is bullshit."

Jayda tried not to get upset. "I miss all of my family, Biff, and my friends. They deserve this life, too." She sighed. "But my husband was a big part of the choice."

"Because you love him and you miss him." Biff tried to brace for her to end their relationship.

"Not even close. I need him to sign the divorce papers that I printed out while we were on the sub. I don't want to be married anymore."

Biff fought through the relief coming into his heart. “You want a divorce?”

“Yes.” Jayda dropped the other shoe. “I never want to be married again. Please don’t ever ask me. If you do, our time together will be over.”

3

Kyle had followed Jennifer. He caught up quickly and then stayed next to her as she marched unafraid through the jungle. He could feel her anger; underneath it was need. Females who were pregnant often craved sexual contact. Kyle was counting on that to help him now. “Can I talk to you about a problem? It has nothing to do with us.”

Jennifer reluctantly stopped, trying not to lean into him like she was used to doing. She missed his touch more than she could say.

Kyle grinned. “I lied. It has everything to do with us.” He sent out a wave of desire and waited to see if she was interested.

Jennifer wanted to give in right away. She could almost feel his lips on hers as she stared at him.

Kyle waited for her to make the choice, but he didn’t insist on a conversation. He wanted the reunion they’d been denied. “It’s not a trick, Jenny. I still want you as much as I ever have.”

Jennifer softened. “I’m glad you’re home.”

“Love me?”

Jennifer stepped toward him in the darkness, unable to resist his need or her own.

Jennifer groaned as Kyle kissed her. The old spark lit them both up.

Kyle steeled himself in case she didn't want to go all the way. His body was already hardening.

Jennifer's jealousy made the choice for her. She pushed his jacket off his shoulders and kissed him hungrily.

Kyle was thrilled. He was also excited. He fell back into their careful routine with a deep gasp. He rubbed her hair and her neck with his good hand while she freed his engorged hard-on and arranged their bodies to put it where she wanted it. Then she rode him, gently, driving them both crazy while making sure it didn't harm the pregnancy.

It took her a long time to climax. Kyle worried over that in the back of his mind while trying to control his body. He stayed on the edge the entire time, gasping and groaning. He was grateful for the wet tree holding their weight as she finally shuddered against him. He continued to hold still as she flexed her hips sharply and finished him off.

Jennifer chuckled at his loud noise of ecstasy. Shivers and chills went over her skin and slowly faded.

Kyle kissed her again, connecting them mentally while she was vulnerable. He shoved on the power in his mind. *Thank you for our time together. Go back to your master now.*

Jennifer understood what he was doing. She pushed out of his arms, fury rising.

Slap!

Kyle didn't move as she brought up her shield and glared at him with bright red eyes.

"You sneaky bastard."

Kyle drew air into his burning lungs, but he didn't apologize. "I'd do anything to help you, Jenny."

"Stay away from me!" Jennifer fixed her clothes and spun around. "Go back to *your* master, you traitor!"

Kyle fixed his damp clothes and let her go even though it was full dark and she was alone. Anyone who ran into her right now would be sorry even if they weren't doing anything wrong. "You need a dose of the rage vaccine and I'm going to make sure you get it."

Kyle hadn't expected his plan to work. "But she enjoyed the moment and so did I. We'll both think about it later and wish it had ended better."

4

Adrian scanned his dark shack in resignation. It was filthy. People had obviously been coming here for private moments and partying, off Jennifer's radar. It was littered, literally, in beer cans, condoms, and trash. It sent him back to waking from the fog on the submarine. He hated it. "I want to leave those flashes in the past where they belong."

"That's hard to do in this camp."

Adrian turned and found Piper coming up the dark path. "Still can't sleep?"

“That’s also hard to do in this camp.” Piper joined him in the shack, nose wrinkling at the mess and the smell. “What are you doing here?”

“I thought I’d start getting it ready for the therapy sessions.” He had escaped the restaurant as soon as he could. “I didn’t know it had become a bunny cage.”

Piper chuckled. “Funny.”

“Yeah, that’s me.” Adrian went to the small storage closet he’d built before he left. He took a broom out and tried to find a place to start. The trash was inches deep on the floor and all the surfaces were covered.

“I wonder what it’s like inside.”

Adrian shrugged as he started sweeping. “Let me clear out a few feet of trash and then we’ll find out.” He hoped no one had figured out how to get inside. If they had, it would stink from being shut up. He didn’t think his stomach could take it.

Piper eyed his big arms through his shirt and blushed. She’d been in the fog for most of their time together, but the part she remembered was hot. “Why did you sleep with me?”

Adrian paused.

Piper shoved a layer of trash from a chair and sat down. She didn’t care about the dirt or the bugs. She cared about the future.

“Is this our first relationship talk?”

Piper shrugged. “It’s overdue.”

“Yeah.” Adrian had expected it sooner, but he still didn’t know how to respond. She probably wouldn’t like the truth.

“Would it be easier if I guessed?”

Adrian snorted. “Maybe.” *She’d have to be smarter than I thought to get it right. I’m still shocked that Tonya figured it out.*

“You’re lonely. You want a family that you get to raise.”

Adrian nodded. *Safe so far.*

“And you’re about to challenge Angela somehow. It involves me.”

Adrian stared. *Not safe now!*

Piper smiled softly. “You know you can trust me.”

He nodded again. “And I do. But people here can pull things from your mind without expending much effort.”

“Your silence is a form of protection.”

He grunted. “I’m biding my time.”

“So you can challenge Angela....” Piper considered that deeper. “How does it involve me?”

Adrian was tired of being alone in his thoughts and plans. He gave her a single clue. “When are you due?”

“I’m not...” Her eyes widened as she got it. “You’re not allowed to breed.”

“No.”

“You’ll be punished.”

“Arrested, yes.”

Piper knew she was on the right track. Adrian was going to challenge the boss, but only if she got pregnant. “You did it on purpose and now you’re waiting to put the rest of your plan into action.”

“What plan?”

“The one where you force a vote on leadership and win this time.”

Adrian’s admiration was clear in his tone. “Brilliant.”

Piper chuckled. “Don’t butter me up. We have work waiting.”

Piper pushed up the sleeves on her white shirt and started clearing trash off the table. People wore long sleeves in the evening or the bugs wouldn’t stop eating them. Bare skin was a dinner bell when the sun went down.

Adrian watched her for a minute, surprised and happy. Piper was definitely a better match for him than Sadie had been. *But it’s not enough. I want my camp back.*

Adrian started sweeping the corner of the shack floor while stewing on the next stage of his plan.

Piper was keeping track of his thoughts. “You should go below and see if the bed’s clean.”

Adrian grinned. Then he went below to see if the bed was clean.

Piper kept clearing the trash and refusing to consider what would happen in the future. *I’m living in the now for the first time in my life. It feels good.*

On the path, Sadie watched with furious eyes and hands deep in her pockets to keep from triggering a fight. *That whore!*

A few feet away, Nature blended in with the dawn shadows and watched Sadie.

5

“Where did you get this?” Ed held up the rare flashlight.

Tim moved faster. “I borrowed it from the supply stock. Try not to use it for long or Jennifer will know by the low batteries.”

Ed turned it on so they could resume searching the beach. “I saw her and Kyle having a private moment. We should have a few minutes, but we’ll have to be fast so the light doesn’t attract a guard.”

Tim was already sweeping the beach and kicking at lumps in the wet sand. “I saw Pam staggering to the cruise ship. She didn’t see me coming down here. Everyone else is in the restaurant or the bunkhouse.”

The insects and island animals made noises in the darkness, but the men ignored it. Their time was limited. Safe Haven was usually quiet at this time of night. It had been a lot easier to sneak around before the mission teams came home.

“I think I found something.” Ed kicked sand off the long piece of debris.

Tim came over and shined his light. Faded lettering caught his eye.

...Adriana lifeboat was designed by...

“That’s it!” Tim grabbed the soggy wood and tucked it under his arm. “Let’s get back to the church.”

Ed shut off the flashlight and followed. “Are we putting it with the boat or sticking it into a trash pile?”

“Let’s break off the lettering part and make sure it gets burned in a campfire.”

“Maybe we should just put it with the boat. Someone might recognize it before it burns down.”

“Fair enough.” Tim hurried up the path that wound along Luke’s cabin. He didn’t want to run into Jennifer and Kyle on the way back. “I’m sorry.”

Ed sighed. “Me, too. I hate sneaking around.”

“We’re doing the right thing. I just don’t want to be banished for it.”

Ed grunted. “I think removal is more likely. We’ve been lying to everyone.”

Tim moved faster while trying not to slip on the wet jungle floor. “We’ll figure something out now that we’ve collected all the evidence.”

Ed didn’t answer. He watched the path for witnesses and wished he’d never agreed to join the church group.

Nature watched them go by with a sly smile. Angela had no idea how many people in her camp

were no longer good. *But I'll enjoy helping that along. Your time as leader is almost up.*

6

Jennifer completed her round of the island and stopped on the clover path, trying to decide what to do now. She needed to sleep soon. Her shift was long over, but Kyle's trick was weighing heavily on her mind. She'd made sure things were calm at all the posts, but she was still too restless to sleep.

Her gaze turned toward the water and the dim cruise ship she could just barely make out from where she was standing. "Maybe I'll do rounds there."

Jennifer didn't like being on the ship anymore; she hardly ever set foot on it now. She reluctantly went that way.

Quick footsteps came up the path toward her. Jennifer stiffened as she spotted Grant. *Lovely.*

Grant grimaced as he saw her. *Great.*

He forced himself to go to her for the update. "The ship's all settled down. There's a skeleton crew on duty."

Jennifer took the nightly report he held out and put it into her pocket without reading it. "How many camp members?"

"Half a dozen. Most of those have duty there come dawn."

Jennifer felt Grant's scorn even though he was keeping his mind blank. She scowled. "I did what I thought was best!"

Grant's tone was cold. "And yet you were still wrong." He moved by her on the path and headed for town. "Good night."

Jennifer let him go without firing back. Her anger boiled in her gut, turning her stomach. Losing Grant's friendship was another harsh blow. "No one understands."

Jennifer changed her mind about doing a round of the ship. She went to the hatch on this path and opened it. She descended into the darkness and shut the lid without fear. She had enough power now to destroy entire cities. She was the thing in the darkness to be feared.

Jennifer saw the few pieces of furniture that had been in this tunnel were gone now, presumably taken into the bunkhouse. Other than a few stools, it was empty.

She walked through, making mental notes about what still needed to be done down here, but her heart wasn't in it. She kept replaying Kyle's betrayal and letting the anger grow. When she finally realized she wasn't alone, she kept walking. "I'm busy. Go away."

Nature laughed. "Such a temper. She was right to put you in charge."

Jennifer grumped. "She doesn't feel that way. She's pissed at me. That's why she really left me out of her team meeting."

“They’re all conspiring against you.” Nature followed the teenager. She’d taken a brief rest in her ancient threads. She felt stronger now. “You should do something about it.”

Jennifer slowed, stepping over a deep puddle from the rainstorm. These tunnels didn’t have good drainage.

Nature trailed the girl, trying to decide if this was a good time to push her into something reckless. Jennifer was smart, but she was also emotional. Nature was digging for a way to use that against Angela.

Jennifer turned into the center cleared area. They were right below the bunkhouse now. Faint noises of people being awake too early echoed.

Jennifer’s displeasure rose again. “She’s got them all riled up. Doesn’t she know our ill people need to rest?!”

Nature seized on that thread. “It’s sad that so many of your people are sickly.”

“I wish I could help them.” Jennifer sighed. “I don’t have the power to heal. It sucks!”

Nature pushed, carefully. “Would you use it if you had it? Some of those people are not good.”

Jennifer nodded. “I’d heal them all and handle their crimes legally. Letting them die is wrong.”

Nature smiled as the girl finally stopped and sat on a molding stool. “Maybe we can make a deal.”

Jennifer snorted. “Like I’m stupid enough to trust you. Screw off.”

“But you do.” Nature gestured with her branchlike arms. “You’re alone down here with me and you don’t feel fear.”

Jennifer shrugged it off. “You know you can’t handle all of us.”

“It’s just you down here. The others might not even try to help you.”

“Stop it!” Unlike the men, Jennifer didn’t see Nature’s beauty. She recognized the ruthless personality that could always be counted on to cause problems for the living. “There’s nothing you can say that will make me turn against Angela.”

“I don’t need to turn you against her. She’s already done that herself.” Nature retreated a step as a hatch opened somewhere nearby. “I have the power to heal any living thing, Jennifer. So could you.”

Nature vanished.

Jennifer’s stomach dropped. “Son of a bitch.”

The evil voice inside gloated. *She just offered a dangerous deal. And you want it.*

Jennifer sighed. “Yes, I do. That gift would be worth almost any price, even my honor.”

Chapter Sixteen

Keep An Open Mind

1

“**G**ood morning.” Stuart smiled at Daryl as he joined their group for a round of the island.

They’d been doing it every day since Angela left. Stuart was glad that wasn’t changing. He enjoyed walking the island before the camp was running around all over the place. He found it peaceful.

Daryl didn’t feel like talking, but he did need the walk to clear his mind. Being with Brittani at night, listening to her misery, was hard on him. He’d started joining the brawlers for rounds to get some peace. “Any trouble?”

Stuart chuckled. Daryl asked the same question every morning. It was funny today. “I have a list. Where do you want to start?”

Daryl shrugged. “At the beginning, I guess.”

He really wasn’t in the mood to hear about the drama, but it might distract him for a while.

Stuart sensed it. “You’ll hear about it later.”

Daryl gave the man a small smile. “Thanks.”

Stuart led the way down the clover path. “We’re all a little early today.”

Daryl knew. “I had to get out of the bunkhouse.”

Stuart was full of sympathy for Daryl and his wife. “Same. The mission team was in and out too much. Hard to sleep with them going up and down the stairs.”

Daryl hadn’t noticed. “Yeah. We’ll get used to it.”

“I hope *they* get used to it. Rumor says Angela is going to move them all into the tunnels.”

Daryl frowned as the beach came into view. The ocean was rushing toward them in angry waves with white foamy peaks. “That’s a bad idea. They need to get used to being around people again.”

“I agree. I don’t think the tunnels are good anymore anyway. It’s wet down there right now. Puddles are everywhere.”

“We never did seal it up. The boss decided it was a waste of time since we were building the bunkhouse.”

“She’s right, as usual.” Stuart caught sight of something pink fluttering in the breeze. He led the group of brawlers in that direction.

Daryl saw it, too. His sharper gaze picked out the body under that familiar pink scarf. “Oh, shit.”

Stuart saw it next. “Hey! It’s Pam!”

He and the other brawlers ran into the water to pull the woman to shore.

“She’s been stabbed.”

“Was she murdered?”

“Someone needs to go find that kid she was always fighting with.”

“Kids don’t kill people.”

“You’re new here, right?”

“Oh, yeah.”

Daryl turned back toward town as the brawlers continued to discuss the violent children in their camp. He called mentally for Angela. *Boss, we have a big problem.*

Angela’s tired voice came right back in his mind. *Get a medic. I’ll be there as soon as I can.*

Daryl felt her stomach pain as if it was his own. *Are you okay?*

No. Neither is Brittani. We’re helping her.

Daryl tried not to panic. *I’m coming up there!*

Marc is helping her. Go get Morgan and secure that scene!

Angela’s sharp tone had no effect on Daryl, but hearing that Marc was helping his wife did. Daryl hurried toward the cruise ship while praying that Marc’s gift would be enough to keep Brittani and his unborn babies alive for another day.

2

“Can I talk to you about something?”

Morgan frowned, pausing the scalpel over his target. “Now?”

Tobias glanced toward the infirmary entrance, where Rico was on duty. “Yes.”

Morgan gently scraped the scalpel against the ingrown toenail that he was removing, separating it from the flesh underneath. “Ask Ralph.”

Ralph grinned at the men. He wasn't feeling anything thanks to the local anesthetic. He was just happy to be contributing toward Morgan's surgery practice. It was his way of making up for his bad choices. "Fine with me."

Ralph really wanted to chat about what he'd heard last night, but he already knew Morgan wasn't the right audience. He held onto the juicy news, waiting for breakfast with the camp.

Tobias didn't care who heard them. "When are we going to do something about him?"

"We're not." Morgan continued to cut away at the toenail's adhesive-like connections. "The boss will deal with it. She's only been out of the QZ for a full day."

Ralph pursed his lips. "The others are taking too much time adjusting."

"I don't see it that way." Morgan gently pulled the nail free and held it up. "Got it!"

"Nice work." Tobias handed him gauze to wrap around the toe and catch the blood. "You're getting better."

"I'm trying." Morgan eyed Tobias's perfect face and kept his thoughts to himself. Kenn had beaten on the man, but there wasn't a sign of it now. Someone had wasted healing skills on him instead of using it on their pregnant women or cancer patients. Jennifer wouldn't be pleased.

"Good. The list of volunteers is long."

People had been asked to sign up if they had something small they needed removed. The practice

would help when Morgan had to tackle the cancerous tumors waiting in Candy's chest.

Ralph focused on his toe, but he pushed the conversation back to where Tobias wanted it because he agreed. "It's really not good to have Rico on duty. He's related to the monster who ran that lab. He shouldn't be allowed in our camp!"

Tobias nodded. "He used the last three months to get close to Tonya. It's not right. She should be told what he's accused of."

"I'm surprised that she doesn't already know." Ralph really was. He thought Tonya was smarter than that. He'd considered telling her, but like Morgan, she was the wrong audience for his gossip.

"Tonya obeys our rules." Morgan checked on the toe and was happy to see the bleeding was already slowing. "She doesn't get into people's minds without their permission."

Tobias bagged the trash. "It's a bad rule."

"And he's a bad man." Ralph held still while Morgan examined his toe again. "Why did the boss agree to it?"

Tobias shrugged. "Maybe it's because he's related to Marc." That story had already made the rounds, along with several others that were almost too far out to be believed.

Morgan was already tired of the conversation. He smeared antibiotic ointment over Ralph's toe and then took the clean bandage Tobias had ready for him. "Let it go, Toby."

Tobias smiled at the nickname. He understood it was their way of accepting him. "I'm trying. I just like her, you know?"

Morgan snorted.

Ralph laughed. "We've noticed."

"Why did everyone agree to keep it from her?"

Morgan sighed. "Leadership wants her to have a chance at a different life."

"With Rico?" Tobias glared. "She deserves better than a UN flunkey who ran away rather than to stand trial for rape."

"Who raped someone?" Tonya came in and stopped at the sudden tense silence.

None of the men met her eyes.

Tonya glanced around, including the guard.

Rico dropped his eyes. He'd been listening to them talk instead of watching the hall. She'd caught them all off guard.

Tobias was fed up with babying the new man. He pointed. "Rico was under guard because he may have raped someone before he came here. He tricked the boss into not telling anyone so he has time to bond with you. Guess what he'll want from you next?"

Rico flushed. "It's not like it sounds."

Tonya pulled it from his mind without trouble. Her gifts had grown while Kenn was gone. Her eyes widened. Her anger rose. "How dare you keep that from me!"

Tonya pulled her gun, marching forward. "You bastard!"

Rico didn't move as her gun went to his chest.

Morgan quickly freed his hands. "Don't do something you'll regret."

Tobias pushed. "She won't regret it. She's saving herself from being raped at some point."

"It hasn't happened, so she'll go to jail!" Ralph was angry with Tobias now. "Stop causing more problems!"

Tonya didn't care about any of that. All she could see was the dangerous information that Rico had kept from her. "How could you do that to me?"

Rico barely breathed. "I didn't want you to view me that way. I needed to show you I'm a good man first."

"Why?"

"So you'll love me."

Tonya's finger tightened on the trigger.

The other guard on this area came closer, but he wasn't sure if he was going to interfere. Finding out Rico might be a rapist who was being given a chance to match up with their lab tech had infuriated him. Stanley was fully on Tonya's side here.

Morgan kept working on Ralph's bandage, but he scanned Tonya. "If you do that, you'll be banished. The boss won't let them remove you, but she won't be able to let you stay either."

Tobias willed her to pull the trigger. "I'll go with you. You won't be alone."

"Stop it!" Ralph knew what Tobias was doing now. "Kenn will kill you this time!"

“I’ll handle him.” Tobias wasn’t afraid of that broken mission man anymore. “If he touches me again, he’ll be banished!” *And I plan to make sure he’s so pissed that he can’t help hitting me again.*

Tonya slowly rotated with the gun still up.

Tobias blanched as she stopped on him.

Tonya was furious. “I’ve always known you were a problem. Now, we’ll see if you can get yourself out of the hole you’ve dug.”

Morgan chuckled. “And that’s why she’s one of us.” He handed Ralph a baggie. “Here are some extra bandages. Change it once a day and apply the ointment.”

Ralph studied Tonya. “Aren’t you going to do something?”

Morgan shook his head. “I’m not on that duty right now.”

Footsteps echoed.

Daryl saw what was happening. He marched over and snatched the gun from Tonya’s hand. “We have bigger problems.”

Tobias remembered how to breathe.

Rico glared at Tobias. “Leave her alone now. She doesn’t want you!”

Ralph smiled at Daryl. “Thank you.”

Daryl flipped Tonya’s gun around and handed it back to her. Then he ignored all of them except his target.

Morgan tensed as Daryl came over to him. “What is it?”

“The guards just pulled a body onto the beach. It looks like it was murder. We need you to come verify that.”

Tonya was distracted. She holstered with a sneer and a glower that told Rico and Tobias she would pay them both back at a later date.

Morgan hated examining bodies, but it was part of the job. “Okay.”

He dried his hands and went to get his medical bag. “Who is it?”

Daryl lowered his voice. He hated to be the bearer of bad news. “I’m sorry, man. It’s Pam.”

Morgan stared. “What?”

Daryl kept going. “That’s not the worst part.”

Tonya snorted. “Excuse me?”

Daryl forced out the rest. “Missy is already a suspect. She’s about to be accused of murder.”

3

“Has anyone touched the body?”

“Just to pull her out of the water.” Daryl led Morgan down the beach to where a handful of guards were keeping people away from the corpse. “I came to get you right after that.”

Morgan ignored the people offering him sympathy. He was almost numb from the news. Pam had been fighting with her alcohol addiction and she’d stayed away from him, especially after Shawn had come home with a new woman in tow. As far as Morgan knew, Pam’s only enemy was Missy. It

was already looking bad for the little girl that Morgan loved as much as he would a biological child.

Shawn and Selina were standing near the group of gawkers. Shawn met Morgan's eyes in terror. He knew what was at stake here.

Morgan didn't try to calm him down. Shawn's new woman was already working on that. Morgan went to the body and knelt, heart now breaking. *I'm sorry, Pam.*

He hadn't wanted to be with her anymore, but he certainly hadn't wished this on her. "Why are we assuming she was murdered? As much as she drank, she could have fallen overboard and drowned."

Daryl gestured at the line of soaked men guarding the scene. "The brawlers said she has an injury on her back."

Morgan started at her soggy head and worked his way down. "Mud in her hair. Her skin isn't wrinkled. They're right; she didn't die in the water. She was likely dumped here."

Tobias recorded the observation.

"Clothes aren't torn on this side. No bruising. It doesn't seem like there was a sexual assault. I'll verify that later."

People murmured at each revelation.

"No shoes. No bra. She was surprised, probably right after she got up this morning or as she went to bed last night. Tentative time of death is between 10 p.m. and 8 a.m. I'll narrow that down during the autopsy."

Tobias pointed at the brawlers. “Get ready to take her to the ship.”

One of the brawlers broke off and went to get a stretcher.

“It wasn’t robbery. She still has her rings and diamond necklace.” They hadn’t had many thefts in Safe Haven because those items were no longer considered precious, but Morgan still needed to rule that out.

“Do you want us to roll her over?” Stuart was soaked from pulling the body out of the water.

“Yes.” Morgan kept studying the body as the men rolled her over.

Gasps went through the growing crowd.

A large rip in Pam’s shirt glared at them. Dark blood had stained the material and her skin.

Morgan knelt, examining the wound. He let out a worried grunt. “It’s a stab wound. The knife is small...”

“Like the ones you give to the kids for their tool belts?”

Morgan nodded at Tobias even though he didn’t want to. “Yes. Send someone to Pam’s cabin. They’re searching for a murder weapon and a crime scene. And someone needs to go get the boss.”

“I already sent for her.” Daryl knew it would take Angela a few minutes to get down here. Her large stomach was slowing her.

“Get Pam on the stretcher. Take her to the ship. Send someone to all the places she’s been. I want a complete record of her whereabouts for the last two

days.” Kenn came through the crowd, glaring at people. “Get to where you belong!”

Kenn was thrilled to have been given the occupation of first detective, but he was horrified to be needed so soon after getting the job. He went to Morgan and began copying everything the medic had discovered so far.

Kyle had come down with Kenn to take charge of the guards. He motioned to the brawlers. “I need a security check. Make sure everyone is accounted for.”

The other brawlers hurried off eagerly. Most of the time, they didn’t have anything to do but walk the island. Today, there was a break from that.

Camp people moved away, not wanting Kenn to bark at them again; they were afraid of the mission men now. It was impossible not to be when looking at their damaged bodies. They headed for population centers to spread what little they knew. As usual, Safe Haven’s favorite pastime was gossip.

Shawn led Selina away from the others. “Come on. We have to go find our girl.”

Selina followed him. “Why? She wasn’t close to that drunken sheila.”

Shawn filled her in as they left. “Missy hates Pam, you saw that. She’s a suspect now.”

Selina’s anger lashed out. “They can’t have her. Missy’s mine!”

Shawn felt the same way. “We have to find her first and keep her from incriminating herself.” His mind was full of muddy shoes.

Morgan looked up at Kenn. He wanted to act like they hadn't heard it.

Kenn refused to allow that. "I'll make a record of it. If she did this, she can't be given a free pass. Murder is against everything we stand for."

"Wait." Tobias got their attention. "You're forgetting something important."

"What?" Morgan hoped Tobias had caught something that would clear Missy.

"You said Pam was dumped. There's no way that little girl could have done this, at least not alone."

Morgan took hope from that. "You're right."

Kenn didn't get distracted. "Some of our kids are very strong and very determined. If she wanted to do this, she could have found a way."

Tobias knew it would crush Morgan if Missy was guilty. He kept poking holes in the theory that was forming. "She hadn't been around Pam in months until the teams came home. We don't have any reports of new problems between them, other than some words at the QZ tent and the outhouse. None of that was serious. Maybe she's being framed."

Morgan stiffened. "That implies we have a killer on this island."

Tobias pointed toward the cruise ship, where they'd left Tonya glaring at Rico. "Maybe on the ship, too."

Morgan latched onto that explanation. “It would be easy to frame Missy for this, but why would anyone want to kill Pam?”

Kenn narrowed his lids against the rising sun as he watched Shawn and Selina hurry off into the jungle. “Maybe it was someone who felt threatened by old ends.”

4

“Is everyone still on board?”

“They’re all waiting for you in the cafeteria. What’s going on?” Grant had been ordered to come down here and keep the skeleton crew from leaving the ship. Camp members who had spent the night on board had been locked down in their cabin and there was a line of guards on the dock. More guards were watching from the cliff above them.

“We found a body on the beach.” Kenn didn’t give more details. As the detective sent to investigate, he was supposed to be unbiased. “No one comes off the ship until I give the word.”

“I’ll handle it.” Grant wanted to ask more questions, but Kenn stepped around him and went toward the ramp to the cruise ship. On the beach in the distance, Grant could see some of the brawlers standing near the shoreline. Camp members were gathering on the hillside above them, watching everything as it happened.

Grant turned for a sweep of the other ships and found Neil hurrying toward him.

“I was told to come here for duty over Kenn.” Neil acted as if he didn’t know why that lie was necessary. “What’s going on?”

Grant gestured toward the scarred Marine, who had almost made it onto the ship now. “Catch up to him.”

Neil hurried after Kenn, soothed that Grant hadn’t answered his question or gossiped. Grant had become a dependable Eagle while the mission team was gone. Angela was going to be very happy with that man.

Kenn paused at the top of the ramp to let Neil catch up. His eyes went over the deck that was both damp and dusty at the same time. He immediately found evidence.

Neil followed Kenn over to the red stains near one of the tables. “Is that blood?”

Kenn knelt next to it, but he didn’t open his bag of hastily gathered gear yet. “Yep.”

He spotted more splatters leading toward the ramp that went down into the ship. “Take pictures while we follow the trail. Do not take a video. I don’t want our voices recorded.”

Neil took out the phone that he always kept charged and on him now. Samantha had one, too, as did Amy. Wade’s new phone was currently charging. “I don’t think it’s a good idea for me to be your assistant.”

“I know it will remind people about what you did, but that’s your problem. I need your skills on this.”

Neil scanned Kenn's burn scars and quickly glanced away. "What skills?"

Before Kenn could answer, Neil stepped around him, pointing at faint marks on the rail. "That's a handprint."

Kenn gestured. "Those skills. You know what we're looking for."

It bothered Neil that Kenn was right. He began taking pictures of the bloody smear.

Kenn found more drying blood drops as he went down the ramp. "Tell me where you were between 10 p.m. last night and now."

Neil tried not to get upset. "I was helping Samantha get settled into the bunkhouse, as you well know, since you were the one who was keeping an eye on our twins while we got all the beds made up. After that, we hit the shower, or rather Samantha hit the shower and I stood on duty outside because there were still so many people around trying to welcome everyone home. I was in my cot when all of you went over to the restaurant around 3 a.m."

Kenn went down the hallway, sharp gaze picking out more splatters. These were heavier and closer together. He pointed. "Get pictures of those and tell me if anyone can verify your whereabouts while we were at the restaurant, up until now."

Neil suddenly understood Kenn was making sure his alibi was solid so he couldn't be accused based on what he had done before. That was why he'd been sent to help. He snapped pictures while he answered. "I helped Daisey with the morning

meal that's being served right now. I also helped Conner and Candy with their little girls while they went to the bathroom. I'm fully covered."

Kenn was glad to hear it. He hadn't thought Neil was involved this time, but many of the camp members would go straight there. It was good to have Neil off the list of suspects. "We'll have to coordinate with the den mothers to verify everyone else's whereabouts."

Neil said what they were both thinking. "I'll cover Missy's alibi first."

Everyone knew she and Pam had problems; the story of their encounter last night at the outhouse was currently going around camp.

"Get back to me quietly on that one. It will be better if we can handle it without stirring up the normals or her parents."

Neil snorted. "Shawn is out searching for her now. He and the new chick split up to cover more ground."

Kenn paused, catching Neil's tone. He looked over his shoulder at the former State Trooper. "Where is she?"

Neil had caught some of Missy's thoughts while she was at the cabin with them yesterday. "Check the unused storage room in the little clinic. She used that as a private playhouse while you guys were gone."

Kenn didn't call it on the radio. He didn't want people to believe the little girl was guilty. It was very likely that she wasn't. Tobias was right that it

would have been very hard for a girl her size to dump an adult body.

“Judging from this trail, I’d say Pam was still alive when she reached the top deck.” Neil snapped another picture and followed Kenn toward the stairs.

Kenn skipped the elevators. When someone was bleeding this much, they weren’t going to push a button and then stand there patiently waiting.

“I expect to find a mess in her cabin.” Kenn followed the trail to the only deck of residential cabins that were still open for camp use. He was surprised when the trail led further down into the ship instead.

Neil kept taking pictures while hoping whoever had done this was caught quickly. Safe Haven didn’t need more stress.

Kenn stepped over a larger puddle of blood at the bottom of the steps. The entertainment floor was well-lit by glass windows and empty of people.

“Why didn’t the guards see all the blood and call the boss?”

Kenn was wondering the same thing. “That’s the first question I plan to ask them.”

The blood trail led straight to the only bar on the ship that was open to the public.

Neil scowled. “They got her while she was drinking.”

Kenn nodded. “Now we know why she preferred to stay on the ship. There was unlimited alcohol and no concerned bartender to cut her off.”

“That won’t be the case anymore. Angela will shut the entertainment floor down after this.”

“Yep.” Kenn carefully opened the door to the bar, pointing at a wide smear on the inside handle.

Neil snapped the pictures and then held the door so Kenn could step over the large puddle of blood drying in the doorway.

Kenn saw the spot of the attack right away. Drying blood was gathered around one corner of the bar and nearly coated one of the stools. “Be sure you get pictures of everything, including the glasses.”

Neil came inside, being careful not to step in any of the splatters or puddles. “Why do I need a picture of the glass?”

“Because it’s plural. There are *two* glasses there. Whoever attacked her was likely the one she was drinking with.”

Neither man said it, but both of them were relieved. There’s no way Missy would have been drinking alcohol with Pam.

Kenn examined the bar and the counter behind it, searching for footprints in the dust that they might be able to match to someone’s shoes. The ship hadn’t been cleaned in a while.

He spotted something shiny under the edge of the counter and took a pair of gloves out of his pocket. “Get a picture of this before I touch it.”

Kenn retreated so Neil had room to get behind the bar.

Neil snapped the picture and then let out a groan. “I recognize that knife.”

Kenn switched places with Neil and knelt down to pick it up. “It belongs to one of the Junior Eagles.”

Smaller knives had been picked for the Junior Eagles because they were a better fit for smaller hands.

Kenn took a baggie from his pocket and quickly dropped the open, gory blade in. He placed it on the counter, then took the permanent marker from his pocket. “Get a picture of me putting the date and time on here.”

Neil checked his watch and then took the picture. “It’s 10:34 a.m. on May 29th.”

Kenn rolled the baggie up and put it into his pocket. “See if there’s anything else we need to bag and tag.”

Neil reluctantly brought up something important. “You didn’t check it for initials.”

All of the Junior Eagle knives had the initials of the owner carved onto the handle in tiny lettering.

“I don’t need to. I’m the one who picked it out and assigned it. I already know who it belongs to.”

Kenn’s unhappy tone was a giveaway. Neil stared in dismay. “It’s hers, isn’t it?”

Kenn reached for his radio. “Yes. Missy is going to be arrested for murder.”

Chapter Seventeen

I Want The Best

1

“She didn’t do it! You know she wouldn’t do it!” Cody was frantic. He ran alongside Angela, begging for her help.

“I agree.”

Cody slipped in the mud and caught himself on a tree. He wiped the mess down his jeans. He’d come running as soon as he heard Missy was in trouble. “Then why are you having them hunt for her?!”

Angela placed her feet carefully so she didn’t fall. The ground was wet and muddy; clouds rolled over the island, warning of more rain coming soon. “It has to be investigated, Cody.”

“But they all think she did it!” Cody glared at the staring, gossiping people they were passing. “She wouldn’t do this!”

Cody’s friendship with Missy was clouding his vision, as it would anyone who was terrified of losing a vital relationship. “We’ll find her and see what happened.”

Cody lowered his voice. “But what if she did it?!”

Angela knew he wanted her to promise that Missy would be spared the fate of the other killers they'd dealt with. "Go find Samantha and tell her what's going on. Then stay with her boys so she feels safe leaving them. Missy needs a lawyer."

Cody took off running, pushing his way through the gawkers.

Angela cradled her stomach so she could travel faster over the jungle path. She wasn't supposed to be on her feet so much, but this couldn't wait and it couldn't be handled by the other coleaders or her heirs. None of them were able to be objective. They all either loved Missy and Pam or disliked them.

So did Angela, but she was often able to put her biases aside to find the truth. This would be no different, but it might be harder in the end. If Missy was found guilty and punished, Cody might never forgive it or forget it.

Wade fell in with her. He knew she wasn't supposed to be out here tramping through the jungle. He didn't scold her, however. This was important. "We're not missing anyone else. We didn't find any signs of intruders."

Angela was disappointed to hear that. She'd been hoping for a tracker so she didn't have to accuse a kid of murder. "Anything you haven't told our dick yet?"

Wade leaned closer so they weren't overheard. "None of the guards have seen her since bed time last night, right after the kids were gathering fireflies. She was pissed about Pam calling her

names and trying to get into the QZ tent to see Shawn. They also said Missy used her shield to protect Selina.”

Angela sighed. Missy and Selina had fast become a pair. The caretaker already loved Missy and Missy was already calling her mom. *There’s the motive. This just keeps getting worse.*

She felt Wade’s misery and understood he had more to tell her. “What else?”

“Amy saw Missy leave the bunkhouse last night after everyone was asleep or upstairs.”

“Damn.” It was looking more and more like Missy was guilty. “Cody is on his way to get Samantha. Go back there and encourage her.”

“You think Missy did it.” Wade assumed Angela wouldn’t be arranging a lawyer if Missy was innocent.

“I believe there’s a lot of evidence, but that doesn’t mean Missy is guilty.”

“Agreed. We have to keep an open mind.”

They both stopped as Kenn came through the damp jungle. A familiar little girl was on his back, slamming her fists into his head.

“She deserved it! She deserved it!”

Kenn was red-eyed from lack of sleep, but his muddy arm on the girl was gentle despite her wild swings.

Kenn put her on her feet, but he kept ahold of her wrist. “I found her in the clinic.”

He pointed at the baggie on his belt. “Her knife was found at the scene.”

Kenn waited. He knew what had to come next, but he refused to be the one to do it.

Angela shook her head when Wade would have taken the hit for her. *It's my job.* “Missy, you’re under arrest for the murder of a Safe Haven camp member. You’ll be taken to the jailhouse now. Would you like to say anything in your defense?”

Missy burst into tears, but her words didn’t change. “She deserved everything she got!”

2

“That’s a second complete search.” Jennifer acted like her ankles weren’t threatening to strike for better working conditions. “You can all go do your normal shifts now.”

The brawlers hurried to the nearest exit, eager to be out of the ground. They hadn’t helped Marc clear this island, but that didn’t matter. These dank, dim tunnels reeked of death. They quickly got above the ground and shut the hatch.

Jennifer scraped mud from her shoes onto the floor where it met the wall. The tiles they’d put down were all peeling up on the corners. They weren’t meant to stay this wet.

Jennifer sat on the same stool she’d used last night and rubbed her ankles. She was six months along and starting to feel it. She couldn’t wait to hold her son, but she was dreading the misery that would come as she got closer to delivering.

Jennifer thought about Angela. “Maybe that’s part of why she’s being such a bitch to everyone. She looks awful.”

Kyle’s chuckle floated through the tunnel. “Don’t let her hear that.”

Jennifer scowled as he emerged from a connecting tunnel. “She doesn’t scan down here. I’m good.”

Kyle stopped near the hatch. “We did an Eagle search. We didn’t find anything except a lot of places covered in trash. They’ve been partying off grid.”

Kyle didn’t mention how much he hated that. He didn’t want her to think he was blaming her for missing it. The partying and trash just reminded him of being in the fog.

“I knew about it.” Jennifer could feel his mind fading away from this moment, but she was still too pissed to offer comfort. “People need stress releases and I cancelled the monthly matchups.”

Kyle realized Jennifer had done some good things for the camp even though they didn’t know about it. “Why are you letting them think you don’t care about anything but power?”

Jennifer sighed tiredly. “Keeping control is hard.”

“Control of them or yourself?”

Jennifer didn’t get angrier. “They haven’t had a release in a while.”

“That reminds me. The boss rescheduled the matchups for two days from now.” His face

darkened. “That was before the murder. She might delay it now.”

Jennifer eyed his muddy clothes and tired face in hidden sympathy. Like the others, Kyle wasn’t sleeping well and it showed. “No, she won’t. The camp needs that distraction even more now.”

Kyle was encouraged by her reasonable words even though he could hear the fury pulsing under her tone. “Can I ask you something without pissing you off again?”

Jennifer huffed. “I doubt it.”

Kyle chuckled, rubbing his cast in place of itching like he wanted to. “Fair enough. Try not to get upset. I have a good reason for asking.”

“You want to know why I won’t let you give the power back.”

He drew in a breath and faced one of his fears. “Is it because of the baby? Is something wrong?”

Jennifer’s heart hurt. “No, it’s not the baby. He’s fine.”

Kyle eyed her stomach bump. “You’re not as big as you should be.”

Jennifer shrugged. “I’m not having twins, or triplets.”

“Oh, yeah!” Kyle wondered if Angela was since she was so much bigger, but due after Jennifer.

“Stop thinking about her!” Jennifer stood up. “When you’re around me, don’t ever think about her!”

“We are *not* having an affair, Jenny. That’s the last time I’m going to say it.” Kyle’s tone switched

into Eagle mode. “The boss called a meeting of the law council. She wants you at the cabin during the lunch meal.”

Kyle went up the ladder before she could reply. He left the hatch open so the guards could hear her if she needed something.

Jennifer was appeased. Being included in this meeting made her feel better. She climbed the ladder and shut the hatch.

As she turned, she saw Tim hurrying through the jungle toward the church. He looked like he was carrying a board under his jacket.

She watched him go into the church with narrowed eyes. “I’ll deal with you later!”

3

“You can’t go in there!” Stuart stepped in front of the jailhouse door.

Selina held out a note. “The boss said I can stay with her, mate.”

Stuart slid aside to let Selina go into the jailhouse. Then he moved back in front of the doorway and put a hand on his holster again. There was another large group of camp members coming down the muddy pathway to join the dozens of damp denizens who were already here, mumbling and muttering. It reminded him strongly of the situation where Tonya had been accused in Chad’s place. He didn’t like it at all.

Selina hurried into the rear room, going straight to Missy. It broke her heart to see the girl in a gaol. In Selina's mind, no young child should ever be caged. She tried to open the door to the cell, but it was locked.

She looked around for the keys while Missy continued to lie on her bed and sob softly.

The jailhouse held only the basics and not much else, though a few bags had been brought in. Selina hoped they would at least provide lanterns or candles tonight when it got dark.

"You can't let her out of there. She's not safe."

Selina saw Shawn sitting in the chair behind the desk. Two of the brawlers were standing nearby, keeping watch on everything. "She's just a little girl!"

Shawn was fully geared and heavily armed now. "I know that and you know that, but those people out there only remember the bad things in moments like this. She's safer behind the bars."

They had split up to search for Missy, but Kenn had found her first. Selina looked at the brawlers. "Can I go in, mate? She's just a little girl."

Both brawlers shook their heads.

Selina knew better than to break the rules. Angela had been adamant that the only way she was allowed to stay with Missy while she went through this was if she followed every order she was given by the guards. Selina assumed Shawn had been told the same thing. "What are we going to do?"

Shawn had been stewing on that since getting the word that Missy had been arrested. “I need you to go find Samantha.”

Selina frowned. “The jumpy sheila with the twin boys? How can she help?”

“Missy needs a lawyer and I want the best.”

“Oi. From what I’ve heard, Samantha isn’t in any shape to help anyone. She can barely help herself.”

“You don’t know her like I do. Tell Samantha I need a personal favor.”

Selina didn’t understand how the traumatized woman could help, but she wasn’t going to argue. “Do you want me to bring anything back?” She hoped Shawn saw the image of their bugout kits in her mind.

“I’ll need my bedroll.” Shawn wasn’t going to leave the jailhouse until he was allowed to take Missy out of here with him.

“That’s a good idea. We can bunk down right across from her, so she’ll be able to see us the whole time.” Selina went to Missy’s cell and tapped on the bars to get the little girl’s attention. “It’ll be okay. We’ll find out who really did this and get you out of here.”

Missy rolled over on the cot and cried harder.

Selina regarded Shawn, confused.

Shawn refused to talk about it in front of their witnesses. “Go get Samantha.”

Selina hurried out of the jail.

Shawn had a lot of questions that he wanted to ask, but now wasn't the time. He stayed behind the desk and waited; his mind churned relentlessly. He was certain that Missy was guilty, based on her reaction to being in here. *I'll find a way to save you, even if we have to run in the middle of the night and face the ocean.*

Missy caught that and didn't answer. She continued to cry; nothing he said or thought got her to stop.

4

Morgan saw Selina come out of the jail. He stepped aside so she could go by. "Shawn in there?"

Selina nodded quickly and hurried off.

Morgan went to the guard at the door. "The boss wants this place set up for overnight guests."

Stuart nodded. "We already turned on the solar powered battery packs and brought in a few boxes of supplies."

Morgan wanted to go inside and comfort his friend, but as the medical examiner on this case, he had to do his duty first. "Let her guardian know the medics are requesting a blood test so they can compare her type to blood that was found at the scene of the crime. Not all of it came from the victim."

Inside the jail, Shawn stood up and moved to the door.

Morgan forced himself to continue even though he didn't want to. "We're also requesting an exam to determine if she has offensive injuries."

Shawn jerked the door open, furious. "You're not examining her! You stay the hell away from her!"

Morgan tried not to be offended. Shawn had to know he didn't like doing this. "Her exam will be administered by a female medic, in front of the boss, in one hour. She can have a friend or family member there for support, providing it's female. You will be asked to leave during the exam. If you don't, the Eagles will make you."

Morgan left to keep from triggering a fight. The last thing he wanted was to be rolling around in the mud fending off Shawn's fists.

Shawn slammed the door shut and began pacing furiously. "I'm not going to let them trap her! There's no way she did this!"

But in his heart, Shawn already knew what they would find. Somewhere on Missy's body was the proof that she had killed Pam.

5

"Can I talk to you, mate?" Selina didn't wait for an answer. She entered the barn and closed the door before Angela could step out.

Adrian moved closer to the new woman. He still wasn't used to her purple hair or her obsessive behavior.

Angela didn't feel threatened by Selina, but she still gave her a sharp tone. "You're jeopardizing Missy's case by talking to the judge. Get out of here."

Selina hadn't thought about it that way, but it didn't matter. "Please."

"No."

"I saved their lives on that sub, mate! You owe me two minutes!"

Angela was trapped by her own honor. She motioned to Adrian. "Lock us down."

Adrian brought up his thickest shield around both women. It really did look bad for Selina to be conspiring with the person who would end up determining Missy's fate at the trial.

"Hurry up." Angela could feel several people scanning the barn and wondering what was happening in here.

Selina was muddy and tired, but determined to convince Angela to spare the girl. She'd already delivered Shawn's message. Samantha was getting ready to go to the jailhouse now. "I want to make a deal."

Angela studied her. "What kind of deal?"

"If she did it, I want to take her place. Set it up so she goes free and I go to gaol."

Adrian and Angela both stared in surprise.

Selina motioned sadly. "She's just a little girl. There wasn't any one to protect me when I was her age. I won't abandon her to the same future."

Angela liked Selina more than she already had.

Adrian's opinion of the woman improved. He also wanted their kids protected even when they made mistakes.

Angela hated to deny the demand. "I won't make that deal because it won't work. There's already too much evidence against her. Even if I knew how to manipulate things that way, which I obviously do or you wouldn't be asking for this, it won't work."

"You have to help her!"

"No. I have to be an impartial leader, otherwise everyone will expect special treatment when they break the rules. Missy will stand trial for Pam's murder. That's my final word on it." Angela gestured.

Adrian lowered the shield and then hurried to open the door so she could go out.

Selina followed them angrily. "She's just a little girl! There's no way she's guilty!"

Adrian and Angela kept walking, but they approved of Selina's outburst. It would help Missy, though the woman wouldn't understand. Because she was upset with Angela in front of witnesses, the story would spread that Missy wasn't going to be treated any differently than anyone else.

"Escort her lawyer to the jail and remember to follow the rules." Angela handed the small bag of gear that she had gathered from the barn to Adrian to carry. It wasn't heavy, but it was already too much for her. Her spine was once again very unhappy.

Adrian kept people back so Angela could make her way to the jail. It was almost time for Missy's exam. Tonya was already on her way there.

Adrian didn't answer questions from anyone they went by. He didn't like some of the ugly thoughts in people's minds, but the thing that bothered him the most was how certain they were of Missy's guilt. Adrian wasn't convinced that she had done it. Selina was right. *She's just a little girl.*

Angela snorted and tried to move faster over the path that was lined with curious and angry people.

Allison appeared in front of them.

Adrian brought his shield up around Angela. It was obvious from Allison's puffy face and wild expression that she was about to cause a scene.

"She killed my friend!" Allison had been crying since she found out. She wailed loudly. "I want her punished!"

"If she's found guilty, she will be." Angela gave the upset, filthy woman a glare. "Go get cleaned up. Morgan needs help seeing to Pam's estate. As her best friend, the duty falls to you to determine what should happen to all of her things."

Allison dissolved into sobs.

Daisey put an arm around Allison and led her toward the little clinic. Pam's body was still on the ship, where it had been taken after being found, but no one else was allowed on the cruise ship until Kenn finished his investigation. Pam's belongings would be sent to the clinic.

Angela reached the jailhouse, glaring and pointing. “You have chores and shifts waiting. Get to it!”

Half of the crowd immediately turned toward town while talking about everything they had seen and heard. The rest of the people were off duty; they stayed to catch any fresh news.

Stuart held the door open for Angela.

Adrian went in first and quickly got between her and Shawn. He could feel how upset Shawn was. His mind was a mess.

Stuart shut the door behind them and hoped Angela didn’t find anything during the exam. He liked Missy. He hadn’t liked Pam.

Shawn surprised them all by dropping to his knees in front of Angela. “Please. I’ll do anything you want! Don’t punish her for my mistakes!”

It bothered her that Shawn thought she would do that. Angela put a gentle hand on his head, hating his scars and stress. Her weak mood charm eased some of his pain. “Go outside and wait. Let us get this over with.”

Tears rolled over Shawn’s burnt face. One of the brawlers helped him to his feet and took him to the door. They felt bad for the broken man and they felt bad for the little girl. They had a lot of doubt about Missy being able to dump Pam’s body. Despite her knife being found at the scene of the crime, there were a lot of holes in the theory.

Angela took the bag from Adrian and put it on the desk. “There are some coloring books and stuff

in here for her.” Angela took the keys to the cell out of the desk drawer.

The door opened behind them. Samantha entered with Selina on her heels. “Stop right there!”

Samantha handed Angela a paper that she had hastily scribbled while Wade helped her get her boots on. “I haven’t had a chance to talk with my client yet. Your exam will have to wait.”

Angela wanted to allow it, but she couldn’t. “You’ll stay here as a witness, but we’re doing it now and getting it over with.” She unlocked the cell and stepped inside, with Tonya.

Missy slowly sat up on the cot.

Tonya got her medical kit out and put it on the cot next to Missy. “This will sting a little and then it’ll be over.”

Missy watched her without speaking. When the needle went into her arm, fresh tears rolled over her red cheeks.

Selina almost cried with her. As soon as Tonya removed the needle and put the band aid on, Selina hugged the girl tightly.

Missy pushed out of her arms when Angela motioned.

Selina didn’t want to go. She left the cell slowly, casting dirty looks at the medic and Angela.

“Do the exam now.”

Tonya knelt in front of the scared girl. “Do you have any boo-boos?”

Missy shook her head.

“I need to make sure. It won’t hurt and I’ll be quick.”

Angela put a hand on Missy’s shoulder, offering comfort. “Kenn will be finished with his investigation soon. I’ve told him to make sure you both get a copy of his report.”

Samantha was upset that her attempt to delay hadn’t worked. “I hope he’s taking pictures of everything!”

“He is.” Angela continued to talk and distract them as Tonya began to examine Missy’s thin arms and legs.

Missy held still and didn’t react to the medic’s hands on her or to the small bit of energy Angela sent into her shoulder. She continued to let tears roll down her cheeks while keeping clouds in her mind.

“Make sure they bring food trays for everyone. I also want the cameras in here connected to the power sources soon as possible.” A lot of alarms and cameras had been set up over the last month, but most of them weren’t working yet.

One of the brawlers stepped outside to pass the orders.

Tonya stood up. “She doesn’t have a mark on her.”

Everyone stared in surprise, including Angela.

Missy climbed onto the cot and curled into a ball.

Tonya covered the girl with a blanket and then went to the desk to fill out the official report. She

made three copies; one would go to the detective on the case. The other would go to Samantha.

Selina and Samantha stared at Missy, not quite daring to believe that something had fallen their way.

Angela walked out of the cell and then left the jailhouse while keeping a sharp lock on her mind so no one could read her thoughts.

Shawn hurried inside, leaving the door open. “What did you find?!”

Tonya’s voice echoed to the crowd outside. “Nothing. I don’t know where the blood came from that was found at the crime scene, but it didn’t come from Missy. She’s clean.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means she’s being framed. Now we just have to prove it.”

Chapter Eighteen
A Hard Topic

1

“**S**ign your name in the book and then grab a cup of tea while we wait for everyone else to get here.” Angela motioned toward the sign-in sheet she’d put on the kitchen table.

The cabin was dusty and musty even though Samantha and her family had only moved out a day ago. Luke’s furnishings and belongings still sat on the shelves, reminding everyone that someone else had lived on this island before them.

Isabel quickly signed her name and then moved to an empty seat. She didn’t want any of the drinks or snacks that were on the counter. She wanted to get this meeting over with so she could get back to her babies. Her twins had upset stomachs and nothing seemed to help. She was worried about their health.

Tonya came in behind Isabel, catching her concern. “Take them for a walk in the surf and see if that helps. Just don’t get that cast wet.”

“I won’t.” Isabel smiled at the medical sheila. She liked Tonya.

Tonya signed her name on the sheet and then dropped down into the chair next to Isabel. “I talked

to the boss about getting you started on some limited shifts in the clinic. How do you feel about that?”

“I’d love to help, mate.” Isabel hesitated. “Oi. Do you think people will be okay with it? Everyone knows I worked in the lab.”

Tonya shrugged. “You’re wearing an Eagle jacket and you have full support from the boss. That’s really all you need in this camp to get started. After that, people will judge you on your actions here and not what happened in the past.”

Isabel was glad to hear that even though she didn’t really believe it. She had heard some of the stories and seen the way Adrian was treated based on his past. She liked it here; she wanted to be able to stay, but that wouldn’t be possible if people made her into an outcast.

Not that she would blame them. The things she had done in the lab were terrible. *I still want a chance to atone.* “If I’d had other options then, I’m sure I would have made a different choice.”

Tonya smiled at the older woman again. “The boss believes that, too, or you wouldn’t be here.”

Angela gestured as more people came in for the meeting. “Sign your name on the sheet and then grab a cup of coffee or tea while we wait for everyone else to get here.”

Morgan and Grant came in together. Both men headed for the coffee after signing the paper. They’d already had a long day and it was only early afternoon.

Morgan swept the room and then did a quick round of the entire cabin before coming back to the kitchen where a dozen folding chairs had been placed around the table. The sunlight coming through the windows was the only illumination. It was warm and stuffy, but no one took off their jackets.

Dwight and Molly came in next. Molly was chatting happily in his ear about being picked for the shark crew, unaware of what had happened with Dwight's son, Quincy.

Dwight was surprised that he had been called for this meeting. He'd been sure Angela would remove him from the council because of Quincy's reckless behavior.

Angela denied Dwight when he would have come over to talk to her, to apologize. "It's not needed. We're fine."

Dwight understood she didn't want to talk about it, but he was going to insist on that conversation at some point. He hadn't known what Quincy was planning and he hadn't expected Thelma to beg her to use the children to help Brittani. Dwight wanted it clear that he didn't support either of those decisions. He had a different idea entirely.

"Sign the sheet and grab a drink while we wait for everyone else to get here."

Gus was also surprised that he'd been called to this meeting. He quickly signed his name and found a seat. He'd expected Angela to remove all of the

mission men from any position of leadership or authority based on their mental issues.

Hurry up! Angela sent out the mental call to the people who were still on their way here. She had picked Luke's cabin for this meeting because it was off the main path. She was hoping most people wouldn't know what was going on yet.

Jayda signed her name with her burnt hand. "Why does it matter? At some point, everyone is going to know who members of this council are."

"Because of influence peddling."

People looked over at Angela's answer, frowning in confusion or nodding in agreement.

Angela clarified it for the people who didn't understand. "In the future, places on this council will be given to those who win an election. We have to make sure those people can't be swayed. We haven't drafted up laws and rules for that; for now, we need to keep it quiet so the camp can't influence members of this council."

"I don't think anybody here right now can be bribed." Molly had complete faith in all of these people, save one. She kept her private thoughts locked so Jennifer didn't catch them. "Everyone here is an upstanding member of our society."

Angela didn't want to cause new rumors to start, but she needed to make this clear. "Imagine for a moment that we were deciding on penalties for child murderers. Many of us here already dislike the idea of punishing children with jail time, let alone removal. Now imagine that the child's parents know

who you are. You could be stalked, harassed, and threatened daily not to vote for laws that would keep the child locked up or even get them banished from our camp.”

Everyone was tense now. Angela’s words gave them a hint about the topic that would be covered today.

“I still think it would be a hard sell.” Molly gestured at the people who were sipping their drinks and listening intently. “We can’t be bought.”

“That’s not true.”

Everyone turned to see Jennifer standing in the doorway, glaring at all of them.

Jennifer drove in Angela’s point. “If your cancer came back and one of those parents had access to drugs that might put it into remission, you could be bought through that.” She moved on before Molly protested. “Gus could be blackmailed for some of the things he was forced to do in the lab. So could Isabel. There are always ways to influence people. Until we get laws in place, no one is allowed to tell the rest of the camp they’re on this council, even if you’re sure the person already knows.”

Angela motioned toward the sign in sheet. “Isabel will take notes.”

Jennifer had already heard about Isabel taking her place on the council. Like the others, she had been surprised to get the order to come here.

Angela stood up, stretching her spine carefully. “Everyone, other than the notetaker, has a full seat

on this council. Your votes carry full weight on all topics that we'll discuss from this moment on."

Jennifer signed her name and then got a cup of tea, but she stood over in the corner away from the others. She didn't need to read their minds to know they didn't think she should be here after the way she had run this camp for the last month.

"We have one more person coming. I invited them here to give them Ralph's seat. He was removed from the council for breaking that rule." Angela was still unhappy with Ralph for that. "I replaced a normal with a normal, though it's possible he won't remain that way for long."

Everyone looked over as the door opened.

Terry stepped inside and stopped at all the surprised glances. "Am I in the right place?"

Angela gestured toward the sign in sheet. "Put your name on the paper and get a drink. We'll start in a minute. In the future, there will be 13 members of the council so there will never be a tie on any vote. For now, we'll do the best we can to avoid that. If we do have a tie, Jennifer and I will make the final choice on it."

Jennifer swallowed a snort of derision. Angela would make the choice and she would be required to support it.

Terry got a cup of tea and picked a chair as far away from Jayda as he could get. He greeted the other people while ignoring her.

Jayda didn't call him out on it. Angela wouldn't appreciate them interrupting the meeting with personal drama.

Angela pointed at the large, thin binder in the middle of the table. "This is a copy of all the decisions we've made so far, including new laws that have been voted on by the camp. Before we leave here today, I want every one of you to read through it. Those who need to be out of here as soon as possible should try to read it while we're having this meeting."

"I can take it around to people later."

Angela shook her head at Jennifer's offer. "I don't want this book out of my possession, but I also want to make sure everyone actually reads it and I can't do that if we pass it around. Governments in the past often pushed through bills that were thousands of pages long and the people voting on them didn't even bother to read it. We will *never* restart that bullshit."

Angela went to the ice box and got out a fresh jug of the tea Adrian had brought from the restaurant. He was on duty outside the cabin. She tried not to think about how safe she felt right now. The only thing better would be if it was Marc out there guarding her. He was doing chores that allowed him to stay close to the bunkhouse today in case Brittani needed more help. Her labor had stopped, but she was still feeling rough. "Today's topic is underage crimes and punishments."

Everyone tensed, except for Morgan, who was already thumbing through the binder of previous decisions. He and Tonya both had a lot of medical work waiting for them when they were finished here.

Tonya leaned forward so she could read it at the same time as Morgan.

“Before we get rolling on specific situations, I want to make it clear that this meeting does not indicate guilt. It’s just the next thing on a long list that has to be covered. As you know, we’ve been holding these meetings when something pops up. It does not mean that I think Missy is guilty. It does not mean I think she will be found guilty. We’re just trying to get ahead of the situation if we can. I don’t expect us to come to an agreement today, though it would be better if we did.”

People were relieved to hear that. Not all of them liked Missy, but only a couple of them believed she was guilty. It was great to know the leader of their camp was keeping an open mind and making sure everyone else did as well.

“This is going to be a hard topic. Many of us have kids. We don’t like the idea of locking them up. Many of us believe that underage suspects need mental care more than they need to be caged. All of us believe in second chances or we wouldn’t be here in Safe Haven. We have to put those feelings aside and use logic. Missy may or may not be guilty of Pam’s murder. We’re not making laws based on just her case. In the future, there will be more crimes

committed by underage citizens. We have to make laws that are fair and balanced for everyone and apply to every situation. I don't want you to concentrate on Missy while we do this. She's just one of many kids who will need these laws in place if they make a bad choice." Angela sat down and gestured to Isabel. "Start taking notes now."

Isabel removed the notebook from her jacket pocket that she had been given when told to come to this meeting. She was thrilled that the cast was on her left hand and not the one she wrote with.

Angela got them rolling. "This is the May 29th meeting of the Safe Haven Law Council. Let's begin."

2

Outside the cabin, Adrian patrolled the perimeter, making sure no one was able to get close enough to hear what was going on inside. He doubted anyone knew the council was here right now, considering that a late lunch was being served. Most of the camp had gathered for that meal so they could share and gather gossip on everything that had happened.

The guards were on double duty around the cruise ship as well as the jailhouse. Almost everyone was busy right now. The only possibility was that someone would realize members of the law council were missing from those gatherings and start asking questions.

Adrian didn't know what Angela had planned for that, but he hoped she covered it soon. A lot of people already knew one or two members. It wouldn't be much longer before the entire camp knew everyone who was on the council and started badgering them.

Adrian stopped near the path, spotting movement. He grinned at the sight of Madison going toward the beach. She was being followed by the goats, the exuberant puppy, and the lovable kitten that was growing by leaps and bounds. Not far behind them, Dog and Duke were also following.

Adrian laughed as he spotted the adult cats.

One of them was on Dog's back, claws dug in tightly to keep from sliding off.

The other was on Duke's back, doing the same. Duke whined as he walked. *Oh, the poking!*

Adrian forced himself to resume his patrol so he didn't stay distracted. Madison was like the piper.

Adrian's amusement faded. He and many of the others had picked up weird vibes from her. She didn't know it, but she was under guard. That had come from Neil and Adrian agreed with it. He assumed Angela also agreed, but he wasn't certain that she knew about it. Neil had set it up on his own with the brawlers whenever they had an off day.

Adrian nodded at Madison's guard as the man went by. Then he went to the outhouse behind the cabin so the guard wouldn't know he was on duty

here. He wasn't supposed to give away the locations of the law council meetings either.

Adrian stepped into the outhouse and kept the door cracked open so he could see when the guard was out of sight. Awful odors smacked him in the nose and brought tears to his eyes.

He staggered out of the toilet, shutting the door. "I am not cleaning that up!" It was another party spot, and it was disgusting. "Who the hell thinks sex in a bathroom is sexy?"

He shook his head while resuming his patrol around the cabin. "Some of our people are still very odd. I hope the boss has plans for that, too. Anyone who will use a toilet for sex needs their brain examined."

Adrian considered some of the oddest places he'd done it, but even the graveyard couldn't match his disgust. "I know we're supposed to let everybody do their own thing, but that's just nasty."

Adrian saw Jennifer through the cabin window. He noticed her slightly guilty expression. *She knows people are using these random buildings for partying. Why would she let them do that when she canceled all the events while we were gone?*

Adrian got out of her sight and continued to work on that mystery. He hadn't made up his mind yet about Jennifer's leadership. He was suddenly certain the answer to that question would seal her fate in his mind. If she didn't have a good reason for letting people break the rules, then she didn't deserve to be in charge.

Jennifer turned back toward the meeting without mentioning Adrian being close enough to hear some of what was said. Adrian was Angela's lapdog. *She tells him everything. He's an outcast!*

Angela looked over her shoulder at the girl with narrowed eyes.

Jennifer quickly cleared her mind so Angela would continue the meeting. Everyone was staring at her, trying to figure out what thought she'd had that had pulled Angela away from their awful topic.

Angela drew in a deep breath. "The next thing we have to talk about are punishments. Should children who commit premeditated murder be locked up, banished, removed, or forgiven? We'll go around the table so everyone has a chance to vent. Don't hold back. This is one of the most important topics we'll ever cover as far as I'm concerned. I want to hear everything on your mind and in your heart. Tonya, you go first this time."

3

"There will be another meeting in a few days. Someone will notify you." Angela gestured. "We're adjourned."

Most of the council left. They'd been here for an hour. Any longer and the camp would find out.

They had taken turns reading through the binder of previous decisions while participating in the debate. Jennifer was reading it now to catch up on

what she had missed; she hadn't been present for the submarine meeting.

Grant waited until Angela moved over to the counter and then joined her. He kept his voice down. "When are we having another meeting about the normals?"

"When we need it." Angela began rinsing out the cups they had used during the meeting. "Do we need it?"

Grant glanced toward Jennifer. "Not as long as you keep things under control."

"So noted."

Grant hurried toward the door as Jennifer glared.

Terry came over to Angela. He didn't say anything.

Angela wasn't in a good mood anymore. It had been a rough night and a terrible morning. On top of that, the meeting hadn't gone the way she'd hoped it would. She focused on Terry with a sharp tone. "You can fight for Jayda and have her for a week or you can ignore her for three months and then have her for life."

Terry stared in confusion. "You told Biff she was his match."

"I did, but Biff isn't Jayda's match."

"What does that mean?"

"Life rarely makes a single perfect match for anyone. Biff will find another chance at love, if he stays in this camp."

“*Is he going to stay with us?*” Terry didn’t want to be mean, but he was now hoping Biff would leave and stay gone.

“That has not been revealed.” Angela hated that answer as much as anyone else. “I think Tonya could use some help in the lab.”

Terry left, hurting deeply. He’d never known Angela to be wrong. *But three months! I’m lonely now.*

Jennifer closed the binder on the table. “You shouldn’t pit them against each other like that.”

Angela didn’t respond to Jennifer’s tone. Their enforcer had stayed quiet for the entire meeting until the end. Then she’d gone against Angela’s vote. “Where do you want me for the next hour?”

Jennifer was surprised by the question. It soothed her anger a little to know Angela wasn’t taking back over yet. “Keep working with the mission men, I guess. They need to sleep tonight.”

Angela did take offense at the tone this time, but she still managed to control her response. “I’ll finish cleaning up here. I’m sure you have rounds to do.”

Jennifer didn’t like being dismissed. She also didn’t like it that Angela was upset with her. “Don’t you think it’s time we talked?”

“Nope. The time for that was in the quarantine tent when you gave me updates and attitude.” Angela went to the outhouse to keep from answering any other questions.

Jennifer slammed the chair under the table and left the cabin, muttering.

Adrian did a quick walk around the cabin to make sure everyone was gone. Then he locked the front door and went out the rear door to wait near the outhouse until Angela was done. He didn't know where she was going next, but he suspected it would be the cruise ship. Kenn's investigation there should be about over now, but Adrian was certain Angela would want to tour the scene of the crime at least once before it was all cleaned up.

Adrian turned as he heard footsteps.

Angela came out of the outhouse.

Jayda stopped at the frown from Adrian and the glare from Angela. It obviously still wasn't a good time. She sighed and went toward town.

Angela headed for the muddy path that led to the cove where their ships were anchored.

Adrian followed. "What does she want?"

Angela nearly growled. "My approval for the list of people going on the run with her!"

"I don't understand. What's wrong with that?"

"Marc's name is at the top of her list."

Adrian lifted a shield around Angela again so she was still covered while he was distracted. "You already knew he was going along."

"I hoped he would change his mind. Jayda confirmed it with him earlier. He's leaving me again."

Adrian understood Angela needed an outlet for her feelings of abandonment, but her pregnancy was preventing most of the normal methods she used.

He tried to offer an alternative. “Maybe you should learn to do something new.”

Angela slowed as the ground became muddier. “Like what?”

“Thelma is giving cooking lessons after lunch. Or maybe you’d like to learn how to sail one of our ships.”

Angela wanted those valuable skills, but neither of them was strong enough to hold her right now, let alone for a month or more. “Try harder.”

Adrian thought about it while following her. He was glad it had finally stopped drizzling, but the treacherous ground beneath his boots made him nervous for both of them as they descended the hill that wound around the beach. “Let’s start reading through the information on the thumb drive.”

Angela liked that better, but she still didn’t think it was enough.

Adrian sighed. “Let’s figure out a plan to make sure Marc comes home after Jayda’s run is over.”

“Deal.”

Adrian chuckled. “Why didn’t you just say that was what you wanted to do?”

“Because it isn’t. I’d rather make a plan that gets him to stay here. Jayda doesn’t really need him. I do.”

As much as Adrian didn’t want to do it, he hated to see her unhappy. “Then let’s do that.”

Angela smiled at the brawler guards as they went by, waiting until they were out of hearing range. Then she told Adrian something she hadn’t

told anyone else yet. “I’m not sure any of them will make it back from Jayda’s run.”

“You’ve seen them all die? Then we have to stop it!”

“It’s not death. They all decide to stay in America. There’s an excellent chance that whoever leaves on this run will never come back here.”

Adrian was horrified and also relieved. “I hate it when you do this to me.”

“Do what?”

“Make me pick between what I want and what’s right. I never used to have conflicted feelings like this. Everything was a lot simpler when I was a coldhearted bastard.”

Angela thought about the choices she had made since taking over his camp. “That couldn’t be farther from the truth. Having a heart makes the world a more tolerable place for everyone.”

“Tell that to all of the people who’ve been hurt.”

“I don’t have to. Those people understand without being told. The only coldhearted bastards in the world are people who have never suffered or experienced downturns in their life. They don’t have any sympathy for their fellow man and they won’t until it happens to them. I pity those people.”

Adrian grunted. “Safe Haven doesn’t have very many souls left like that. We’ve all been through hell, in one form or another.”

“Yes, and unfortunately, the hell isn’t over. We still have a long way to go to build the world of peace and light that we foresaw.”

Adrian didn't think it was just Marc's decision that was weighing on Angela's mood. He also didn't think it was lack of sleep. "Are you going to tell me or make me guess while we walk through the mud?"

Angela's brows came together. "The baby went quiet and still again."

"That's normal for our kind, right?" Adrian tried to remember what he had heard from Neil when Samantha neared her due date. "That just means you'll be delivering soon."

Adrian's eyes widened. "You're within a month of the delivery!"

"Yes, I think we counted wrong, but Marc isn't going to be here for it. Once again, he's going to leave me alone and let fate determine our future."

Adrian heard the anger and he also felt her pain. "This is the last straw for you."

Angela nodded, voice turning into stone. "If he misses the birth of our baby, we're done. I'll raise her alone and he can stay in America—forever."

Chapter Nineteen

I Love That Woman

1

Kyle entered the little clinic and shut the front door. He was happy to find the lobby empty. Everyone should be at the restaurant right now, but there was a chance that Tonya was here. He tried to be quiet as he went by the closed door of the exam room.

The dusty hallway floor squeaked under his light steps as he entered the new lab space. He had an excuse ready, but it wasn't needed. The cool room was empty.

Kyle went over to the top cooler and knelt down to examine the vials through the glass.

This lab was small and crammed with counters holding equipment that only Tonya knew how to use, though Timmy was doing well as her assistant. Kyle assumed the plans to enlarge this clinic would provide more room for the lab, but he wasn't sure. That project was Neil's baby.

A door opened in the hallway.

Kyle moved over to the counter and picked up the log sheet.

Timmy entered the lab and stopped. "What are you doing in here?"

Kyle gestured with the sheet. “We’re verifying where everyone was last night.”

“Oh.” Timmy waited, staring at Kyle’s burns. Most of them were healed now, but it was still clear that he’d been hurt a lot.

Kyle frowned this time. “What are *you* doing here?” Everyone knew Timmy stayed after all the meals to help clean up so he could finish off any leftovers.

Timmy hesitated. He didn’t have an excuse ready.

Kyle dug into his mind. It only took a few seconds to see what the boy was up to.

Kyle put the log sheet down and went over to the cooler. “Tell me which vial to use and how much.”

Timmy realized Kyle was here for the same reason he was. He let out a sound of relief. “The ones in the front. You need half a syringe full, but all the meds from the lab are locked in the bottom cooler. Only Tonya has a key to it.”

Kyle eyed the simple snap lock and then took a small tools kit from his jacket pocket. “Go watch the front door.”

Timmy pointed at a tall cabinet. “Syringes are in there, but you have to keep it cool until you give it to her. It might be harmful if you let it get to room temp.”

Kyle took out the tools he needed and began to work on the lock, awkwardly fighting with his cast. “I have ice packs in my pocket.”

Timmy chuckled. “So do I.” He went out and stood near the main desk to distract anyone who came in.

Kyle picked the lock. It took him longer than he’d expected due to lack of mobility, but he finally popped it and got into the cooler. “I need to work on that skill. Kenn could have had this open in ten seconds with a cast on both hands.”

Kyle filled two syringes and wrapped them in the ice packs. Then he replaced the vial and locked the cooler. He approved of the security measures, but this obviously wasn’t good enough to keep people from stealing. “I’ll drop a note to Tonya about it in a few days.”

Kyle closed the lab door and went out to the lobby. He joined Timmy at the reception desk. “Thank you.”

Timmy nodded. “I like Jenny. She just needs some help with her anger.”

Kyle eyed the boy’s stomach and pudgy face. Then he laid down the law. “No more zapping. Do it with willpower.”

“I tried. I don’t know how!”

“I do. I want you with the brawlers when you aren’t working. Spend all your free time with them.”

Timmy’s sadness filled the room. “They make fun of me for being fat.”

“And they’ll keep doing it until they see you’re serious about getting in shape. Then they’ll be the support system you need.” Kyle didn’t remind the boy that he and his brothers had picked on Matt so

much that the teen had flipped to the dark side. He doubted Timmy had forgotten it. “Report to the beach at dawn tomorrow. Don’t slack off or I’ll make your life miserable. Are we clear?”

“Yes.” Timmy smiled. “Thank you.”

“It’s my honor. Now go enjoy the late lunch. It’s your last time finishing off leftovers. Enjoy it while you can.”

2

“Can I get a few minutes of your time?” Samantha fell in step with Morgan as he came from the bunkhouse. She’d come here to feed the twins before resuming her interviews. “I need to get your statement.”

Morgan slowed a little so she could keep up with his long stride. “What do you need to know?”

“I’ve already collected statements from several people. I know all about the interactions between Missy and Pam since the mission team got home. I need to know if anything happened between them before then.”

Morgan trusted Samantha. As Missy’s lawyer, she was the only one he felt like he didn’t need to hedge with. “They had a couple of tense moments right after the rescue team left, but it was just dirty looks across the table at mealtimes. I don’t remember any words being spoken.”

“Good. It wouldn’t be premeditated that way.”

Morgan frowned. “She’s just a little girl. She didn’t do this.”

Samantha ignored the small bit of fear from his tone. She was working through her issues to help Missy. “I believe that, too. Tonya is testing the blood that was found at the scene against Missy’s type. She didn’t have any injuries when Tonya examined her. That part is good.”

Morgan sighed. “The rest of it isn’t.”

Samantha nodded. More than half of the camp was certain of the girl’s guilt. “We’ll figure out who did it and get her out of there as soon as possible. When the test comes back negative on the blood work, I’ll ask the boss to release her right then.” Samantha realized Morgan was going to the jailhouse. “Are you doing guard duty?”

Everyone knew Shawn and Selina were going to spend the night at the jail.

“I’m going to talk to Missy.” Morgan was hoping nothing would come from that conversation, but he also hoped she would trust him enough to tell him the truth. If she was guilty, admitting to it would be the only thing that saved her from an awful punishment.

“As her lawyer, I should be there for that.”

“I don’t mind if you’re there.” Morgan glanced over at her. “Thank you for doing this.”

Samantha smiled shakily at him. “I don’t mind. She’s just a little girl.”

Selina's defensive words were currently going around the camp and being used by everyone who thought she was innocent.

The guard on the jail let them in without argument. He'd been told to expect Samantha, and Morgan was a senior Eagle who could go anywhere he wanted.

Shawn stood up from the chair as they came in. Selina stepped in front of the cell and blocked their path.

Morgan went around her to Missy's cell and tapped on the bars. "Hey, squirt."

Missy looked up from the cot. "What do you want?"

Morgan could tell from her tone that this wasn't going to go well, but he pushed ahead anyway. "I need you to tell me the truth. What happened to Pam?"

Missy crossed her arms over her chest. "You didn't care about Shawn while he was gone, so we don't need you now. Get out."

Morgan noticed Missy hadn't answered the question.

So did Samantha.

"I care deeply about you. I want to help. Don't turn me away."

Missy refused to look at him again.

Selina didn't trust Morgan; she didn't know him. "You heard her, mate. Get out."

Morgan went to Shawn. "There was a meeting of the law council today." Morgan didn't mention

that he was a member of that council. “They discussed underage criminals and what the punishment should be for murder. Would you like to guess what the final choice was?”

Shawn was horrified. “The death penalty.”

Morgan shared Shawn’s revulsion. He hadn’t voted for it. “It was decided that taking someone’s life without it being self-defense is going to be punishable by removal, no matter the person’s age. If Missy is found guilty, the enforcer will have to execute her.”

3

“I’m not going to let that happen. She’s just a little girl!” Samantha hurried out of the jailhouse and headed toward the remote path that would take her down to the cove. Kenn was still on the ship finishing his investigation. He was going through Pam’s cabin and talking to the people who’d been held in the cafeteria. Samantha had been told Angela was also there now, going over the crime scene. “Let’s find out what really happened.”

Debra appeared on the path. She gestured quickly.

Samantha was grateful. “I’d be happy to have you as my guard for the day.”

Debra joined her for the walk, glad to be able to help. She was off duty, but restless and she didn’t want to spend time around the camp members who

were convinced of Missy's guilt and eager to see the little girl get punished.

Samantha hurried along the path while trying not to slip in the mud. "Whoever did this is evil. Who sets up a child to take the fall?"

Debra didn't have an answer for that. She also wasn't convinced that Missy was innocent. She'd caught a lot of bad thoughts in Missy's mind about Pam, but that didn't mean she was guilty either. Debra was willing to wait and see where the evidence led them.

It only took Samantha a couple of minutes to reach the cove and hurry down the slick ladder to the dock. Their small armada of ships bobbed unhappily in the rough swells that were rushing toward the island. It was obvious another storm was coming, but Samantha wasn't concerned with that right now. It took all of her willpower to step onto the shifting dock to reach the ship.

Chad's voice in her mind wasn't welcome.

I'll be with you forever, Sammi. Let's go for a swim and see if we can find that diaper bag.

Debra put a hand on Samantha's wrist. "Slams door!"

Samantha nodded at Debra's slurred reminder not to listen to that voice anymore. She hurried over the ramp and boarded the cruise ship. "Would it be rude if I told you I'm a little jealous of you right now?"

Debra chuckled. She understood. She wasn't afraid of the ocean the way Samantha and the

returning teams were, but she also couldn't hear it. That made things easier.

Debra replayed her thought, eyes widening. *I can't hear the water, so I'm not scared of it and there are open spots on the diving team that's being put together...*

Samantha and Debra went past Ed and Tim, who were now doing a guard shift at the top of the ship to make sure camp members didn't go down there yet and muddy up any of the scenes. Samantha caught Ed's thought of not really liking Debra and hoped the deaf woman didn't. Ian and Ed weren't really part of Safe Haven anymore, but Debra was. Samantha hoped the woman changed her mind and stayed.

Debra barely noticed the guards despite her and Ian planning a trip to America with Ed. She didn't like him that much. She only tolerated him because he was Ian's friend.

Samantha hurried down the ramp, avoiding the taped off areas where evidence had been found. She passed multiple locations like that, bringing more concern. There was a lot of evidence to be collected. If Missy had done the crime, there was no way she hadn't left something here that would be identifiable, other than the murder weapon.

Missy had told them she lost her knife a few days ago, but no one had been able to verify that. The circumstantial evidence against her was strong. Samantha was putting her faith in the blood work. "All I need is one good way to inject doubt into the

theory. I'll make them feel guilty for even thinking about executing a child on top of it. I'll have her out the same day the blood work comes back."

Debra didn't think that would be the case. She was positive part of the reason Missy was locked up was for her own safety. Safe Haven had a nasty history of rioting when things went wrong.

Samantha followed the taped locations down to the entertainment deck of the ship. It wasn't surprising that it led them straight to a bar. "As much as she drank, I'm sure Pam angered other people. I need to make a list of anyone she argued with, not just Missy."

Debra knew Samantha was talking to herself to make sure she didn't forget anything. Debra kept an eye on the empty corridors while trying to maintain her balance on the pitching deck. The ocean had reached a level of unhappiness that implied the coming storm wasn't going to be the light rain and wind of the last one.

Samantha and Debra entered the bar. Angela and Kenn were there, along with Adrian.

Debra joined Adrian in watching over the investigator, the boss, and Missy's lawyer. She compared his almost healed injuries to Kenn's heavily damaged body and looked away from both men.

"Have you found anything new?" Samantha already had a copy of Kenn's basic notes, but it had been hours since those had been delivered to her.

Kenn shook his head. “I just pulled the fingerprints from the glasses, but we won’t have results for a while yet. I still have to read through the book to figure out how to match them up.” It had taken him an hour just to figure out how to collect the prints.

“I assume you’ll want Missy’s fingerprints to compare.”

Kenn nodded. “Along with Pam’s, and everyone else in camp if those don’t match up. I’m going to make sure she gets a fair shake.”

Samantha was glad to hear that, but she didn’t let it distract her from doing her duty as Missy’s lawyer. “As soon as the blood work comes in, I want Missy released into the custody of her parents. She can have a guard and be in the bunkhouse, on the top level. She shouldn’t be kept in that cold, damp cell.”

Footsteps came down the hallway behind them. Tonya appeared with a folder in her hand.

“Is that the results? Has Missy been cleared?”

Tonya ignored Samantha’s questions and went over to the boss. “It matches, unfortunately. She didn’t have any injuries on her, but it’s definitely her blood. I matched the rest of the blood to Pam. There were no other results. It’s just the two of them.”

“Damn.” Angela had been hoping for a different answer.

Tonya eyed the two glasses Kenn was working with. “Her blood tested negative for alcohol.”

“She really is being framed, then.” Samantha had also been ready for it to go this way; a good lawyer always covered both possibilities. “She was examined in front of witnesses. She has no injuries. How did her blood get at the scene of the crime?”

Kenn had two possible explanations. “Either she’s being framed or someone healed her injuries before the exam.”

Tonya frowned deeply. “Either way, someone else is involved in this murder.”

Everyone looked toward Angela to see what she wanted them to do.

“Finish the investigation and all of the interviews. We’re handling this by the book.”

Tonya stepped closer to Angela while avoiding a dried puddle of blood. She doubted that they would be able to scrub it off the floor. “Rumors about the law council decision are already spreading through the camp. I don’t think we can handle this by the book. We should let Jennifer interview Missy. She’ll get the truth from her, one way or the other.”

Samantha shouted, surprising them all. “That is not going to happen! We don’t torture people here!”

Kenn winced, but not because of Samantha’s shout. It reminded him of the cages on the warehouse floor. “Maybe someone else can scan Missy and see what happened. I don’t think Jennifer should be allowed to do it.”

Everyone looked at Angela again, waiting for her choice.

“I repeat, we’re handling this by the book. Finish gathering evidence and interviewing people.”

“But that will take days!” Samantha glowered. “You can’t leave her in jail the whole time. She’s just a little girl!”

“A little girl who may have murdered someone.” Angela moved toward the door while letting out a groan of misery at her aching spine. “Let me know when you both finish your investigations, and we’ll go from there. I’ll be in the beach tent if anyone needs me.”

Kenn tried not to smile as he realized what was happening. “The beach tent is only for the boss.”

“I’ve been told that.” Angela gestured. “I’m taking over as of right now. Send someone to tell the dragon and then pass the word. The boss is back on duty.”

“Jennifer isn’t going to like that.” Tonya definitely didn’t want to be the one who told her.

“The camp will, though.” Adrian was positive camp members would rush down to the beach as soon as they found out.

Samantha didn’t care about that. “I’m going to file a motion to have Missy released on bail, pending her trial. There’s absolutely no reason for you to refuse it as long as she’s under constant guard.”

Angela stopped at the door and looked at Samantha. “I’m not letting Missy out. That’s my final word.”

Samantha opened her mouth to protest.

Angela went out the door so she didn't have to be sharp with the recovering woman. It was encouraging that Samantha was fighting for her client's rights. Angela didn't want Samantha to stop, but there was no way she could give Samantha what she wanted. If they let Missy out of the cell, she and her family would run and then all chance of a happy future for any of them would be over. "The enforcer isn't going to let them take off without facing justice. She isn't going to allow that for anyone."

Adrian followed Angela out of the bar.

Debra and Samantha also left, taking a different set of stairs.

Alone now, Tonya and Kenn shared worried looks. Angela's warning reminded Tonya of her conversation with Adrian. "Jennifer knows. It's only a matter of time until she confronts me about it."

Kenn put the fingerprint he had taken into the kit and snapped it shut. He stared at her through the dusty mirror behind the bar, burn scars glaring. "We need to leave before that happens."

Tonya headed for the door. "Why do you think I'm keeping Rico so close?"

Kenn stared as Tonya left, heart easing into a smoother pattern now that he understood what was going on. If she had to flee, Rico would keep her safe until Kenn was able to catch up to them. "Then I'll slit his throat right in front of her and there won't

be an enforcer around to remove either of us for it. Damn, I love that woman.”

4

“It’s nice of you to help gather supplies for Jayda’s trip.”

Charlie grunted beneath the weight of the heavy boxes. “Yep.”

Marc tried again as they trudged the muddy path toward the cove. They were both filthy, but enjoying the cool breeze blowing in ahead of the storm. “Are you doing okay?”

Charlie sucked in air to talk with, lungs hurting. He felt very out of shape. “Just had to get out of the bunkhouse.”

Marc tightened his grip on the three wet cardboard boxes that pushed against his cast and made his wrist ache. Everything was damp now. “The camp means well. It’s just hard for them to understand we aren’t ready to open up yet.”

“Yeah, but it’s not that.” Charlie felt his hand slipping. He used his knee to push the boxes back into place.

“Too much baby care?” Marc had been impressed with all the time Charlie was spending helping other people with their children.

“Yes, but I don’t mind the work.” Charlie told his dad the truth. “It makes me sad.”

Marc understood. “Ah.”

“I’m glad you brought it up, though.”

Marc knew what was coming. He tried to stall. “Be careful going down that ladder.”

They had a pulley system set up for lifting and lowering gear, but people still had to make the climb.

Charlie didn’t go for it. “I’m coming with you guys. I already signed up.”

Marc sighed. *It’s time.*

Charlie nodded. “I’ll do my share on the trip, but when it’s over, I’m going my own way. I have a son out there somewhere and I’m going to find him.”

Marc put his boxes onto the platform and straightened. He looked at the angry ocean instead of his son, automatically scanning for a green cloud.

Charlie studied Marc’s scarred arms and hands. “Why aren’t you trying to talk me out of it?”

Marc shrugged. “You have a son out there somewhere. He should be with you.”

Charlie put his boxes down. “Thank you for understanding.”

“Yep. But let’s not talk to your mom about it until Jayda’s ready to leave, okay? She has enough on her plate right now.”

Charlie looked toward the cruise ship, where the new dick was still working. “Do you think Missy is guilty?”

Marc shrugged. “I almost hope so. If not, Safe Haven has another murderer on the loose.”

“Kenn will track them down.”

“You think so?”

“Yes. He’s very good at digging up shit people don’t want known.”

The males shared a chuckle and a glance. It was good to have Kenn occupied. After seeing Tonya embrace Rico, they’d both expected Kenn to be the one in jail for murder.

“It will kill Cody.”

Marc knew that, too. The law council’s decision was awful and unexpected. “If he asks you to break Missy out, tell him no.”

Charlie headed toward camp. “I already did, but Bret and Cate said yes. You may want to shut them down.”

Marc groaned. “Kids!”

Charlie’s sadness overwhelmed him again as he left. Images of meeting his son filled his mind and kept him company as he got out of sight.

Marc gathered power and sent out a fast, powerful message that traveled against the wind to reach his target. *It’s time.*

He waited patiently for an answer, watching Angela and Adrian move slowly toward the path to the beach.

Adrian felt his gaze and glanced up, hand falling to his holster.

Marc looked away before Adrian could try to communicate. He wasn’t in the mood for it.

The wind shifted, bringing another spat of light rain and an answer to Marc’s call.

As soon as the weather passes.

Marc didn't send an answer back. He didn't want anyone else to know yet. He was a little surprised that Angela hadn't felt it, but it was clear by her hunched shoulders and slow pace that she was in too much pain to pay attention to anything else.

Marc glanced at Adrian and found the blond man opening an umbrella for Angela. He hadn't caught it either.

That only leaves one other person who's strong enough to know what I just did. Marc turned, scanning the jungle. He found Jennifer's signature in the tunnel under town. She'd been spending a lot of time down there since they got home. Marc assumed she was avoiding the many people who were disappointed with her.

When she didn't respond to his scan, Marc was relieved. Jennifer hadn't noticed it either.

Marc went to the barn for another load of supplies while considering how strange life was for him now. He loved plotting and scheming as long as it was for something good, but he still didn't want to stay here and help his wife do that for all of these people. *Deep inside, I'm still a Marine. I need the adventure to feel alive. If I stay here, I'll wither up and die.*

"She's right. I'm probably not coming back here." Marc sighed miserably as confusion and loneliness tried to eat him alive. "She'll have the baby, Adrian, Greg, and leadership. She won't even notice I'm gone."

Chapter Twenty

Right On Schedule

1

“**F**orm a line! Stop pushing!” Adrian was displeased by how the camp was crowding around the beach tent. Everyone who hadn’t gotten a chance to complain or ask for something yet was now down here dealing with the rain. The wet conditions were making people irritable. The faint thunder and roaring ocean wasn’t improving the mood. “Settle down or go back to town!”

People grudgingly lined up, muttering and glaring, mostly at Adrian.

Adrian’s unshaven face and wrinkled clothes set him apart from the other guards, who were neat and clean except for their muddy boots. He felt people eyeing him in distaste and made a mental note to get a shower and shave later.

Angela tried to find a comfortable position in the chair. She got her notebook out and waved at the first person in the line. People had started coming down before she’d even reached the tent. “What can I do for you today?”

Grant slid into the chair across from her. “How are you feeling?”

Angela didn't have the patience for niceties. "What can I do for you, Grant?"

Grant wasn't used to her being short with him. He didn't repeat his question since it obviously wasn't good. "I'd like to restart our wedding plans. Ray and I talked about it. We were thinking a Fourth of July wedding would be nice."

"The Fourth of July would be a nice date for a series of weddings." Angela wrote it in her book. "You can't be the only wedding, however. We're going to do group events so there are enough supplies for everyone. Get back to me in a couple of weeks with a list of other couples."

Grant was happy with that. He didn't mind sharing the spotlight. He moved on to his next concern. "I'd like to resume doing full-time shifts as an Eagle and part-time shifts on the ships. You don't really need me as a captain right now. There's nothing going on."

Grant was wearing his sailing uniform under his Eagle jacket. Angela liked the image it gave, but she could tell he didn't. "No. Jennifer was absolutely right about that. Until we have other captains who are as skilled as you, I need you on the bridge full-time, teaching people."

Grant could tell from her tone that she wasn't going to give in on that. He was disappointed. He rose from the chair while trying to think of anything he could say that would make a difference.

Angela wasn't in the mood to be argued with or persuaded. She gestured toward the next person in line, forcing Grant to move on.

Angela did notice that he hadn't asked her to make him a descendant even though that had been his main focus before she'd left. Angela made a note about it as Ian sat down in the chair.

Ian didn't bother trying to be nice. "I'd like to know why Jayda's trip is already being supplied, but I've been put on hold every time I asked about gathering what we need from our share of the supplies. All three of us are ready to leave!"

Angela motioned coolly toward the active ocean. "We don't have an extra ship to send you out on. I told Jennifer to make you wait until our next run. You can all go on the boat with Jayda."

Ian nodded right away. "Cool. What about our share of the supplies?"

Angela didn't like his greed. Ian wasn't in full Eagle gear; he was flaunting the fact that he was leaving soon and didn't need to follow their rules. Angela didn't call him on it, but she wanted to. It set a bad example for everyone else. "I'll make sure extra supplies are sent with Jayda."

Ian had to be happy with that even though he wanted to ask about specific totals. He knew Angela was upset that they were leaving. "Thank you."

"Yep." Angela signaled for the next person to keep from saying something nasty.

The sky dimmed; rain began falling harder over the waiting people. Many of them opened umbrellas and shared with those who didn't have one.

Cody and Cate pushed to the front of the line together and stood in front of the table without sitting. The kids were muddy and disheveled. For Cate, it was normal. For Cody, it was a huge difference. Angela didn't like it. She also didn't order him to go get cleaned up. Other concerns needed to be settled first.

Angela shook her head. "I'll give you a break from your duties with Wade so you can take turns visiting Missy, but that's it. We have procedures that must be followed in situations like this. I can't give her immunity. Safe Haven doesn't do that."

Cate and Cody both protested, talking over each other.

Angela let the kids vent because they needed it. When they finally quieted, she motioned toward the muddy clover path. "You're going to spend tonight at the jailhouse as guards. Go collect your gear and get settled there before it gets dark."

Both kids were happy to have been given permission for that. They walked away from the tent while delivering glares toward the other adults around them.

"Who's next?"

Angela's sharp tone made a lot of people hesitate. She had to point to keep things rolling. "Maddie."

Madison came over to the chair, eager to get this over with so she could be out of the spotlight. “I’d like to be allowed to trade shifts again. Not with Allison, of course. She tricked me, but sometimes I don’t feel like babysitting. I’d rather be allowed to help on other chores when people want to trade.”

“Convince Jennifer and then get back to me.”

Madison frowned. “Why?”

“Because she’s right. It’s better to be able to depend on the people we schedule. When you trade shifts, it makes everyone nervous.” Angela gave the woman a pointed tone. “Like *you* do.”

Madison cringed. “I just don’t fit in. I never have fit in anywhere.”

Angela dug through the woman’s mind, along with several of the guards, but there was nothing to find except extreme social awkwardness.

Angela looked over at Adrian. “Tell Neil it’s time to get rid of the guard on her. They’re overreacting.”

Madison had a quick flash of insight. “They think I’m like Chad and Chris!”

Angela shrugged. “You can’t blame them for being careful.”

“Wanna bet?!” Madison stood up. “That’s why people here are shunning me. You tell Neil he owes me an apology!”

Madison stormed off down the beach.

The goats and the puppy came out of the tall grass and followed her.

Angela wrote it in her book. It was the first time Angela had witnessed a spark from Madison. She was encouraged, though she didn't make plans around it. The shy woman would come out of her shell in time. There was no reason to rush her.

The wind picked up, pushing rain further onto the beach. It sprayed the tent and made the canvas walls flap annoyingly.

"Here comes Jennifer." Adrian had been keeping an eye out for the teenager.

Kyle came from the opposite path at the same time. He joined them in the tent, making Adrian sure the mobster had been following his wife.

Kyle eyed the rain and fought the urge to insist they move this to town. Angela was doing it here to keep with normal routines, but also to fight the fear of the ocean that was paralyzing to the team. The line of people didn't notice it; the team members couldn't get it out of their heads. Kyle tried not to be affected by their anxiety or his own.

Jennifer's anger was on her face as she reached the tent.

Angela lifted a brow. "Problem?"

Jennifer tried to be reasonable. "Why are you letting them take advantage of you?"

"I'm doing it because you didn't. I want them to be happy. You just want them to behave."

"Obeying the rules is important."

"So is being happy." Angela motioned toward the chair on her left.

Jennifer reluctantly sat down. She didn't look at Kyle.

Kyle fingered the ice packs in his pocket, but Jennifer was too alert right now, too angry. She would notice if he made a move toward her.

Angela motioned the next person over.

Tobias sat in the chair. He didn't waste any time making his wants known. "Kenn assaulted me. I want him arrested."

Angela eyed him from top to bottom with a sneer. "I don't see any proof of that."

There wasn't a mark on him. In fact, he looked better than he had in a while, healthier. Even his graying hair had returned to shiny brown strands that framed a glowing face. None of it was natural.

Tobias stared back incredulously. "You were in the tent! You saw it!"

"Witnesses are notoriously unreliable, Tobias. I'm going to need proof of the assault." Her lids narrowed. "Unless you'd like to tell me who healed you instead of using that precious energy on our ill people."

Jennifer nodded savagely.

Tobias snapped his mouth shut and forced his mind into a different direction.

Angela shook her head in disgust. "Request denied. Get lost."

She was more than disappointed with him. Everyone now knew he'd tried to get Tonya to shoot Rico so she would be banished. "On your way back

to camp, try to remember the biggest rule of Safe Haven—if we can't trust you, we don't need you.”

Tobias tugged his medical coat closed against the rain as he stomped off down the beach without responding.

“He's hiding something.” Jennifer was positive about it.

Angela nodded. *So am I.* “Who's next?”

Angela spent a few minutes handling the much easier requests of camp members who wanted to be allowed to stay up later than Jennifer's curfew, to be allowed to sit where they wanted to for meals, to enjoy more free time on the cruise ship, and to do less shifts through the week. Angela only granted a few of their requests.

Jennifer didn't allow nasty looks from the camp members to trigger her anger, but it was hard to sit there quietly while listening to Angela handle things. She didn't believe giving people what they wanted without getting something in return was a good idea.

Jennifer kicked an ant away from her chair and then scuffed her boots together to get rid of the damp sand. She felt how much the team around her hated the rain and the sounds of the ocean, but it didn't bother her even though she'd viewed enough of their thoughts to understand why they were afraid. Angela's ingenious idea to keep them alive under the water during a hurricane was just another source of anger for Jennifer because she never would have thought of that.

Angela didn't react to Jennifer's thoughts, but she caught all of them. "Who's next?"

Jack swallowed a yawn and sat in the chair. "I'd like you to help Dace. I was told you haven't really tried yet and neither has your enforcer." He didn't glance at Jennifer, but Jack could feel her anger that she'd been mentioned.

Jack had bags under his eyes and couldn't stop yawning. He was spending every free moment with Dace. Angela felt bad for him; it didn't show in her voice. "I assume you're willing to give me undying loyalty."

"In a heartbeat."

"Why?"

"We're good friends. We've been together a long time."

Angela caught the tone. "How long?"

Jack reluctantly let her in. "Since his birth. Dace is my little brother."

Everyone was surprised to hear that.

Jennifer started to shake her head. Their sick people needed the energy more than someone who was in a coma. Dace's life wasn't in danger right now.

Angela held up a hand to stop the girl. She focused on Jack. "You will have to make a hard decision in the future. When that time comes, you have to walk away, no matter how much it hurts."

Jack shrugged. "If it means my brother wakes up, I'll do it. You have my word."

“Deal. Go sit with Lisa; see if she’s ready for a break yet.”

Jack smiled at the heavily pregnant leader. “Thank you.”

Angela didn’t smile back. “Who’s next?”

Jack frowned as he left. He was suddenly sure he’d been tricked even though he didn’t know how.

Sadie slid into the warm, wet chair. “I want you to punish Adrian for cheating on me.”

Adrian flushed.

Angela laughed.

Sadie glared. “I mean it. Safe Haven is supposed to have morals. Cheating on someone shouldn’t be allowed.”

Sadie didn’t look at Jennifer, but she wasn’t upset with their enforcer. *I broke a rule and paid for it. It’s not her fault. It’s Adrian’s!*

Sadie was cleaner, calmer, and fitting in well with their camp now. Getting away from Adrian had been good for her. Angela was glad. “Even if he had made a commitment to you, and I happen to know that he did not, I still wouldn’t agree to it. The law council isn’t going to waste time chasing people around and making sure they stay loyal to their mates. We have more important issues to worry about.”

Sadie started to protest.

Angela delivered a sharp tone of warning. “You’re a rookie Eagle in our camp. You have a loyal boyfriend who I consider to be a wonderful

person. Let the past go and move on. That's an order."

Sadie was sent back to her time with the UN. When they gave an order, they expected it to be followed, no questions asked. She clamped her lips together and got up, but she couldn't resist glaring at Adrian. *This isn't over.*

Piper came through the line and sat in the chair, ignoring Sadie.

Piper's hair blew in the wind, reminding people of Angela, but that was where the resemblance ended this time. Angela was huge, with clothes too tight and yellowish skin that said she was having trouble. Piper was vibrantly healthy in comparison.

Angela refused to acknowledge her jealousy. *I'll be pretty again after the birth. That's not important.*

Adrian swallowed the need to tell her she was beautiful now.

Piper smiled brightly. "I want Adrian removed from conditional banishment and allowed to take his place back in Safe Haven like he deserves."

Sadie stopped and turned, growling angrily.

People in the crowd gasped.

Angela smiled warmly at Piper. "No."

Piper smiled back. "I had to try. How about giving me a place on the law council instead?"

Because she had asked for it openly in front of so many people, Angela was forced to deny that request as well. "There are no empty spots on the council."

“How about a waiting list?” Piper wanted to represent the normals. She hadn’t forgotten her conversation about that with Lisa on the sub. She wanted to make sure her kind was protected.

Angela shook her head again. “We don’t have a waiting list.” She wrote Piper’s name in her book anyway. “Anything else?”

Piper had the feeling that she had succeeded in getting something she wanted even though she didn’t know what it was. “Nope. Have a good day, Boss.”

“Thank you.” Angela ignored Jennifer’s displeasure at the title and motioned to the next person in line.

The rain was coming down steadily now, drenching people, but it wasn’t enough to deter them from this moment. Their needs and wants were stronger than their discomfort.

Dwight wiped his face as he sat.

Angela steeled her temper. Dwight had more gray hair now, thick bags around his eyes, and a determined expression that told Angela what he was about to ask for.

Dwight leaned across the table in hopes that most people wouldn’t be able to hear him. “Does anyone have an extra lifeforce they can use to help my daughter?”

Jennifer stiffened.

Angela shook her head. “No. We’ve used them up during our battles for survival.”

“Are you sure?”

Angela was unhappy that he had made the request in front of so many witnesses. She used that sharp tone again. “I’m not going to tell you to stop asking for help, but I am going to tell you to be careful. Rumors are flying through the camp now about our kids, thanks to your son. If one of them gets hurt, all of the descendants are going to blame your family for it.”

Dwight hadn’t thought about that, but it wouldn’t have changed his mind even if he had. “We’ve seen amazing healing in this camp. We can’t help hoping they can do it for Brittani.”

“The kids are locked, but they don’t have that ability anyway. Only a rare few of the adult descendants have a healing gift.” Angela motioned toward the mission men who were here. “If we had unlimited healing power, don’t you think I would have already used it on my team?”

Dwight was forced to accept that answer. “I’m sorry. I just love my daughter and she’s dying!”

Angela put a hand over his on the table. “We’ll keep trying. Don’t give up hope. Just don’t stir up trouble that won’t solve the problem either.”

Dwight got up and stumbled into the comfort of the church group who had come down with him. They led him toward the path while murmuring platitudes.

Angela saw Conner trailing the church group dejectedly. He would have asked for the same help for Candy if she had said yes to Dwight. Conner had

been using his spare lifeforces to ease her pain. He was out now.

Conner had the same sleepless eyes and worried mind as Dwight. Angela wished she could ease the hearts of both devoted males. She sighed silently. *I just need a little more time. Hang on, guys. Help is coming.*

“He asked me last night if we’re going to do human testing with the vials that were brought back from the lab.” Kyle showed Angela the note Conner had given him.

Angela put it into her notebook. “I have no plans for that. Pass the word.” She gestured at the line of camp members. “Who’s next?”

Several people came over at the same time, complaining about the muddy conditions. They wanted some of the straw that had been brought for livestock to be put down around the bunkhouse and restaurant to soak up some of the water. The next group asked for access to musical equipment from the cruise ship so they could start a band. The entertainment deck of the ship had a lot of items that weren’t being used because they weren’t needed.

Jennifer tuned out the requests. She didn’t know how Angela had the patience for things like this when so many other problems were more important. She forced herself to sit through it while ignoring Kyle.

“Thank you, Boss.” The camp members moved off to spread the good news.

“Who’s next?”

Angela tensed as Charlie sat in the chair. Charlie had a three-day beard, unbrushed black hair falling over his tired face, and a gun on his hip. He looked like the rest of the mission men even though he hadn't been in the lab. It was haunting to his mother.

“Dad told me not to talk to you about this yet, but I don't feel right keeping it from you.”

Angela already knew what it was. She sighed miserably. “I don't want you to go, but I understand why you need to. All I ask is that you try to stay with Marc while you search. If you remind him that it's his grandchild, he'll go with you and help bring you both back alive.”

Charlie knew she was in a rough mood, and he didn't want to make it worse, but he had already come this far. “I don't think I want to come back here, mom.”

Angela's heart broke. She forced herself to give him the answer he needed so he could be happy in that future. “You always have a place here if you change your mind.”

Charlie got up before her sadness could affect him. Being on this island was a constant reminder of Tracy and all the mistakes he'd made. Even if he got his son from her, he didn't want to be here. “Thank you for understanding.”

Angela swallowed her tears and motioned. “Who's next?”

A loud wail broke the surprised chatter of the group. Allison shoved through the line and leaned

on the table in front of Angela. “She killed my friend!”

Allison’s puffy face and filthy clothes said she was spending her time mourning. Angela was sure Jennifer had already had to cover those work shifts.

Why is it hitting her so hard? Jennifer didn’t believe it was all an act, though most of it was.

She’s facing mortality. Pam’s death is an ugly reminder that she can die, too. Angela signaled. *Unlock her.*

Jennifer was shocked by the mental order. “You can’t mean that.”

Angela lifted a brow. “Don’t I?”

Allison wailed again, “I want that little bitch gone!”

Jennifer brought up her shield around Allison.

People in the crowd gasped, expecting something ugly.

Allison barely noticed. She was fully into her misery. “You have to make her go away! If she doesn’t leave, I will!”

Jennifer sent power into the shield surrounding Allison.

Allison froze for a moment. Then her body and face relaxed. She let out a sigh of relief. “What did you do?”

Jennifer gloated mildly. “I hit you with a mood charm and connected you to the hive. You’re no longer Invisible.”

Allison pushed away from the table, horrified. “I didn’t ask for that!”

Jennifer snottily relayed Angela's reason. "You did, though. You're here making a scene and causing problems when we already have a suspect in jail and an investigation taking place. You can't be Invisible anymore because of your behavior."

"I don't want to be like you!"

"Too late now. Go finish settling Pam's estate like you were told to do!"

Allison glared back at Jennifer. "I'll make you pay for this!"

She stomped off before Jennifer could reply, no longer crying over her friend. The hive voices were offering comfort and delivering warnings. Allison had no idea how to handle it or to block it out.

Jennifer turned to Angela. "Why did you really have me do that?"

Angela ignored the question and gestured toward the line that was finally shrinking. "Who's next?"

Jennifer didn't ask again. She used her brilliant mind to figure out the mystery. It was entirely possible that the answer she had given Allison was the truth, but Jennifer didn't think so. *Why would the boss unlock her when we're all worried about her discovering Harry's secret and following in his footsteps?*

Jennifer continued to ponder that while Angela finished handling the requests of the camp members.

“That’s the last one.” Adrian was glad they were finally finished. The rain pushing in off the ocean was getting heavier. He wanted to escort both women to the bunkhouse before it got any worse.

Angela enjoyed the rain on her hot skin as she left the shelter of the canvas. She waved off the umbrella Kyle opened.

A lone, lean man came around the side of the beach tent, making everyone stiffen. “Time for one more?”

Rico was fully geared like the Eagles, just without a jacket. He was also well-armed. He looked and felt like a hard soul who was above everyone else and their misery. *Tonya’s right. He’s a Brady.* Angela pointed toward the chair.

Rico sat down and ignored everyone but her. “You already know what I want.” Tonya was barely tolerating him now. He couldn’t take it. Need was beating in his brain like a neon sign.

Angela took advantage of the moment, like she often did in these situations. “I’ll do it in exchange for you proving to Marc that not all Reichers are evil.”

Rico scowled. “How can I do that? He already knows I detest female leadership and I’m stalking someone else’s mate.” *Not to mention my past issue.*

Angela waited patiently while everyone else frowned at him for the blunt truth.

It finally occurred to Rico that Angela knew what was happening with him and Tonya; she'd known all along. "Why are you allowing it?"

Angela smiled coolly. "Because we all need to believe that Reicher family members can change. It isn't just for Marc. Every one of the men who were destroyed in that lab need to be put back together and you're going to help me do it."

Rico was surprised and angry. "You're selling her out!"

"I'm giving her options. Kenn wasn't always a good person either."

"She's happy with him." Rico sighed, anger fading into misery. "If I were a good man, I would ask you to match me with someone else and I would walk away."

Angela grunted, wiping rain from her face. "I knew you weren't good the first time I saw you, Rico. I didn't need you to be a good man then and I don't need you to be a good man now. I just need you to prove you aren't evil."

"I don't understand."

"That's because you're still stuck in lab mentality and thinking like your brother. I'm going to prove to you that he was wrong about female leadership by giving you what you want."

Rico was very confused; so was everyone else who was listening.

"I assume you've heard about our monthly matchups."

Rico nodded arrogantly. “I will not participate so I don’t hurt anyone.”

“Overruled. You’re going to do more than participate. You’re going to challenge one of the mission men to a matchup and win.”

Adrian and Kyle both groaned. They didn’t believe anyone was capable of doing that now.

Jennifer stared in surprise. “Why would you do that?”

Rico understood camp acceptance could come from that if he didn’t kill the man. From there, Tonya would start viewing him in a better light. He finally smiled. “Maybe you do know what you’re doing.”

Angela chuckled without humor. “You have no idea. But you will and by then it will be too late to change your mind. I’ll give you one chance right now to walk away.”

Rico shook his head. “Like I told your mate, only death will get me to leave her alone.”

“Then start with the match and keep working on the goal I just gave you. If you do that, I’ll give you what you want.”

“Thank you.” Rico quickly got out of sight, not sure if he was being tricked.

Angela immediately looked over at Jennifer. *I want him unlocked, too.*

Jennifer shrugged, falling back into her confused anger. “You’re the boss.”

Despite the snarky tone, Angela nodded. “Yes, I am. It’s one thing I truly excel at.”

She waddled off down the beach, enjoying the cool rain on her hot skin.

Kyle stepped closer to Jennifer, hand going into his pocket.

Adrian shook his head. He knew what the mobster was trying to do, but it was a bad time. If Kyle tried to give Jennifer a dose of the rage vaccine right now, he might succeed. “We have a storm coming. She’ll need her anger to get us through it.”

Jennifer didn’t know what they were talking about, but she did know it involved her. Rain flew from her hands and hair as she spun around and glared at both men.

Kyle looked away.

Adrian delivered a mocking smirk.

Jennifer left the tent while casting ugly glares at both of them.

Adrian followed Angela while Kyle followed Jennifer. None of them spoke, but their thoughts ran wild over everything they’d heard. Once again, Angela was miles ahead and they didn’t know how it had happened. She was right. It was something she truly excelled at.

Jennifer wanted to be like that. Her jealousy was put aside for the moment while she tried to figure out how to make it happen.

Jennifer heard Kyle’s steps and knew he was going to try talking to her again. She quickly headed for the nearest tunnel hatch. “Leave me alone!”

Kyle was hurt by her tone. He went in the other direction.

Jennifer went down into the tunnel and shut the hatch.

Angela smiled as she scanned all of their thoughts. *We're right on schedule.*

3

“I wonder if taking more lifeforces would do it.” Jennifer walked the dim tunnels and stewed on how to be as detailed as Angela in her planning. She'd been down here for an hour now, but she wasn't any closer to figuring it out. “She's had a lot more of them than everyone but me, and the ones she consumed belonged to some powerful people. Mine were almost all from low-level fighters.”

Jennifer stepped over a puddle and ignored the wet walls and dank odor. “But I didn't get smarter afterward. I grew stronger.”

Jennifer paused by the molding stool that now sat in an inch of mud. “There has to be a way to figure this out and duplicate it.”

She didn't bother turning on any of the solar powered lights that were still attached down here. When they had a free work crew, they would reclaim all these wires and use them aboveground in the population areas. These tunnels wouldn't be used for a long time now that the weather was ruining the work they'd done.

A step splashed behind her.

Jennifer frowned. “I'm thinking here!”

Nature chuckled.

Jennifer turned, hand coming up to her hip. “Don’t you have better places to be?”

Nature smiled. “We’re both lonely. There’s no harm in communicating.”

“Tell that to anyone who catches us.”

Nature stuck her leg into the mud and began pulling nutrients into her body. “I have an answer to your question.”

Jennifer grunted. “Yeah, I thought you would.”

Nature understood why the girl had come down here. “Help me and I’ll give you any information you desire.”

Jennifer stared coldly. “I’ll figure it out on my own eventually. I may not be a genius like her, but I’m still smarter than you.”

Nature tried to forge another bond. “She views the world as a chessboard now. She plays it ruthlessly, sacrificing pawns without pity.”

“Chess!” Jennifer smacked her head lightly. “I should have known.”

Nature put her hands into the walls, sinking them deep into the damp earth as she fed. It was always easiest to feast when the ground had been watered. “She’s outplayed herself more than once. That’s why so many people have died.”

“Stop.” Jennifer sat on the stool. “You can’t turn me against her.”

Nature didn’t bother giving the same answer as before. She moved them to the next level. “Let Angela take back over everything. She’ll overwork

herself and go into labor too early. Then it will all be yours.”

Rain beat heavily on the ground above them, drowning out all the other noises of island life.

“Until she recovers.”

“We’ll deal with that headache then.”

“We.” Jennifer glared. “You’ll run and hide again and I’ll be left to face her alone!”

Nature understood Jennifer was scared of Angela. A true bond flew between them this time. “We could do it together. All you have to do is help me and everything you desire shall be yours.”

“You don’t know my desires. You only care about your own.”

Nature had been watching Jennifer closely. “Family. Power. Invincible. Immortal.”

Jennifer had gone still and quiet, mind blasting those words. *My family could be protected forever. I’d have so much power that I’d be invincible. I could live forever. Damn.*

Nature waited, letting human greed work in her favor. She was already tired of the girl’s whining. Jennifer had another huge shock coming when she delivered her offspring. *But only if she gets very lucky and Angela isn’t as strong anymore when this all plays out.*

Jennifer’s head snapped up. “You’re a liar. Even if I do what you want, you wouldn’t gift me those things because you can’t. If you had the ability to share it, you would have already done so with humans in the past.”

“I have never needed to make deals like these until now.”

Jennifer shook her head, standing. “I don’t believe a word you say.”

She headed for the nearest hatch.

Nature tried to find a way to prove her claims. “I’ll...heal one of your people! That will be proof that I can share.”

Jennifer kept walking. “Even if I believed that, I know it won’t be free. I’m not making a deal with you.”

“Call it a good faith gesture.”

Jennifer was feeling rough about her relationship with the camp. She also hated not being able to help their people. She paused. “It won’t cost anything?”

“No.”

Jennifer sighed, unable to pass up the offer. “If you do that, I’d have to consider your deal. I’m not saying I’d take it, just that I would consider it.”

Nature frowned suddenly. “Are you tricking me?”

Jennifer shrugged. “I’m trying to think like the boss.”

Nature chuckled. “You’re young; you’ll get better with more experience.”

“Which I won’t get because she’s back in charge now.” Jennifer’s anger rose up hot enough to smother her. “Go away. I’m thinking here!”

Nature vanished.

Chapter Twenty-One

I Owe You

1

“I heard he’s the leader of the United Nations now.”

“That was just a trick so they could access the computers and locks in the lab.”

“Angela said there are no more working labs in the world now. That was the last one.”

“Some people believe she’s going to move the mission men into the tunnels because they’re having so much trouble adjusting to being around everyone.”

“Have you seen how scarred they are? It might be a good idea for them to be separated from us for a while. They’re dangerous.”

The group of normal camp members were gathered in the kitchenette of the bunkhouse, sharing companionship while the storm blew things around outside.

Thunder cracked loudly overhead; everyone jumped, but it didn’t stop the gossip.

“They’re Eagles. They’re supposed to be dangerous.”

“Their kids are dangerous, too. Those twins of his are special. The boy was hosting the therapy session!”

“That’s nothing compared to the girl. She has an invisible shield now!”

“What about the rapist?”

“Gabe and Peter both wanted Tonya and now they’re dead. Maybe she’ll do the same with Rico and Tobias.”

“Why would she?”

“It keeps Kenn happy with Tonya and off the boss’s ankle.”

“Nope. It would let her keep studying his change of heart. He went from a nasty person to one of the most upstanding men in camp. She doesn’t want anything to interfere in that experiment, not even the justice he deserves.”

“I just want to know what she’s going to do with two XOs.”

“Running this camp is a big job. There’s enough work for both of them.”

The bunkhouse was full of people avoiding the storm while catching up on gossip. It was warm and dusty, with drenched, dirty mats throughout the first floor. Many of the Eagles were out in the rain, securing animals and projects. Others, like Trent and Thomas, were in here helping the den mothers and flirting with them in hopes of being chosen as a relief source.

“I don’t care what anyone says, that other girl is guilty. We’ve seen how ruthless the kids can be.”

“We’ve also seen how helpful the kids can be.” Parker joined the group in the kitchen. “I don’t think we should be discussing it.”

He frowned at Ralph before the man could continue to spread stories. “Get the rest of the snacks put out.”

Ralph glared at Parker. The man was upstanding and self-righteous. It was nauseating.

Parker shrugged. “You can wait for the enforcer to zap you.”

Ralph and the others did what they were told while casting disapproval at Parker.

Parker didn’t care about their displeasure. He didn’t want the descendants to hear them gossiping and think there was another problem with the normals.

“Don’t get crumbs on my suit!”

Ralph’s snap drew Parker’s attention again. He and all the church men were still in their service clothes and looking out of place among the camp members who were in jeans and shorts. Parker understood they needed to blend in so people wouldn’t be so suspicious of them, but there was no way the other church members were going to change. They liked being spiffy.

Parker went out to mingle with the camp. He smiled at Candy as he went by, wishing there was something to be done for her. Praying didn’t seem like enough.

Lying in a cot near the kitchen, Candy rubbed her chest through her shirt, wincing at the dull throb.

She was lightheaded and sweating again. The medics weren't sure if that reaction was because of the cancer or because of her anxiety. Candy believed it was both. She'd never been this scared.

Thunder cracked again, making most people jump and then laugh at the scare.

Candy didn't. She wiped sweat from her face and wished for the old world. *I would have been in chemotherapy right now. Damn the war!*

Conner clasped her hand, but he didn't transfer energy to her this time or even a mood spell. Angela's order not to had been clear, but he was still drained anyway. The descendants weren't doing recharges right now. There was too much going on to take time out for that.

It won't work anyway. Conner was frustrated. They had massive power in this camp and still couldn't heal Candy.

Candy smiled at him and turned her attention back to the book he was reading to her.

Around the bunkhouse, people were settling in for the night and for the storm. It was loud out there, but dry and sturdy in here, though mud tracks were all over the floor. Daryl and his helpers had done a wonderful job on the bunkhouse.

On the other side of Candy and Conner, Daryl and Brittani were playing Uno at a card table that had been put over her legs. Her huge stomach stuck out over both sides of her lap and rested against the table. Her stringy hair hung over her face, hiding her green skin. Her stomach was constantly upset, even

with the pills Tonya had given her for that. Brittani refused to take more than one a day in case it was bad for the babies; they only offered a little help anyway. Even curling her thumb into her palm only bought a few minutes of peace at a time.

Daryl kept his attention on the cards. If he looked at his wife, he would break down again and beg her to change her mind.

“Bucket!”

Daryl lifted the metal bucket to Brittani’s mouth right as she vomited. He didn’t notice the smell. His nose was numb to it now.

People glanced away, grimacing and full of sympathy.

Brittani choked back tears and concentrated on settling her stomach. She’d never been so miserable. *But it’s worth it. I want my babies!*

Daryl used what little energy he had left to help relax her stomach and get her to stop retching so it didn’t send her into labor again. Marc was upstairs, loudly scolding a couple of the kids who had gone on the lab run with them, but Daryl was terrified that the next time his wife went into labor even Marc’s power wouldn’t be able to stop it.

“Has anyone seen Morgan?” Madison moved through the hundreds of people, steeling herself to their terse denials and suspicious glances. *Stop staring at me!*

Madison hurried to the next group, wishing she had done this when most people were working.

Madison glared toward Neil as he came down the steps with his twins. They were going to take a walk in the rain to determine if that was good enough to settle their little stomachs. Madison felt bad for his babies; she was pissed at Neil. *But it can wait.*

Neil caught her thought and ignored it. He'd removed the guard on Madison, but he hadn't given her an apology and he wasn't going to. It was standard procedure to put a guard on people who were acting suspiciously. In Madison's case, she was an introvert who only liked animals. Until that changed, he and Samantha would still avoid her.

Madison went by the church women who were discussing rules in the Bible. Sadie's request for Adrian to be punished for cheating had resulted in a consult among the religious females. They wanted the same thing. They were trying to find something in the Bible that might convince Angela to implement such a law. Interestingly, the men from the church group were in the kitchen, refusing to take part.

Madison hurried toward the front door. The church group had tried to bring her into their fold multiple times, but Madison wasn't comfortable with them either. *I don't know why I'm like this. I wish they could see into my mind and understand it's not personal.*

Madison eyed their long dresses and sweaters in annoyance as she went by. *Why do women always*

have to be covered up? It's hot in here. They have to be uncomfortable.

That was part of why their attempts to bring her in had failed. *I don't think God really cares if my ankles are showing. He has bigger concerns.*

Ray looked up as Madison went by, catching her thoughts. He remembered his first days in Safe Haven, where he had been terrified that someone would discover his sexual preference. At the same time, he'd longed to be one of them in every way. Madison had that feeling about her.

Grant jokingly smacked Ray's arm. "Over here, Sailor!"

Ray smirked. "That's not the ass I'm interested in."

Grant busted out laughing at the crudeness. Ray hardly ever made jokes like that and especially not in public. "Answer my question. Indoor or outdoor wedding?"

"Outdoor." Ray assumed that would be easiest on everyone.

As soon as Grant began asking the next question, Ray's mind faded again. *Something's going on with Kenn.*

Ray had expected Kenn to be punished for the fight with Tobias. Finding out Angela had denied it even happened had been a shock, but Ray didn't believe that was the problem. He also didn't think it was because Rico was still stalking Tonya. That closed-off man was her guard right now while she was in the barn doing her usual workout.

Kenn was at the jail, connecting the cameras to the battery sources while questioning Missy for his investigation. Everything appeared normal on the outside, but Ray knew there was a big problem. *I'll talk to him about it later.*

“Would you rather do this later?”

Ray heard Grant's disappointment and quickly apologized. “I'm sorry. I'm just listening to the weather. Not paying attention to things like that caused a lot of our problems on the submarine.”

Grant was immediately sympathetic, as were other people who heard the comment. Most of the camp held deep sympathy for the mission men and the rescue team.

It was part of why Grant hadn't asked to be a descendant yet, but it wasn't the big reason. Grant wasn't sure he could match those men and women now and he didn't want to. *The normals have to be protected. If I change, I can't represent them anymore.* “I don't think we have any plastic flowers left and I don't think we're going to have time to grow any between now and then. Once they get those garden beds together, I'm pretty sure the boss is going to plant food. How do you feel about pictures of flowers?”

“That's a great idea.” Ray tried not to feel bad that the garden beds still hadn't been assembled. He wanted to give farming another try, but not the engineering side of it. *Putting stuff together isn't my forte.*

“Maybe we can ask Neil to do a couple of drawings for us and then just place them around the altar.”

Ray nodded distractedly while Grant wrote it down. He glanced over at the small family who was playing Scrabble in the corner.

Zack placed his tiles on the board. “Dangerous! That’s a double word score for 39 points.”

They’d been playing for hours now while waiting for the storm to abate. Even Timmy was here, though he was watching the brawlers every time they went by on a patrol or came in for a break from the rain. Zack hoped they weren’t picking on his son.

While Leeann recorded the score, Zack made a quick motion using Eagle code. *Is everything okay?*

Ray liked it that Zack was keeping track of him and everyone else. He motioned. *Five-by.*

Zack knew that wasn’t the truth, but he also knew Ray didn’t want to talk about it in front of everyone. He waited for Mike to play a word on the board while scanning the other side of the bunkhouse. Lisa, Jack, and Dace had been reassigned to cots near the bathroom so caring for Dace was easier. He had a catheter and a constant bedpan for waste; it was a smelly pain every time he needed to be changed, but Zack hadn’t heard either of his caregivers complain. Lisa and Jack were taking good care of the comatose man. They wore matching exhaustion and determination. Lying between them, Dace looked like an angel.

Lisa felt eyes on them, but she didn't try to see who it was. She was reading a comic book to Dace in hopes that he would be able to hear her voice. She had remembered stories of loved ones reaching patients this way.

Jack was in the cot next to them until it was his turn, but he wasn't asleep. He was waiting on Angela to return to the bunkhouse and fulfill her end of the deal. He felt a little bad for ambushing her with the request, but he would do anything for his brother.

Jack caught Lisa's attention as she came to the end of the page. "There's something I need to tell you."

Lisa gestured. "I'm all ears."

Jack knew a lot of people were fed up with Lisa's pushy attitude, but she hadn't acted that way toward him at all. She was only like that when it came to Dace. It made Jack like her more, but it also made him feel guilty because he hadn't told her the truth. "Dace is my little brother. I'm sorry I didn't tell you that sooner."

Lisa chuckled. "I already guessed there was a blood connection somewhere. You have the same nose and the same quiet, reliable personality."

Jack wondered what had happened to change Dace. "He used to be wild. All he wanted was adventure."

Lisa made a face. "He got that on our run and then some." Lisa reluctantly made an offer. "Do you want to see what happened?"

Jack sat up on the cot, relieved that she had finally offered. He hadn't asked because it seemed like an intrusion and he hadn't wanted to break the peace between them. "Just the stuff you feel okay showing me."

He already knew she had gotten in trouble on the submarine. He didn't want to remind her or anyone else of it.

"Do you need to touch my hand or something?"

Jack's heart thumped in warning. "No. Just let your mental guard down and concentrate on what you want me to see."

All around the bunkhouse, descendants stopped what they were doing and observed. Those who hadn't been on the run were curious about everything.

As soon as Lisa got to the part where Dace had been swallowed by the island and then plunged into the ocean, many of them tuned it out, not wanting the nightmares that the returning teams already had. Many of the stories they had returned with were outlandish, but all of the memories matched up. They weren't lying. They'd been through hell.

2

Upstairs, Marc finished his speech and then scanned the two children to see if it had taken effect.

Cate glared defiantly with her arms crossed over her little chest.

Bret refused to meet Marc's eyes.

Marc sighed. It was time to get serious. “Let me put it this way. If you help Missy escape from jail, you have to go with her. Neither one of you will ever be allowed in Safe Haven again. There’s also a chance the enforcer will be sent to hunt you. It would be a very serious crime.”

Neither of the kids responded.

Marc felt how little they were paying attention. It was obvious they were going to do what they thought was best if Missy was found guilty.

The upstairs had been outfitted with furniture and shelves now. Most of the mission men were here, trying to rest through the noise of the storm and the curiosity of the people below who were listening for anything that carried downstairs. They didn’t help Marc scold the kids, but they also didn’t think he was going to win this battle.

The kids were muddy and angry. They’d been running through the rain to spend time with Missy at the jail. They’d taken food trays and clothes to the family now living in the jailhouse, too, but Marc was sure Angela was going to put a stop to that soon. They couldn’t keep track of supplies if everyone was allowed to get into them whenever they wanted, but more than that, these two had guard shifts to cover and school lessons to attend.

Marc tried the only thing he had left. “I’ll talk to the alpha about it.”

Bret and Cate immediately began promising they wouldn’t do anything wrong.

Marc hid a smile. “Go help the den mothers with any chores they need until the snacks are ready.”

Cate and Bret hurried out of Marc’s sight.

Thunder cracked again, making the mission men flinch. They didn’t laugh like those on the first floor did. Jump scares weren’t funny to them anymore.

Rain hit the roof in hard blows, echoing loudly. It was worse on this top floor.

Marc heard familiar boots coming up the stairs and sighed. He could already tell by the determined stride that the person wasn’t going to be stalled or denied without making a scene. Marc sat on the cot and crossed his arms awkwardly over his chest, now feeling like Cate. “What do you want?”

Adrian paused at the defensive tone. Then he came over to the cot and dropped into the chair next to it. “I want to talk to you about Angela.”

Marc waited, eyes flickering dangerously. He was already on the edge of his patience due to the wild storm that was now rattling the walls and making the lights flicker.

“The baby went quiet.”

“That’s normal.” Marc eyed Adrian’s neat clothes and freshly washed hair in contempt. Adrian wasn’t having trouble fitting back in.

“It means there’s only a month left Marc, and you’re not going to be here for it.” Adrian braced to be beaten on even as he spoke his mind. “If you leave her alone for that, you’ll lose her. I personally think you should go, just give her a divorce first.

Then you can both move on and try to find happiness elsewhere.”

Marc didn't rise to the bait despite being low on patience. He'd already considered that option, but there was no way he could do it. “Get out of here.”

Adrian had expected a much firmer defense. He pushed harder. “I love her enough to stay with her. Do the right thing and let her go!”

“Even if I didn't want her, I still wouldn't give her to you.”

Adrian lifted his chin. “The camp is slowly accepting me back in. Even Neil forgave me.”

Marc glared. “That's because you aren't chasing his wife!”

“You can't keep leaving her every time you get a wild hair up your ass. She's worth more than that!”

Marc was surprised that Adrian was coming at him so openly and not caring if anyone heard. The conversations in the main bunkroom had all stopped. Descendants and normals alike had turned toward the stairs to listen. “Where is this coming from?” The last Marc had heard Adrian was getting ready to settle down with Piper.

“It's coming from her!” Adrian groaned. “I can't take her misery, Marc. Either stay here with her or let her go. Act like a man for the first time in your relationship!”

Marc was starting to get pissed. He stood up.

Adrian flinched, hands coming up in defense.

Marc mocked him. “You'll never be man enough for her.”

Adrian fired right back. “Neither will you!”

Marc suddenly realized Adrian was intentionally winding him up. His byzan mind ran days ahead. “Is it because of the matchups that are coming?”

Adrian blew out a snort of derision. “Nobody cares about the damn tiger anymore. Do the right thing!”

“Why do you care?” Marc gestured unhappily, “I’ll be 1,000 miles away and you’ll be the one bonding with her, caring for her. What does it matter if I make it official?”

“It matters because she has honor. It’s wrong of you to take off and leave her, but it’s even worse to leave her hanging like you did all the time when you guys were kids. Stop hurting her. Let her go!” Adrian headed for the stairs while throwing one more warning over his shoulder. “If you miss the birth of the baby, Marc, you might as well stay gone. That came straight from *her* mouth.”

It bothered Marc to hear that, mostly because if that was what she was saying aloud, then what she was thinking had to be worse. He laid down on the cot. “I’ve made my choice. There’s no going back on it now.”

Greg had been in his cot for hours, contemplating the future while trying to block out the storm. “You really can change your mind.”

Greg didn’t know why Adrian was pushing Marc so hard, but he was positive it had come from the boss. It had the feel of Angela all over it. “He’s

right about the divorce. If you're going to abandon her yet again, at least have the decency to let her move on."

Both of them flashed to the matchup on Howland Island where Greg had revealed his true feelings about Marc, blaming him for almost everything Angela had suffered.

Greg got up and walked down the steps. *I need a therapy session.*

Unlike Adrian's remarks, Greg's simple comment got under Marc's skin. He rose from the cot and strapped his gun belt on. He went downstairs, walking by silent, disapproving camp members to reach the main exit. As soon as he was outside, conversations resumed; he was the main topic.

"Well, that was awkward."

Lisa nodded at the comment. "I hope he makes the right choice. Angela deserves to be happy, and he really is the only one she wants."

"I'm not so sure about that."

For a moment, Lisa didn't recognize the voice. Then she glanced down to find Dace's eyes wide open and staring at her.

Dace smiled. "I've always thought Adrian was a good match for the boss."

Jack gawked. "Dace?"

Dace stared between them now with confusion starting to rise in his mind. "Why does my throat hurt so much?"

Lisa shrieked and hugged him, dropping the book and drawing attention from everyone. “Dace!”

Dace looked at Jack over her shoulder. “Is she my girlfriend?”

Jack gently pulled Lisa back by the shoulder. “What do you remember? Do you know who you are?”

Dace yawned and then frowned deeply. “I can’t move my legs.”

Lisa saw the panic start to come into Dace’s eyes. She hugged him again. “It’s okay. We’ll help you learn how to do everything again now that you’re awake.”

Dace tried to sit up, but his body wouldn’t obey his commands. He only had his mouth to use. “Let go of me!”

Lisa flinched as if he’d slapped her. “I’m sorry. I’m just so happy that you’re awake!”

Dace looked at his brother again. “Somebody better tell me what the hell’s going on right now!”

“What are you talking about, bro?”

Dace nodded toward Lisa with a weak gesture. “She’s acting like my girlfriend, and I don’t even know who the hell she is. Someone better fill me in right now!”

Lisa’s joy shattered. “He doesn’t know who I am.”

Tonya didn't stop doing pushups as Adrian entered the barn. "What's going on over there?"

Adrian pulled the door shut, frowning at the man in the loft. "Dace woke up."

Tonya paused. "Really? That's awesome!" She stood up.

"Morgan and Terry have it covered."

Tonya didn't feel left out. She was glad for the break. She used her shirt to wipe away some of the sweat.

Tonya's fiery hair was in a wild bun. Her clothes were damp from sweat while tiny trickles ran down her chest and arms. Adrian and Rico both found it sexy, though only one of them wanted to give her a gentle shower and put her into his bed.

Thunder rumbled, shaking the ground and the barn. Tonya ignored it. The barn was the only dry place in town right now. The rebuilt version had included drainage ditches around it that were keeping the water out. The rest of the town had inches of water running over all the paths and walkways.

Adrian grimaced, wishing the storm was over. He wasn't fitting in as well as Marc thought he was. He just put on a better act.

Adrian joined her in the center of the cleared space. "Mind if I tag along?"

Tonya grunted as she dropped back to the floor to resume her workout. "It's a free country."

Adrian grimaced again instead of chuckling at her joke. *I miss America.*

Tonya blew out steady breaths as she pushed her body. “Maybe you should go on Jayda’s run.”

Adrian began the pushups, hating how his arms immediately protested. “I might.”

Tonya snorted. “Yeah, right. You aren’t leaving Angela alone here.”

Adrian tried to ignore the pain. “Greg’s probably staying. She won’t be alone.”

“Whatever.” Tonya slowed to let him match her speed. She could see he was already having trouble. “What’s on your mind?”

“Marc.” Adrian felt Rico start paying attention to more than just Tonya’s body going up and down. “I need your help with him.”

Tonya laughed. “Like I’d ever side with you over Marc.”

“Would you side with the boss over him?”

Tonya grunted, arms throbbing. “In a heartbeat.” She stopped and drew in deep breaths, waiting for him to get to the point.

Adrian reached a 20 count and stood up, unable to take more than that at one time yet. “She wants him to stay. He’s not going to do it on his own.”

Tonya resumed her pushups. “You think a medic could ground him.”

“I’m wondering if that would work.”

“Why ask me?”

Adrian glared toward her guard. “I’m really not.”

Rico understood he was supposed to prove his loyalty to the boss by helping give her what she

wanted. He turned to eye the darkness around the barn through the window.

Adrian wasn't surprised. He turned back to Tonya. "Ask Kenn about it for me if you see him first?"

"Will do." Tonya reached 100 and fell over, groaning. "Come on, body. We're only half way through!"

Adrian studied her, seeing a much stronger body and a very defensive mind. "I owe you."

"Yes."

"When you need it, I'll be there for you."

Tonya tried not to feel safer and failed. She sighed, shutting her eyes as sweat rolled over her neck. "You're thinking too small. Don't worry about grounding Marc. Ground the entire trip."

Adrian grinned. "Brilliant."

"Yeah." Tonya rolled back over and forced her shaking arms to lower her to the ground again. "Go away or get down here with me."

Adrian hurried out of the barn.

Tonya laughed.

Rico came down the steps, but he kept plenty of space between them. "Why did you do that?"

"She's the alpha. It's what she wants."

"Marcus can't stay because he is not the leader here." Rico already knew what Marc's problem was. *All Reichers suffer that flaw.*

"He could be, but he refuses to commit to it. Maybe a talk from his uncle could help that along."

"Why would I help him? He hates me."

Tonya snorted. “Marc only hates two people. One of them just left. The other is going to kill you at some point. Do yourself a favor and get in good with the boss. She’s the only one who can save your life.”

“I do not make deals with demons!”

Tonya stopped her workout and looked up at him with glowing eyes. “Of course, you do. All Reichers also suffer that flaw.”

Rico didn’t know what to say. He hadn’t even felt her reading his thoughts.

“I’m bad news, Rico. So are you.”

“We’re perfect together.”

Tonya sighed. “Yeah.”

Rico went back up the stairs as Tonya resumed her pushups.

4

“Keep an eye on those cords. Touch them occasionally. If they’re hot, unplug it all and I’ll redo it tomorrow.”

“We’ll watch for trouble.” Shawn handed Kenn the toolkit. He’d been holding it while Kenn attached the camera cords to the battery packs. The jailhouse was fully wired now and brightly lit. There was also a lock on the front that was activated from the inside.

Shawn stank. He hadn’t left for a shower since Missy had been arrested. Kenn breathed through his mouth to avoid the odor. It reminded him of how

bad Shawn had gotten on the submarine. Kenn hoped it didn't go that far this time.

Selina was also stinky and rumped, though she looked better than Shawn did. Kenn fought the urge to tell them both to go stand in the rain for a while.

Bright lightning flashed outside the windows, making Kenn's heart thump. The storm wasn't letting up. He was dreading running through it to get to his next stop. He was glad the jailhouse had been built on a hillside. It kept the rainwater out, though muddy prints were all over the floor. This building didn't have rugs for people to wipe their feet.

"You won't have a guard overnight." Kenn tucked the toolkit into his jacket pocket. He felt Shawn and Selina exchange glances behind his back.

Kenn gathered up the rest of the mess, tossing the cords into the recycling bucket he was using for spare parts. "If you run, the boss has already picked a hunting crew."

Shawn wasn't surprised. "We won't run."

"You're thinking about it." Kenn wasn't in the mood to sugarcoat anything. "It will get you killed."

"Yeah." Shawn shook his head at Selina when she tried to excuse it. "He's like the boss. He knows bullshit when he smells it."

Kenn grunted. "Then why are you hiding shit from me?"

Shawn had kept his mind closed the entire time Kenn had been here working. "She's just a little girl."

Kenn glanced into Missy's cell. She had finally stopped crying, but she'd been silent and her mind was full of Neil's white clouds. It didn't look good. "She did it. You know it and you're trying to find a way out of it for her."

Kenn ignored Selina's glare and Shawn's immediate defense. "You've forgotten something important. The boss owes you. There's a favor to be called in."

Selina's face fell. "I tried that, mate. She wouldn't go for it."

"She doesn't owe *you* enough to cover this, not like she does Shawn." Kenn took the stool and went around the confused woman. He put it in front of the cell and sat. "Let's get this over with, kid. I'm tired, I missed dinner, and there's a stalker watching over my fiancé right now. I'm not in the mood."

"Leave her alone!"

"Control your woman, Shawn, or I'll do it for you."

Shawn grabbed Selina's arm and pulled her over to the desk. His mind was spinning furiously through Kenn's advice. "What do I say?" Shawn had never tried to blackmail or guilt the boss into anything.

Kenn focused on Missy. "The truth. She owes you for what you went through in that lab."

Missy sat up and crossed her arms over her chest. "Pam deserved it."

"I agree." Kenn hadn't liked Pam since her big mistake. "Tell me where you went last night."

“The bathroom.”

Shawn relaxed. “I cleaned her shoes when we all came out of the bunkhouse. I didn’t want her to get in trouble for tracking in mud.”

“Stop lying to me!” Kenn really was at the end of his patience. “You cleaned them so she wouldn’t get in trouble for roaming.”

Shawn dropped his head. “Yeah. But she only went to the bathroom.”

“So she says.” Kenn took a crumbled paper from his pocket. “This isn’t a normal drawing.”

Missy stared at the caricature she’d drawn of Pam. “It was just to give her a bad dream.”

Kenn had already verified that with the other kids. “Tear it up.” He put it through the bars.

Missy snatched it and began ripping up the drawing.

Selina was confused. “She’s dead, mate. Why does that matter now?”

Shawn was tense again. “It might stop her soul from finding peace. Paper charms and spells are very specific and they last until the paper has been destroyed by the one who made it.”

Missy dropped the pieces into the garbage can that Kenn held out. Then she struck the match he gave her and dropped it in, too.

The papers flamed briefly and then went out, leaving thin smoke in the air.

Kenn stared at the sullen child. “Why did you kill Pam?”

“People die all the time.” Missy glared. “Some of them deserve it more than the others.”

“I need an answer or you’re not getting out of here.”

Missy laid back down and shut her lids. Clouds came into her mind.

Kenn scowled. “That’s a clear sign of guilt.”

“Leave me alone!”

Kenn knew he wasn’t going to get real information from Missy unless he ripped her mind apart and Angela had told him not to do that yet. Kenn got up and walked toward the exit. He flashed a quick glance at Shawn as he went out. The team hive connection lit up. *You’ll ruin all of your lives if you run. The boss will remove all three of you.*

Shawn shut and locked the door behind Kenn, but he didn’t answer.

Missy spoke up firmly. “I’m not running away and you’re not threatening the alpha. This is our home; she’s our leader.”

Missy pulled the thin blanket over her legs. “Now go to sleep. It’s been a long day.”

Both adults were relieved. They got settled for bed in the cell across from her, feeling a little better.

Missy kept clouds in her mind until she fell asleep. Then she dreamed about them.

Chapter Twenty-Two
My Husband

1

“Welcome back to the land of the living.” Morgan grinned at Dace, hoping he didn’t get offended by the joke.

Dace yawned and smiled. “Thanks.”

Morgan began storing his equipment in his medical bag.

“What’s wrong with him? Why doesn’t he remember me?” Lisa was thrilled that Dace had woken up, but the amnesia was scary and hurtful.

Morgan shrugged. “We’ll do more research, but I think it’s probably normal for coma patients to have gaps in their memory. Hopefully, it will fill in on its own.”

The bunkhouse was a lot quieter now as people tried to hear what the medics were saying. It was still hard because the storm was now producing heavy downpours and howling wind.

Morgan snapped his medical bag shut and regarded Terry. “Is there anything else you want me to do before I crash?”

Terry took the stethoscope out of his ears and left it hanging around his neck. He’d listened to Dace’s lungs and his stomach. It sounded like his

body was resuming normal functions. “Not tonight. I’ll remove his catheter tomorrow. We’ll keep a close eye on him for a while, but everything seems normal.”

“Normal! He can’t walk and half of his memory is gone!” Lisa looked around angrily. “Where’s the boss? I want her to check him out.”

Morgan frowned. “The boss is doing therapy sessions right now. Calm down.”

“But he doesn’t have his memory!”

Terry frowned at her this time. “Just be glad that he’s awake.”

“I am!”

Morgan tried to offer comfort. “Spend some time talking to him and maybe that will help trigger his memory. We’ll do research to find out how to help him regain use of his legs.”

Lisa didn’t have a choice but to do as they said. She sat down in the chair next to Dace and got set to remind him of all the things he’d forgotten.

Dace yawned again. “Let’s work on that later, huh? I’m beat.”

Lisa felt the coldness in his reply. She fought tears as she stood up. “We’ll do it whenever you’re ready.”

She hurried toward the bathroom to keep him from seeing how upset she was.

Dace stared at his brother. “I don’t understand how we can have such a close relationship, but I don’t remember her. I remember you. I remember

the rescue. I even remember being attacked on the sub. Why is everything else a blank?"

Jack didn't have an answer for that any more than the medics did. He fidgeted with the small bandage on his hand from where Molly had accidentally hit him with the hammer. "The human body is an amazing, complex creation, bro. Try not to worry about it. We'll figure it out."

Jack was happy his brother had woken up, though the amnesia was an obvious sign that there was still a problem in Dace's mind. *I owe Angela big time for this.* Jack still hadn't figured out what Angela was demanding as payment, but he didn't care. *I'm willing to pay whatever price she wants.*

Jack had once believed he wanted to live under magic rules so he would be able to do whatever he wanted, but being away from his brother for a month had convinced Jack that he wanted a happy family and a solid future in this camp more than he wanted the freedom to be wild. "Try to be nice to Lisa if you can. She cares deeply for you."

"Yeah. Is it okay for me to take a nap?" Dace was terrified of going to sleep and not waking up.

"As far as I know, yes." There was no way they could keep Dace awake indefinitely. Terry didn't want to stress the man out even more than he already was. "We'll probably wake you up a lot over the next couple of days just to be sure."

"I can live with that." Dace yawned again. His eyes closed.

Jack reached out and took his brother's hand.

Dace's eyes flew open. "How long was I out this time?" He grinned to show he was joking.

Jack laughed while the medics breathed a sigh of relief. "That's the little brother I hated."

Morgan left the brothers there and walked toward the kitchen area to wash up.

Madison saw Morgan was free and joined him at the sink. "Do you have a minute?"

Morgan soaped his hands. "What's up?" He was aware of Madison's discomfort. She didn't like being stared at and everyone had just turned in their direction to see what she wanted.

Madison forced her tongue to work while wiping sweaty palms down her pants. "I just wanted to say thank you. It was really nice of you to help us out that way even though we weren't supposed to trade shifts."

People approved and kept listening.

Morgan waved it off. "It's how it should be handled. Just don't do it again."

"I won't." Madison left him alone, feeling better now that she had forced herself to do that. She hadn't gotten the courage yet to talk to Jennifer about the trading shifts rule. She was starting to see that Angela was right about it, and she was terrified of Jennifer. She'd mostly decided to let it go so she didn't have to deal with the hard-to-like girl.

Morgan thought about calling Madison back to ask why she was so uncomfortable around people and then decided to let it go for a different time. Madison wasn't the only one suffering from

extreme shyness in their camp, though she was the only one who made people nervous because of it. Morgan didn't like it that she was being viewed as if she were carrying on the legacy of their other vets.

Morgan scanned the bunkhouse, wondering where Jennifer was. Rain was coming down heavily outside, but a number of people weren't here, including their enforcer. Now that he'd had time to cool off, Morgan was feeling bad about yelling at her in front of everyone. *I should have handled that better.*

Morgan headed for the exit, grabbing one of the yellow community property rain slickers off the long row of hooks. He avoided the red raincoats. When water rolled off them it looked like blood.

Morgan assumed Jennifer was avoiding everyone; he was certain his outburst was partly responsible. *I should talk to her after I handle Harry's burn box.* He'd put it in his kit when it was delivered, but he hadn't opened it yet. He was a little scared of what might be in there.

Morgan slipped out into the rain and quickly shut the door. He hadn't tried to keep Jennifer in line at all while the teams were gone, but it hadn't just been because of his feelings for her. Leadership in this camp was hard, no matter who it was. He hadn't wanted to add to her stress levels while Kyle was gone.

Morgan forced himself to finish that. *I also didn't want her to develop bad feelings for me. I definitely deserve the boss's anger.*

Morgan walked toward the closest fire can, leaving thick prints in the mud as he went. *I hope it stops raining soon. We've never had to deal with a flood. We're not ready for that.*

2

“None of us were ready for that, but now that we’re in the bunkhouse, we’ll do the best we can. Don’t be afraid to take time away. Even though this shack obviously isn’t big enough, there are other places we can go when we’re feeling the need for privacy.”

The people standing around the table in Adrian’s shack grunted in agreement. They were all crowded under the small roof to avoid the rain, but it was still hitting the open frame and splashing in. The only consolation was that the thunder and lightning were settling down now, but it was still producing downpours that were turning the paths into muddy slip-n-slides.

It was worth it to escape the large gathering in the bunkhouse. Angela had felt their need. It matched her own. She had to spend time with people who understood why her mind was so unreliable during this weather. Angela glanced around the group. “Would anyone else like to get something off their chest or make a request?”

Angela had made that offer when they first arrived, but none of the men and women here had asked her for anything, unlike the Safe Haven camp

members. Her team never tried to take advantage of her. Angela was grateful for them.

Jayda sighed. “I know you’re pissed at me that Marc is going along for my run, but I need him. I can’t tell him no.”

Angela had gotten to vent about that. She wasn’t upset with Jayda anymore. “I can’t tell him no either and your run will go better with him along.” Angela waved it off when Jayda started to apologize. “He’s a grown man who will make his own choices. You and I are fine.”

Angela’s eyes slid to Biff. “At least we will be once you settle your domestic problems.”

Jayda flushed. “It is settled as far as I’m concerned. Biff and I are still dating. Why does it need to be more than that?”

Biff refused to answer. He was horribly hurt.

Angela sighed. “It doesn’t, for you. Biff wants the happily-ever-after we were all sold on as kids. If you can’t give that to him, then move on and let someone else try.”

“I’ll think about it.” But Jayda wasn’t going to change her mind. *The hell I went through before the war turned me against marriage forever. There’s absolutely nothing he can do or say that will make me change my mind.*

The team hive connection transmitted that to everyone, including Biff.

Jayda got up and went out into the rain. “Good night.”

Despite being upset, Biff got up and followed her so she wouldn't be alone in the jungle after dark.

Angela glanced around at the other people. They'd spent hours talking about things that had happened on the run and the things they wanted from the future. It had been good progress for some of them. "Anyone else?"

Gus and Trent walked to the exit at the same time, shaking their heads.

"I'm better now, thank you."

"See you at the bunkhouse, Boss."

The two men hurried off into the pouring rain, grinning and laughing at how they were slipping in the mud. Getting things off their chests had definitely helped those two.

"Are you going to town now?" Greg took an empty chair now that there was one.

Angela denied that. "Kenn's on his way here to give me updates about the investigation."

Greg hoped Kenn had some good news. It would kill Angela to follow through with the law council's decision if Missy was found guilty.

While they were alone, Greg took the moment to see if she needed a therapy session. As far as he knew, Angela hadn't taken one since they'd been home. "Anything you'd like to get off your chest or request?"

Angela chuckled at his copy of her words. "Thank you, no."

Greg didn't push the issue. Angela was very good at hiding her feelings. He was also good at

sensing when she was doing that. He would insist later if he felt like he had to.

“I noticed you didn’t have much to say.”

Greg realized trying to give her a therapy moment was about to backfire. “I’m working through things.”

“I feel your fear.”

Greg wasn’t surprised. “I haven’t made a decision yet.”

Angela was glad to hear that. She didn’t want Greg to resign from the Eagles. She was afraid of the effect it would have on him later. “Things are going to pick up soon. You’ll have an opportunity to see how action moments are going to hit you. It’ll be better if you wait to make a choice until after that.”

“What kind of action moments?”

“The same crap we’ve been dealing with all along.” Angela refused to say more. “Kenn will be here in a minute. You can go on back.”

Greg snorted at her. “I’m not leaving you alone and you know it.”

Angela shrugged. “I’m just trying to keep Erin happy since the rest of us don’t seem to be capable of that emotion.”

“She’ll get over it.” Greg wouldn’t give up this time with Angela for anything anyway, but leaving her alone was a huge no-no the Eagles would punish him for. He didn’t even want to think about what Marc and Adrian would do to him.

Footsteps splashed toward them in the darkness.

Greg rose smoothly and spun, good hand going to his holster.

“It’s just me.” Kenn hurried up the path and got under the shelter of the shack roof. He was completely drenched; rain ran off him in tiny rivers that saturated the already wet floor.

Angela handed him the damp towel everyone had passed around when they first arrived. “I assume the cameras are working now?”

Kenn dried his face. “They are at the jail. The cameras on the cruise ship were turned off, so we don’t have footage from last night.” Kenn dried his hands next. “The skeleton crew they’ve been using on the ship are the same five people. I got them to admit they spend every night drinking and playing cards. They haven’t been doing rounds of the ship at all. Every one of them was drunk last night.”

Greg scowled. “That explains how Jennifer was able to get them to work every day. It was really a nightly party.”

“That also explains why they didn’t see the blood or hear anything.” Angela wrote it in her book. “Pass their names to Kyle and let him handle their punishments.”

“I will.” Kenn sat in the chair across from her, sending fresh water down the wooden legs. “We traced back for the last two days. The only place Pam went was to the QZ tent. She even took her meals on the ship.”

“Meals?”

Kenn grunted. “Okay, stale bar snacks. She even had a sleeping bag in one of the booths in case she was too drunk to make it back to her cabin. They haven’t been doing proper ship rounds while we’ve been gone at all. There were open lockers, trash, dust, and even a couple of weapons missing.” He didn’t mention how much it had been like being on the sub during the fog.

The fog... Kenn looked around for a green cloud as his heart pounded and fear rushed up his throat.

Angela waited for him to recover.

Kenn shook it off, but it was hard. “We’re missing a few handguns and a couple of the knives.” They hadn’t used the lockers near the camp cabins in a while now, but they hadn’t been completely emptied in case the Eagles on the ship needed to rearm themselves during a fight.

Greg perked up. “Knives?”

Kenn shut it down. “The wounds match perfectly to the Junior Eagle blade we found at the scene.”

Angela motioned. “What about her cabin?”

“Nothing but a pile of dirty clothes, some empty Vodka bottles, and a batch of odd tea she was steeping. I found drying jungle vines.”

“Maybe those were tracked in?”

“No, I mean neatly hanging on a string to dry out. There were pieces of the vines all over her brewing setup. I think she was making tea from them. I sent it to the lab, but I don’t know if Tonya can do anything with it.”

“Did you drink some of it?”

Kenn frowned. “No. I can’t do what Harry could.”

Angela didn’t respond to the upset tone. Harry had been able to push out poison. Until one of them also developed that skill, testing strange concoctions by drinking them would have to wait.

“I scoured the scenes again and found a smear on the dock. Pam made it off the ship, but she’d lost too much blood to survive. She died on the dock and the waves pulled her into the water. The incoming tide pushed her toward the beach.”

Angela made another note in her book. “Keep going.”

“Tonya is running a test on Missy’s blood for alcohol. As you know, we found two glasses on the counter near the crime scene. I won’t have the fingerprint results for a couple of days. I really do need to read through the book and run a few test cases first so I don’t mess up the evidence.” Kenn held up his beefy hand. “I’ll test on myself a few times and then probably a couple of other people before I get to it. Then Tonya will verify it. I’m sorry it won’t be sooner.”

“I’m not upset. We have to relearn to do this stuff.” Angela was just glad she’d had the foresight to gather books and research information on a wide variety of topics that included criminal justice and investigative procedures. “When she gets the results, bring them to me first. We’ll go from there.”

Kenn didn't have a problem with that. Even though he already knew better, he was still hoping the prints wouldn't match. "I gave Shawn the warning. As I left, Missy told him to forget about running, too. I don't think you'll need those guards on the jail tonight." They were at the small guard post right now, listening to the rain and keeping each other company. It was an obvious setup to see if Shawn would run.

"It's good practice for both of them."

Kenn nodded. "I agree, but I don't think Marc will be happy about it."

Angela shrugged. "He was just there checking on his twins. He made sure they have everything they need to get through tonight." Angela had sent Cate and Cody to do that duty for a number of reasons, but the biggest was that neither twin was going to sit in the bunkhouse and pretend to be happy while Missy was in jail. Cody had already been insisting on staying in the cell next to the little girl. Angela had solved that problem by sending him there as a guard.

Greg had scanned Kenn's mind for the details. "Did you really need to tell Shawn that Missy isn't safe from the camp?"

"Yes. It doesn't seem like it right now, but the camp is deeply disturbed that Pam was murdered, though not because they liked her. It makes everyone nervous to have a death in camp when there hasn't been one here for months." Angela winced at the thought of Harry and the rookies who

had gone along for the run but hadn't made it back. "Bret is quietly keeping track of that for me."

"Good. Do you need anything else?" Kenn was exhausted. He wanted to go check on Tonya and his son, read their orphans a bed time story, and then hit the rack.

"Marc and Adrian are both out roaming. You collect one and I'll collect the other."

Kenn knew without being told which one he was supposed to find and convince to return to the bunkhouse. "Do you think he's still at the jail?"

"He's standing on the beach, staring at the water near the dock." Marc was once again torturing himself over Kendle's death.

Kenn shook his head in disgust as he got up. "I should have offed her before we left the States and then he wouldn't be going through this."

Kenn moved into the rain, being careful not to fall. Every path was a potential mudslide now.

Angela slowly stood, groaning as the pressure shifted from her hips to her thighs and sent a ripple of pain through her body.

Greg automatically took her arm to help her keep her balance. He tucked the other arm into his jacket to protect his cast from getting wet. "Where's the traitor?"

Angela gestured toward the path that led to town. "In the barn."

Greg helped her out of the shack and then kept a strong grip around her arm in case she slipped. The rain quickly drenched them both.

Angela moved as fast as her large body and the environment would allow her to, not enjoying the cold shower this time. She hadn't thought to bring an umbrella along.

Neither had Greg. He added that to his mental list of things to take care of later as he escorted her down Cliff Road and through the dark jungle.

3

The dim lights in town were a welcome sight to both soaked people as they arrived. Guards on the area approved of the fact that she wasn't wandering around alone. No one had been completely sure who was with her.

Angela motioned toward the bunkhouse with her free hand. "I'm going straight to the barn. Go get changed and spend some time with Erin."

"Why are you pushing that?" Greg escorted her to the barn door. "You already know she'll get over the time I spend doing Eagle duty around you, so what's your beef?"

Angela stepped into the barn, out of the rain. "I want Erin to understand how important she is in this camp. It'll be easier for her to do that if people see you spending time together. Your stellar reputation will rub off on her with them."

Greg wasn't sure he had that good of a relationship with the camp anymore, but he was willing to take Angela's word for it. "I'll see what I

can do.” Greg headed to the bunkhouse. “Make sure Adrian escorts you back.”

“He will.”

“I will.” Adrian chuckled at their overlapping answers. He’d been standing in the shadows of the barn, watching everyone come and go while stewing on Marc. He wanted the man to leave, but he also wanted Angela to be happy. He was being pulled in two directions and hating it. *I’ll make the right choice because of her. This sucks!*

Adrian didn’t ogle her wet body, but he was aware of how her clothes were clinging to her skin, outlining the same slender body with a huge mound in front. It always amazed him how pregnancy could change a woman’s body so drastically and then give it back to them with time and hard work. “You’re beautiful.”

Angela glared.

Adrian snapped his mouth shut. He hadn’t meant to say it at all.

Angela walked toward the nearest chair to sit down. She took the light kit off her shoulders and began digging through it for a dry shirt. “You can go now.”

“Yeah, that will happen.” Adrian was curious why she had come to the barn instead of going to the bunkhouse. He went to the door and stayed there, resuming his sweeps of the dark, muddy town. It almost looked like the center of a functioning society now. It was encouraging.

Angela quickly changed her shirt and then hung her wet one on the rail to dry. “We’re going to have company in about two minutes. I don’t want him to know you’re here.”

Adrian immediately went to the back shadows of the barn and blended in. Then he brought up his shield and tried his hardest to fade completely out of view. He also kept his hand near his gun in case the company wasn’t friendly.

Angela drank from her almost empty canteen and listened to the rain while she waited. She didn’t mind the sound of it on the roof and walls, but the noise it made rushing over the ground made her skin crawl.

It was hard for Adrian to obey orders when he saw who Angela was waiting on. He concentrated on holding his shield and remaining unnoticed while moving a few steps closer to her chair.

Rico entered the barn without a single wet spot above his ankles. His boots were drenched and muddy.

Rico had escorted Tonya to the clinic and then come right back. He scanned the barn, found Angela waiting, and dropped his shield. “You summoned me?”

Adrian’s frown grew. He knew Angela had ordered Jennifer to unlock Rico, but using his shield against the rain was pure genius. None of Safe Haven’s people were doing that yet. *He’s a serious threat.*

Angela motioned toward the other chair.

Adrian saw Angela wasn't surprised. He immediately began wondering if Rico had been locked at all. *Has he been fooling us?* Until this moment, Adrian wouldn't have thought that was possible. Jennifer had amazing skills. *But she is young.* Adrian took another silent step closer.

Rico sat stiffly in the chair. He waited for her to speak without showing any signs of how nervous he really was.

Angela studied him, letting the tension build. She examined his strong body and his ruthless eyes, comparing him to his nephew. Each scan now revealed another commonality. "Why did you really join this camp, Rico?"

Rico was prepared for harder questions. He didn't react to her first stab. "My brother wanted to be sure you came to the lab."

"So he could kill me."

"Eventually." Rico told her what he was sure she already knew. "He wanted you in his program. Your death would have come much later."

"And if I wouldn't leave this island?"

"Then I was supposed to kill you."

The sound of a holster being opened was lost under the next heavy downpour of rain.

"And now?"

Rico sneered. "Is that why you're setting me up this way, bringing me here to give me the chance to follow through?"

“No, I need a favor and you’re the only one who can do it. I just need to clear the air between us before I ask for it.”

Rico wasn’t sure how to respond.

Angela stabbed again. “Have you thought about taking over Safe Haven?”

Rico lifted both brows. “You’re crazy, right? I refused to take my brother’s place. Why would I want yours?!”

“So you can remove Kenn and have Tonya.”

Rico’s face softened for just an instant. Then he glared coldly. “If your enforcer accuses her of murder, Tonya will leave and this camp will suffer from lack of a talented lab tech.”

“How does it feel to care for someone else for the first time in your unhappy life?”

Rico stared. “You’re giving me a therapy session.”

Angela shifted on the chair, trying to find a better spot for her spine. “Answer the question.”

Rico wanted to refuse. He hated the idea of spilling his guts to anyone, let alone to Angela. “It’s odd. I’m adjusting.”

“Kenn believes you’re her safety net. If she has to run, you’ll escort her.”

“And then he plans to kill me.” Rico already knew. “His mind is thick, slow. He doesn’t see the truth.”

Angela nodded. “She cares for you.”

“She stayed loyal to him.” Rico didn’t want Tonya accused of cheating.

“It will be hard for her to make a final choice.” Angela saw more of what Tonya was drawn to as she studied Rico. He had a strong presence. Despite the rough conversation, she felt safe right now with him. She had little doubt that he was deadly. “It’s good that you haven’t tried to insist.”

“And I won’t.”

“Because deep down you think you’re not good enough for her.”

“I know I’m not.” Rico was positive Angela already knew more about his past than he’d told anyone except Pam and Nature. *And now one of those females are dead...* “She gives me hope for the future.”

“Same.” Angela stabbed one more time. “Why do you hate women?”

Rico flinched again, recovering slower this time. He hadn’t expected her to attack directly about that. “It was ingrained in our family.”

“You know I’m trying to change that.”

“Yes, but it won’t work on Marcus. Or myself.” Rico was impressed by the things he’d viewed and heard here, but he doubted she’d really been the one to do it all. He glanced over his shoulder, glaring at Adrian, and then turned back to her. “Ask your favor. I have places to be.”

Angela chuckled. “I’m going to enjoy the moment when you understand you were wrong, that you were always wrong.”

He sneered again. “Keep waiting. It won’t ever happen.”

Angela smiled at him. "Thank you."

Rico frowned. "For what?"

"I like a challenge."

Rico was surprised into a chuckle.

Angela moved on before he could close up again. "I told Jennifer to get rid of your guard because you're not like your brother. You were unlocked for the same reason. You have dark spots, like we all do, but it's nothing that time here won't lighten. Try to let go of the past, the guilt, the self-hatred. Safe Haven is a place for second chances. Take advantage of that and try to find some happiness."

Rico felt warmth enter his cold heart. He quickly shut it down, scowling. "What do you want?!"

Angela got down to business. "We'll be having a monthly matchup."

Rico grunted. "I've already agreed to your terms."

"I can tell you miss fighting."

Rico crossed his arms over his chest. "Yes, but I doubt your camp will appreciate me hurting your Eagles."

Angela lifted a brow. "Are you that good?"

"Yes."

She smiled again. "I'll need you to do more than just prove it."

Rico finally understood she wanted him to beat on someone. "Who displeased you enough that you want them humiliated in front of everyone?"

“My husband.”

Chapter Twenty-Three
Don't Start Shit

1

“**W**elcome to the monthly Safe Haven matchups!”

A loud cheer echoed across the top of the cliff and floated out over the darkening ocean.

They were using the runway up here for the main site this time to avoid the mud, but also because it was the only place left on the island where there had been enough room to erect the large tent where most of these partiers would crash. Another smaller tent sat nearby, stocked with medical supplies and staff.

As Chief Medical Officer, Terry was here, but he didn't want to be. He remembered how ugly it had gotten last time. He doubted this would be different. Fire cans were burning at the four corners and dozens of firefly jars were in the tents, keeping it lit just enough to see by. Chairs and stools had been brought up, along with coolers, grills, and gear. It was all neat and orderly right now, but Terry knew that wouldn't be the case come dawn.

“The matchups begin at sunset and end at daylight. The same rules apply. There will be no partying in town, on the ships, or anywhere else.

Follow the basic rules and have fun!” Angela pointed toward the sun that was quickly sinking below the horizon. “Take this final minute of daylight to be grateful that we’re still here.”

Angela liked starting these matches with a moment of silence in respect for all of those who had lost their lives, but also for the crowd to look around and see who was here. Half of the camp had shown up this time, but there were only a few normals. Angela was certain that by the time the party was in full swing those normals would be back in town where it was safer.

It had rained again over the last two days, but this morning had been clear and stayed that way. Everyone was glad about that, but it wouldn’t have mattered to most of them. They needed the coming release more than they disliked the rain. Everyone was in their downtime clothes, from half tops to cutoff shorts. Hair was down, perfumes and colognes were filling the air with scents other than mold, and people were happy. It was a good vibe. Angela used it to feed her spirits. She needed this, too.

Angela handed the mike to Adrian. “It’s all yours for the next 12 hours.”

Adrian’s happiness rushed out and slammed into the crowd, bringing flashbacks of his time in leadership.

A few people in the crowd were unhappy that Angela had put Adrian in charge, but most of them understood she couldn’t keep things under control

this time. She was in a chair a few feet away from the ring, but her large stomach would prevent her from getting involved if there was a problem.

Adrian waited the full minute for the sun to finish sinking and then gestured toward the fighting cage that had been placed in the center of the weedy runway. “Let’s roll!”

Another loud cheer echoed as the party began.

“The first match starts in three minutes! Get your bets down now!” Kenn had been surprised when Adrian tapped him to be the MC for the evening. He was also looking forward to it. He didn’t want to participate in any of the matches, but just getting drunk and watching wouldn’t have been enough to keep his interest either. “The tables next to the ring are for placing bets. Put your wager on a table or offer a challenge!”

Kenn moved toward the cage as insults and boasts began to fly through the air.

Adrian did a fast scan of the guards in the area. All of them seemed sober and alert right now.

The brawlers and the Eagles gave him gestures to let him know they were paying attention, but Adrian wasn’t satisfied with that. He concentrated mentally. *It would be good to have an enforcer up here for this.*

Down in the muddy tunnel below town, Jennifer received his request in surprise. She hadn’t expected to be invited to the matchups for exactly that

reason—no one wanted an enforcer during a party.
I'll be there shortly.

Adrian did another scan to make sure none of their kids had slipped in against the rules. Amy was very upset that she wasn't allowed to participate, but Angela had ruled out all kids being here this time. Amy didn't understand, but Adrian did. No one needed to see a little kid being violent right now. It would only add to the impression that Missy was guilty.

Adrian headed toward the cage.

Neil fell in step with him. "Do you think tonight will go like last time?"

Adrian grinned at the former State Trooper. "No, I think Conner beat your ass enough."

Neil laughed. "That's too bad. I was looking forward to passing out in the barn on Kyle's shoulder."

Adrian chuckled. "You never know. The night is young."

"I'm surprised so many of the mission men are here."

Adrian nodded at Neil's comment. Wade had stayed in the bunkhouse with Samantha and their kids, but everyone else was here. Even Marc was observing, though he was inside the large tent and watching from a distance. Adrian knew that wasn't going to last either, but he pushed it from his mind for now.

“The opening match starts in two minutes! Who wants to draw first blood?!”

Kenn’s loud voice through the microphone rolled over the conversations, laughter, and challenges. Several people marched toward the ring.

Sadie got there first. “I challenge Piper!”

Adrian tensed for a minute and then forced himself to follow through. “We have our first match. Place your bets!”

Kenn was MCing the fight, but it was important that Adrian appeared to be neutral even though his girlfriend and his ex-girlfriend were about to step into the cage together. He already knew without looking that Piper had risen from her chair and was strolling toward the challenge with a grin. He could feel her bright mind determining a plan of action. Adrian just hoped neither one of them was seriously injured.

Neil slapped him on the shoulder. “Welcome home!”

Adrian grimaced.

Sadie dropped her gun belt at the entrance to the cage and quickly climbed inside. During the last matchup, she had been hurt by Jonny because she hadn’t expected him to be so rough on a rookie but also because Adrian had refused to let her use the new move she had learned. This time, she was free to do whatever she wanted.

Piper had watched Sadie’s fight with Jonny and felt bad for the girl. That wasn’t the case this time. “All’s fair in love and war.”

People laughed at her mocking.

Sadie got into the nose breaker stance, glaring. “And this is war between us.”

Piper dropped her gun belt next to Sadie’s. “In this new world, women take what we want. It’s not my fault you weren’t good enough to keep him.”

The crowd quieted a little as they realized things had already gotten serious between the women.

“Sadie versus Piper! The match starts in one minute!” Kenn stayed between them so the fight didn’t start sooner. He also got ready to get out of the way. He wasn’t sure how Piper was feeling right now, but the anger coming off Sadie was clear. She wanted revenge for Piper stealing her man. Kenn thought she was about to get more than she’d bargained for. He’d observed Piper in action during their time on the submarine. *It’s too bad I’m not allowed to bet because I’m MCing. I’d put it all on Piper.*

“My last bag of Doritos on Piper!”

“I’ll take that bet. I have a bag of Oreos!”

People began picking items they wanted while enjoying the alcohol that had been brought up from the ship.

Angela had shut down the entertainment floor; she’d shut the entire ship other than a few areas they needed to keep open, like water filtration and handling the waste they were still pumping into the ship from the island, but all the spirits had been removed. Most of it was up here now, though a small stash had been taken to the clinic and

bunkhouse. A few rare bottles of beer were still moving through the crowd as well, but most of the drinks were wine or whiskey. Kenn didn't want to consider the messes that would have to be cleaned up tomorrow from having so many harder drinks available.

“Betting is now closed! Let the match begin!” Kenn quickly slid out of the ring.

Sadie immediately moved forward. During her Eagle training, she had learned that it was better to be the aggressor than the defender.

Piper advanced to meet her, not intimidated.

Sadie threw a punch and a magic spell at the same time, hoping to put Piper on the ground screaming like she had Adrian in the quarantine tent.

Piper absorbed the spell and ducked the punch. She lunged forward and slammed her head into Sadie's stomach. She lifted the stocky girl up while she was out of breath and flipped her over one shoulder.

Sadie hit the mat with a loud thump, instantly flashing to how she had lost the match to Jonny. She tried to get on her feet, but just like last time, her body refused to respond.

Piper put her boot on Sadie's neck, but she didn't use any pressure. She didn't need to.

“Match to Piper!” Kenn was glad it hadn't gotten more violent. He was also surprised.

Some of the crowd cheered, but most of them booed at the fast fight.

Piper held out her hand to help Sadie to her feet, trying to be a good sport.

Sadie was humiliated. She took Piper's hand and brought her free arm around in a brutal punch that rocked Piper's head back.

Furious, Piper butted Sadie in the face, splattering blood across the mat.

Now the crowd cheered happily.

Sadie's muffled screams drew a medic from the small tent.

Kenn opened the gate to let Terry in.

Piper slid out, slinging blood from her hand. She had a goose egg popping up on her forehead, but it was worth it. "First blood is mine!"

The crowd screamed back at her, lifting their drinks in salutes.

Kenn helped the medic get Sadie out of the cage and over to the medical tent. Then he kept the party rolling, while pondering the irony of Sadie losing to the same move as last time. "Who's next?!"

More people came through the crowd that had gathered around the cage. No one had matched up beforehand this time, as far as anyone knew. People pointed at each other and made their choices while the partying crowd decided who to bet on.

Erin took off Angela's jacket and held it out to Adrian. "Make sure this doesn't get dirty." The jacket was now her most prized possession.

Erin had been hoping Selina would attend the matchups. Because she wasn't here, Erin picked the only other woman she thought stood between her

and temporary leader of Angela's team. "Molly! Let's do this!"

Molly hadn't planned to participate this time. It was an awful reminder of Monica and her betrayal, but Molly wanted team lead, too. She locked her thoughts as she removed her gun belt. "You'll be sorry you picked me."

"Betting is now open! The match starts in three minutes!" Kenn got back into the bloody ring to stay between the women. He'd heard the stories from the last matchups, but he didn't think anything tonight would get so violent that he and the other mission men couldn't handle it. In fact, Kenn thought a few of them might want to get in the cage later just to let out a little of their tension and frustration.

The partying crowd placed their bets and enjoyed the ambience as a cool breeze blew in and the music was turned on. Loud, hard beats rolled over the cliff top, drawing the dancers.

Angela refused to eye the dark ocean from here even though her mind was telling her to. She didn't need to watch out for a green cloud now. They weren't stuck in the cotton batting anymore.

Adrian looked over at Angela, remembering how they had danced together in the rain during the last event.

Angela smiled warmly, also remembering how it had felt to spend a few hours in Adrian's arms without worrying about Marc, the camp, or anything else. She had no plans to do that tonight, but it wasn't because Marc was here. She couldn't

imagine lying on the ground with her stomach so big. *If I get down there, I won't be able to get back up!*

Adrian laughed and turned his attention to the crowd. Almost everyone had a drink in hand now. The party was underway. "The next match starts in one minute! Get those bets in!"

Marc observed from the flap of the big tent. He kept his thoughts closed to everyone, including the other team members. He was reading the minds of the people who had been here for the last matchups, however. He was bothered by a lot of it.

Jonny's actions were a surprise to Marc. He hadn't understood how obsessed the man was with Grant, but Jonny's death was still horrifying. Everyone here had a vision of Angela's demon form in their mind and they were okay with it. They knew what she looked like inside. Like Kyle, they knew who she really was.

Charlie joined Marc near the flap. He was here as a medic, though his shift would start later. "Do you want a drink?"

Charlie was already holding one. Safe Haven didn't have a legal drinking age yet and several of their camp members were taking advantage of it.

Marc shook his head. "No."

"Are you going to fight?" Charlie could tell how much Marc needed a release.

"No." After everything they'd gone through in the lab, Marc didn't trust himself to stay in control and not do permanent damage to anyone he was

facing. The only men who would be able to handle him were team members and he had already hurt them enough.

“Uh-oh.” Charlie pointed. “Jennifer just showed up.”

The partying crowd hesitated a bit as Jennifer was noticed. Betting stopped while people stared at her, expecting her to shut things down despite Angela being here.

Jennifer held her chin up against their disapproval as she went to Adrian. Angela had already told her that Adrian was going to be in charge of this event. She didn't mind that. She hadn't wanted to be here and possibly be tempted to punish anyone without orders.

Adrian didn't like the way Jennifer was being treated even though he didn't agree with some of the things she had done while they were gone. He smiled in welcome. “Hang out near the cage and absorb any extra energy so it doesn't hit the crowd.”

People around them relaxed as they realized she wasn't here as an enforcer.

Jennifer went to stand near the cage while the sly voice inside celebrated being here. The evil side of her wanted to see blood flow and people get hurt.

Kyle appeared at Jennifer's side. He was dressed in full Eagle gear over his cast.

Jennifer frowned at him. “I thought you were off duty tonight.”

“There has to be at least one Eagle here who doesn’t fight or drink.” Kyle made a face. “And I think I’m still hung over from last time.”

He sent Jennifer a mental image of how he had dealt with Daryl in the ring and then gotten so drunk that he still didn’t remember passing out. Jennifer had been on the ship and missed it all.

Jennifer winced at the memory. Samantha had been taken that night.

While she was distracted, Kyle stepped closer.

Jennifer held up a hand to stop him before he went any further. “No!”

Her quick refusal embarrassed him this time. “Fine. I’ll keep it to remind me of the girl I used to love.” He walked away for a patrol of the dark perimeter.

Jennifer stared in hurt shock.

“Betting is now closed! Let the match begin!”

Erin and Molly quickly advanced, both swinging. They connected, throwing fast punches but not using magic.

Erin slid to the side as Molly tried to headbutt her for the win, like she’d done last time with Monica.

Molly kicked and punched at the same time and missed on both of them.

Erin swung lightly, not wanting to hurt a friend.

Molly swung as hard as she could, wanting to win and gain team lead.

Erin’s anger rose as pain rolled through her skull from the hard punch. She spun around, using a kai

move and drilled her heel into Molly's stomach. As the woman bent over, gasping, Erin brought her hands together and slammed them against Molly's neck, dropping her. Wanting to make sure she got the point, Erin followed her down, fists swinging like machines.

“Match to Erin!”

Erin almost couldn't stop. She let Kenn pull her out by her arm. *I didn't know I was that angry.*

Molly groaned in pain as the medic hurried over to tend to her.

The crowd cheered happily, now starting to feel the alcohol and the bloodlust.

Jennifer wrote Erin's name in her book and resumed observing. The rage illness was getting worse in some people, but Erin had been vaccinated while on the submarine. She shouldn't still be so angry.

Erin collected her jacket from Adrian and took the cup of wine that Greg had held out. He kissed her deeply, making the crowd cheer again.

Nearby, Ray and Grant were observing the match, but neither of them was happy.

Grant was having flashbacks of the last matchup and feeling guilty over Jonny's death even though he hadn't done anything wrong.

Ray was remembering being fogged on the sub and still feeling the need to hurt his fellow man.

They turned to each other at the same time.

“I don't think I want to—”

“Would you mind if we—”

Ray and Grant realized they both wanted the same thing. Ray slid an arm around Grant's waist and steered them toward the path to town. They both nodded to Tonya as she finally arrived via the same route.

Angela motioned the redhead into the empty seat on her right.

Tonya dropped into the chair tiredly. She'd been working almost nonstop since the mission team came home. She was off duty now, but too tired to really enjoy the party. She didn't think she would stay long.

"Thank you for coming." Angela knew how tired the medic was.

Tonya was glad to have gotten a personal invitation. She liked how it felt to be sitting next to the boss where everyone could see her, but she was too tired to fully enjoy that either. "I'll probably crash soon."

Angela gestured toward the tent behind them. "You're welcome to body pile with us."

Tonya eyed Angela's large stomach. "You won't be part of the body pile this time. Stop it."

Angela laughed. "I'll be on a cot, but you're still welcome to join. I'm sure I can find a corner for you. You're skinny enough."

Tonya had just come from feeding her son and getting him to sleep. She stopped smiling suddenly. "Why are you buttering me up?"

Angela looked over Tonya's shoulder at the man who had stopped in the shadows instead of joining them openly.

Tonya frowned. "You invited me to get him to show up."

"I invited you because you deserved to have some downtime."

Tonya didn't believe it. She scowled. "I'm too tired for your crap. Get on with it."

Angela laughed again, not offended. "He's doing FND later. I thought you'd want to be here for it."

Tonya relaxed, leaning back in the chair. "That's more like it." It pleased her that Angela was going to help Rico become a true member of their camp. She refused to take that thought any further as the next match started.

Angela tuned out the fighting. Now that she wasn't feeling the effects of the rage disease anymore, she didn't have the urge to get into the cage like she had last time, though she hadn't been able to do it then either. She was certain she would take a turn at some point in the future, but only if someone actually deserved the punishment she was now able to deliver.

Jennifer glanced over her shoulder at that moment and caught Angela's eye.

Tonya tensed.

Rico came out of the shadows and stood next to Tonya's chair.

Angela grinned at Jennifer and saluted her with the mug of tea she'd gotten from the cook on the way here.

Jennifer turned around to observe the match and catch any spare energy. Selito and Raheem were already throwing spells, though both new descendants were only using basic strength. They knew better than to get out of hand with Jennifer right here.

Angela scanned the partiers, unable to help searching for problems even though she wasn't in charge this time. She found one right away, though it was something she would have to handle later. There were no laws in Safe Haven against being a whore. *But there will be in the future. You can take that to the bank.*

Angela watched Dari as she tried to flirt with Kyle.

Kyle completely ignored her.

Angela wasn't even sure if he noticed the woman batting her eyelashes and sticking her breasts out to get his attention. The fact that he was a married man didn't mean anything to Dari.

Not discouraged, Dari scanned the other men around her, hunting for an easier target.

She spotted Theo and sauntered over to him with a wide smile and a clear invitation. "Hi, cutie!"

Theo hadn't spotted Debra. He assumed she was still at the bunkhouse. He took the second best option. "Hi, yourself!"

Angela looked away from that scene in time to see Ed glaring at the loose woman.

Angela was surprised that Ed and the other members of the church group were here at all. It was only the men. She assumed they were keeping track of the members of their congregation.

She turned her attention to the match before anyone noticed her. Because she wasn't drinking or in charge tonight, she was able to observe the behavior of everyone around her; she was making mental notes for things that would have to be handled later, as well as evaluating some of these people for positions on teams. If they could survive in the cage, they were probably Eagle material.

"And the match goes to Raheem!" Kenn stepped aside so the medic could once again get into the cage. It hadn't been particularly violent, but Selito was dripping blood from his nose and staggering around. "Who's next?!"

Rico took a step forward.

Angela gave a subtle shake of her head, letting him know it wasn't time yet. She could tell he was anxious to get the match over with, but it would still be a little while before Marc was ready to step into the cage.

Angela could feel Marc's growing need to let the tiger out, but he was a stubborn man who would try hard to keep control over himself the entire time. In the end, he would have to be pushed into it.

Angela looked over her shoulder, catching Marc's sigh. She patted the arm of the empty chair on her left.

Marc reluctantly took the seat. He didn't need a better view of the fights, but he hadn't spent any time with Angela since they'd gotten home. He hoped the hours went by quickly.

"Betting is now open! The match starts in three minutes!" Kenn took his place in the ring between Ian and Panaji. Kenn was already sure that Ian was in for a surprise. He had observed Panaji doing workouts while Ian stood on guard duty or spent his time sitting at a table in the restaurant with a notebook.

The crowd began to lay bets.

Standing next to the cage, Isabel tried to get Adrian's attention. "Am I allowed to bet?"

Adrian didn't hear her over the music and the noise, but Stanley did. He stepped closer. "You're part of our camp now. You're allowed to do anything you want."

Stanley eyed her long blue dress and small waistline before glancing up, blushing.

Isabel had already drunk half a cup of wine. She smiled at the shy man. "What if I want to dance, mate?"

Stanley pointed toward the partying area where half a dozen people were now gyrating contentedly to the deep beats of the music blaring from the speakers.

Isabel took a chance, smiling. “What if I don’t want to dance alone?”

Stanley held out his arm like a gentleman. “It would be my honor.”

People clapped and cheered as they noticed Stanley escorting the older woman over to the dance area.

Stanley lifted his chin proudly.

Isabel blushed prettily and quickly set her cup on one of the folding tables as they went by it. “I should have mentioned I don’t know how to dance.”

Stanley chuckled. “I don’t either. We’ll learn together.”

He gently put an arm around her waist and led her onto the impromptu dance floor.

In the background, the crowd groaned at a fast end to the fight as Panaji quickly disabled Ian with a chokehold.

“Match to Panaji!”

Most of the people around the dance floor didn’t notice. They were observing Stanley and Isabel.

Isabel kept distance between them as they swayed out of rhythm to the music. She’d felt the disapproval of these Eagles when their women were too forward. Nearby, Dari was slipping away with Theo. Ed was scowling openly at them. Isabel didn’t want that reputation here.

“Are you okay?” Stanley wanted to make sure everyone was being nice to the new lady.

“I’m fine.” Isabel didn’t want to talk about herself. She picked a random topic. “I’m sorry to hear about your friend, Pam.”

Stanley’s face darkened. “She was not my friend.”

“Oh. Sorry.”

Stanley sighed. “She tried to kiss me once when she was drunk. If I’d let her do it, maybe I could have helped her and she would still be alive.”

Isabel liked it that he was nice about someone he clearly hadn’t liked. That was all she’d heard about his personality from listening to the gossip, though the bloke’s clumsy nature had been mentioned a lot. *I haven’t seen that side of him.*

Stanley laughed. “You will.”

Isabel stared. “You’re a descendant.”

“And you’re not.”

They gazed at each other, instantly bonded in rebellion.

“My kind isn’t supposed to be with your kind.” Isabel hadn’t forgotten about the rules they’d learned from Nature on the submarine.

Stanley felt heartache for the first time. He didn’t like it. “You make me feel funny.”

Isabel let go of the young man and stepped back. “I’ll leave you alone.”

“No!” Stanley followed his manly urges. He pulled her back into his arms and let their bodies touch this time.

Isabel wrapped her arms around his strong neck and shut her eyes. “I already love being here.”

Stanley chuckled again. He rubbed their cheeks together, and allowed his heart to fill with emotions for a female. *This is what I've been waiting for.*

Angela grinned at the sight. "Our little boy has become a man."

Tonya laughed. "Not yet, but if she gets him drunk enough it could happen. He has more balls when he's had a few."

"Is that why he was giving Jennifer problems?" Marc had been curious about that since hearing Stanley had gotten out of line.

Angela chuckled. "I may have shoved too much spine down his throat."

Tonya nodded. "He had a hangover that day, I think. He hasn't touched a drop since. He's a good guy."

Marc looked over at the man standing next to Tonya's chair. "Is he?"

Rico tensed.

Tonya glared. "Don't start shit."

Angela watched as the next match started, refusing to think about anything that could be pulled from her mind right now.

Marc scowled. "What are you up to?"

Angela didn't answer.

Over in the corner by the dance floor, Ed watched Dari and Theo slip into the jungle with a determined stare. *That has to stop. If the boss doesn't do something about it soon, I will.*

Timmy was emboldened by the fighting and by the beer he'd snuck out of his dad's secret stash. He marched over to the brawlers, who'd made a campfire and were passing a bottle around it while watching the matches. Raheem, Selito, and Richie were new members of the brawlers group. Timmy glared at them as he went to Stuart. He didn't have sympathy for their new cage injuries.

Stuart saw him coming and grinned cruelly. "Hiya, fat boy."

Timmy flushed, but he didn't stop until he was a foot away from the man.

Stuart passed the bottle. "What's up, kid?"

Stuart had been watching Timmy follow them around for days now. He never spoke. It was annoying.

"I challenge you!" Timmy punched the man as hard as he could.

Stuart flew off the moldy stool and landed on his back in the mud. He stared up at the boy in surprise. "What was that for?!"

"I want to join you guys."

The other brawlers burst out laughing.

"Well, he did ask politely."

Stuart started to stand up.

Timmy lunged forward and punched the man again.

Kyle was observing the moment. He groaned. "That wasn't what I meant!"

Stuart kicked out, taking Timmy to the ground. He punched the boy twice, drilling in his point.

Timmy had been scrappy before he gained the weight. He fought back as best he could, chest heaving.

Stuart stood up, eyeing the muddy boy. He wasn't crying or shouting. He was getting to his feet for another round.

“You will let me join!”

Stuart shoved the boy, hard.

Timmy tripped, landing on his ass in the mud.

Stuart grinned when the heavy teen determinedly rose again and advanced. “Maybe I will, kid. But first, a lesson.” Stuart punched him, aiming for his chin.

Timmy went down again and stayed there this time. Stars and bright lights ran across his vision. “I give!”

Stuart grabbed Timmy's muddy arm and hauled him to his feet. Then he hit him once more, knocking him to his knees. “You get it?”

Timmy groaned. The beer he'd drank came up and covered Stuart's boots.

“He gets it.” Stuart helped Timmy stand and led him over to the stool. “Let's talk.”

“We just did that! I didn't like it.”

Stuart shrugged. “Maybe you need to learn some communication skills.”

Laughter flowed through the group and stopped the Eagles and the worried father who'd been rushing to help Timmy.

Stuart clapped the boy on the shoulder. “Tell me why and we’ll go from there.”

Now Timmy started to cry. “I’m a fat slob!”

“Ah.” Stuart glanced at Kyle. “I assume someone recommended this?”

Timmy wiped blood from his nose. “Yes.”

“Then that’s good enough.” Stuart held out the bottle. “Next time, just ask.”

Timmy waved off the alcohol. “You wouldn’t have said yes. You’ve been picking on me for weeks.”

“How did it feel?”

Timmy hung his head. “Awful.”

“And now you know not to ever do that again to someone, right?”

Timmy understood they’d heard about how mean he and his brothers had been to Matt, and what it had caused. “I’m sorry for it. I was sorry before, but I’m really sorry now.”

“Good. That’s how we learn and grow and become better people.” Stuart nodded at Zack, who was listening closely to the conversation. “Join us between your work shifts like you’ve been doing. If you stick with us, you’ll have your life back in six months.”

“Six months!”

“It takes a long time to fix the damage we do to ourselves, Timothy. Just be glad it is something you can correct. Many mistakes stay with us forever.”

Chapter Twenty-Four
Two Tigers

1

Angela scanned the medical tent, where Terry and Charlie were tending to Molly and Sadie. Both females were embarrassed, but fine. They were bruised and bonding over their defeats.

Angela swept the crowd that was now starting to show signs of being drunk. Several of them had already gotten sick, adding to the mess of empty bottles and trash dotting the clifftop.

She found Zack and Eric sitting near the betting tables, both with drinks that didn't seem like they'd been touched. Eric was glaring toward Jennifer and Zack's eyes were glazed.

Angela fought a chill. The view from the clifftop was short and dark now that the sun had set. They could all hear the restless ocean rushing onto the beach and cove below, but they couldn't see it. It was giving some of them ugly flashbacks.

She motioned to Neil in Eagle code.

Neil got it and went over to Zack. Neil would have preferred to be in the bunkhouse with Samantha now, but he was also enjoying the free time. It was an odd mix. He was glad Angela was keeping him busy. He struck up a conversation,

digging for the problem. Angela had just said to distract Zack, not why.

Zack forced his mind back to reality. “She’s afraid I’ll fog-out again.”

Eric sneered toward Angela. “She never should have taken you on that run!”

Jennifer was a few feet away. She glared over her shoulder. “Shut up.”

Zack smacked Eric’s arm with his cast when the teenager would have sent back an ugly insult. “Shut up.”

Eric glowered at both of them and slumped in his chair.

Zack wasn’t happy with Jennifer either, but finding out Timmy had asked to be zapped had tempered his displeasure. He still delivered a cold glance her way as their eyes met.

Jennifer forced herself to turn toward the cage. She knew without being told that the mission team was off limits to her corrections.

Allison walked by the scene without caring, zeroing in on a woman sitting by herself and looking lonely compared to everyone else.

Allison dropped onto a stool next to Jayda. “Are you okay?”

Jayda nodded automatically, but she wasn’t feeling that way. Biff was mad at her, Trent was a busy den mother helping at the bunkhouse, and Terry wouldn’t even talk to her. Because he was so high up in this camp, a lot of people were following the medic’s lead and ignoring her.

Allison gestured. "Let's have a drink and chat."

Jayda smiled gratefully. "Thanks."

Allison handed over the bottle she was drinking from. "I'm surprised you aren't doing a matchup. I thought you liked to fight."

"I do." Jayda took a drink and tried not to gasp. "Did."

Allison took the bottle back. "I heard it was rough. I'm sorry you all had to go through that."

Jayda missed the headshakes and silent denials of those around her who were listening. "The worst part was losing Harry. He could heal anything, even death. If he was here, he could save Candy and Brittani. They'll probably both die because none of us were strong enough to help him stay good."

Allison met Angela's hard eyes over the crowd. *He knew how to stop death... So she killed him.*

Allison lurched to her feet, already drunk from the first half of the bottle. She dropped it into Jayda's teary grip and spun toward the jungle. *She killed him!*

Allison vanished into the tree line.

Angela smoothed out her expression; most of the mission men were now staring at her in concern. *We'll handle it when we need to. Enjoy your downtime.*

She spotted Theo and Dari coming out of the woods and made a derisive sound. "That was fast."

Tonya snickered. "The camp men have given her a nickname that sums her up."

"Ho-ho? Twinkie?"

“Cum-catcher.”

Angela burst out laughing.

“All kidding aside, she’ll open that mouth for anyone. The rookies love her.”

While they watched, Dari flipped her hair at Kenn as she walked by. Her glittery green shirt twinkled in the light from the burning cans. It was so low cut that both breasts were bare all the way to the nipples. It was more like a scarf than a shirt.

To his credit, Kenn didn’t react.

Tonya glared. “I may get in the cage after all.”

Angela snickered.

Tonya didn’t. She watched Kenn for signs that he was responding to the newest town whore.

Dari was quickly surrounded by horny rookies who began herding her back toward the woods while she giggled and enjoyed the attention. They didn’t care that she’d just caught someone else’s load.

“Do you want me to go break that up?”

Angela shook her head at Rico. “As long as it’s willing, I let people do what they want in that area.”

“It’s a good way to pass diseases.”

“Our people don’t have diseases. They’ve all been cleared medically.” Angela slapped at a mosquito, squishing it onto her arm. She flicked the carcass off. “Thank you for the offer, though.”

Gnats, mosquitos, and moths were being drawn from the jungle by the light. They swooped and dove between the partying people, hunting for food, a drink, and a mate. They fit right in.

Rico grunted. Playing this game with her reminded him of being in the lab. *Just do it already!*
Request granted. Angela smiled at Marc. “Perhaps you’d like to challenge someone to a matchup?”

“What?” Marc had been stewing on Harry’s death.

“You could use a release.” She leered. “Sorry I can’t give you that right now.”

Marc glared at Angela. “I don’t know what you’re planning, but it’s not going to work. I’m not getting in the cage.”

Angela shrugged. “You don’t have to.”

“I’m not getting drunk and body piling. And I’m not hurting anyone!”

“You don’t have to.”

“I know you’re up to something!”

Angela reached over and patted his cast. “You don’t have to.”

Marc frowned. “That doesn’t make any sense.”

“I know.”

Marc chuckled against his will. It was rare to see her in such a good mood.

“Maybe you should just enjoy it while it’s happening.” Tonya wanted the couple to have a nice night, though she agreed with Marc that Angela was up to something.

Marc frowned again. “I mean it. Whatever you’re planning, count me out.”

Angela smiled sweetly. “It’s too late for that, *Marcus.*”

Marc glowered as he caught Rico's thoughts of their conversation. "It's not going to happen!"

Rico knew it wouldn't take much. He still shoved hard, voice echoing clearly through the party. "You are fearful of being embarrassed in front of everyone. It's okay to be afraid of me. You can pick someone who's a guaranteed win."

Tonya gasped.

Angela grinned.

The crowd stared in surprise, waiting for Marc's response.

Jennifer turned around and glared toward them, not sure what was happening but positive that Angela was the cause of it.

Angela kept that smile on. "I'll bet my favorite knife on Rico."

Marc's thin control snapped. He lunged up from the chair and padded toward the cage.

Rico followed him with an apologetic glance at Tonya. "I'm sorry."

Tonya turned toward Angela. "What did you just do?"

Angela leaned forward eagerly. "I put two tigers in a cage together."

"Why?!"

"Because I love my husband."

"That doesn't make any sense!"

"It does to me, and it will to him after he loses."

Tonya snorted loudly. "Marc's never lost a fight. You know that."

Angela nodded. “Yes, I do, but there’s a first time for everything.”

Tonya watched the two men as they walked toward the cage. “I hope you know what you’re doing.”

“So do they.”

“Do you?”

Angela stood up and went closer for a better view. “You’re my guard.”

Tonya followed, shaking her head. “I knew this wasn’t just for downtime.”

“Someone’s about to go down. Does that count?”

Tonya snorted bitterly. “It all counts, Boss. In the end, you might not be able to pay the bill for this one.”

“Hold that thought while I win your knife.”

Tonya put her blade on the betting table. “I think Marc will destroy him.”

“And I believe Rico is a better fighter than anyone here knows.”

Both women ignored the surprise and anger coming from the two men now entering the cage.

“One minute until the match starts. Get those bets placed!” Kenn didn’t enter the cage this time. He knew better than to get between them. “Only one of them will walk out, folks!”

Angela leaned against Tonya and watched with ruthless blue eyes.

“Damn. That’s going to be an ugly match.” Terry clicked off his pen light. “Stay sitting for a while.”

Sadie knew not to nod. Terry had bandaged her nose and given her a painkiller that wasn’t working yet.

They’d all heard Angela goading Marc and Rico. The other medics were already going to the cage to be closer. They assumed they would be needed for this.

Molly groaned. “Next time, I’ll say no.”

Sadie wanted to laugh, but she was hurting too much. “It’s still better than being zapped.”

Molly automatically locked her thoughts. “She should be punished for doing that to you.”

“Don’t blame her for my stupid choice.” Sadie got up and walked awkwardly out of the tent. “I’m not missing this fight. You coming?”

Molly hurried after the wild girl. “The boss sure knows how to pick you guys.”

Sadie put an arm around Molly’s shoulders. “Us. You’re special, too.”

Terry stared as the women left the medical tent. “I’ll never figure them out.”

Charlie was cleaning up the bandages and garbage while wondering why Morgan and Tobias had decided to skip the party. Both of those men were at the bunkhouse. He assumed they wanted to have a medic close in case Candy or Brittani had problems. He hoped they didn’t. The medics were

worn out. They wouldn't be able to do much.
"Figure out who?"

"Females." Terry's gaze went to Jayda, who was still sitting by herself while getting drunk.

Charlie sighed. "Same, but look at it this way: she can't get pregnant and take off with the kid, or abort it. At least you get to skip that."

Terry frowned. "What are you talking about?"

"She can't have kids."

Terry turned toward Charlie. "How do you know that?"

"Harry was doing tests on people on the sub, with and without our permission. He put it in Jayda's file."

Terry turned toward Jayda, voice lowering. "Does she know?"

Charlie shrugged. "Maybe. She hasn't been the same since we got back."

"Well, that's fair. I haven't been the same since you guys left." Terry remembered Angela's words and turned away. "That's her business. Don't tell anyone else."

"I won't. You're the CMO. You have clearance."

"We don't have a HIPAA law anymore."

Charlie grunted. "I forgot." He dropped the garbage into the can and began restocking the small tray from the boxes stacked in the corner.

"Aren't you going out there to bet on your dad and watch the fight?"

Charlie shook his head. “Nope. I’m getting us ready to tend their injuries. This is going to be an ugly match. We need to get ready for the aftermath.”

3

“Betting closes in one minute!” Kenn shut the cage door and retreated. “Don’t fire until you see the whites of his eyes!”

The crowd laughed at Kenn’s joke.

Marc didn’t.

Neither did Rico.

The two fighters stared at each other in dislike and waited for the violence to start.

“What is she doing? Marc will kill him!”

“She’s finally punishing the new guy for stalking.”

“I think she’s just giving Marc a release. I know I’d want that if I’d been in that lab.”

“Either way, my bet’s on Marc.”

“You got that right!”

Kenn came over to stand by Tonya as the crowd chatted and placed bets. He was thrilled that Marc was about to abuse Rico, but he needed to act humble while it was happening. He also needed to be sure he wasn’t going to get any of the blame for it. “I’m sorry.”

Tonya huffed. “You didn’t do anything wrong. It’s just a skank.” She was furious at Dari for trying, though.

“I mean for what happened while I was gone. I was trying to give us a clean break. I didn’t think I was going to make it back.” Kenn kept his mind blank as he used the excuse Angela had given him. Then he added something genuine. “My life would suck without you in it. Please forgive me?”

Angela was moved to tears even though it wasn’t as sincere as it felt. “Of course she does, now stop it! I want to enjoy the fight. Then someone can cry!”

Kenn and Tonya laughed.

Tonya wrapped her arm around Kenn and leaned against his big body.

Rico saw it. Anger lit his mind up like fireworks.

Angela smiled. *Perfect.*

Thomas came through the crowd on his crutches and stopped by Angela. “He’s dangerous.”

“I know.”

“Then why are you doing this? Marc could get hurt.”

People around them snorted.

Angela didn’t. “It’s a ten-fer.”

Thomas stared. “What?”

Kenn groaned. “She has a habit of combining benefits into one hard or terrible moment. You heard it on the sub.”

Thomas shrugged. “I barely remember that time in my life.” He turned away. “Excuse me.”

Angela sighed. “Well, that’s one way to get through the memories.”

“It won’t work when you’re asleep. I know.”
Kenn let go of Tonya and went to the cage door.
“Match starts in one minute!”

Stanley and Isabel were still dancing, but they shifted toward the cage so they could watch without letting go of each other. The other dancers stopped and walked toward the cage, wanting an up-close view of the fight.

Marc and Rico were staring at each other, but neither of them were angry enough to fight.

“You might have to trigger it.” Tonya shrugged.
“I’m not sure how you’ll do that, though.”

Adrian held up a hand for quiet.

The crowd settled a bit, curious.

Adrian regarded Angela. *Are you sure?*

Angela nodded curtly.

Adrian forced excitement into his voice. “Some people in this camp have a natural advantage in these fights...”

Marc immediately flashed to his first true matchup in Safe Haven.

So did Kenn, Greg, and Neil. Those three men groaned.

Adrian continued, dropping a surprise. “Would anyone like to go in and help Marc?”

Gasps and shock ran through the crowd.

Marc’s control snapped at the fresh humiliation. He advanced.

Angela smiled again. “I’ll trigger it like that.”

A hush fell through the crowd as the two men met in the middle of the cage and began to swing.

Marc swung with a right to the face and a left to the stomach, planning to quickly disable Rico and end the fight quickly before he could really hurt the man.

Rico deflected his hits and then used the exact same moves back on Marc.

Marc deflected the punch and spun around so the stomach hit glanced off his arm. He immediately spun again, kicking out to nail Rico in the leg. When Rico staggered, Marc swung hard, closing in for the kill.

Rico spun around, letting Marc's ugly hit bounce off his shoulder. It knocked him into the side of the cage. He used the momentum to thrust his whole body forward, knocking Marc backward.

Marc fired again, kicking with his left as he drilled Rico in the jaw with his right.

His cast shattered against Rico's face. Blood and spit flew from Rico's mouth.

Marc didn't wait this time. He immediately fired his left into Rico's chest.

Rico hit the mat and rolled, legs coming up to surround Marc and bring him to the ground.

The two men grappled violently, throwing knees and elbows into any exposed area they could reach.

Marc headbutted Rico and shoved himself backward to get out of the man's grip. *It's like fighting myself!*

Both men gained their feet and advanced at the same time. Rico took the offensive before Marc could. He threw himself into the air, booted feet

driving into Marc and slamming him against the bars.

Rico hit the mat and rolled, coming up on his feet. He automatically ducked Marc's vicious hit and threw an ugly punch of his own, catching Marc in the chest.

The crowd gasped and cried out at the contact. Everyone was shocked that Rico was still conscious.

Marc slammed his elbow into Rico's chin and then brought his left arm in to grab Rico around the neck. Marc pulled him down while bringing his right knee up, still trying to close the deal with a final hit.

Rico twisted out of the tight grip and brought his leg up while Marc was off balance.

Stars flew across Marc's vision as Rico's knee made contact with his chin. His head snapped back. Blood ran from Marc's nose.

Rico threw a left into Marc's temple and then a right into his shoulder blade, driving the man to his knees.

Marc lunged forward through the pain and slammed the top of his head into Rico's chin. Blood flew from both men, splattering the bars and the crowd standing outside the cage.

A complete silence had fallen over the crowd now. The only noise was the music and the painful grunts coming from the two fighters. Even the wind settled as if to listen to their misery.

Marc used the bars against his hip as a shoving point, using one leg to thrust himself forward and the other one against Rico's knee so he could get the height he needed to wrap his other arm around Rico's neck and pull him close again. Marc drove his fist into Rico's chest repeatedly.

Rico used Marc's weight to drop himself to the mat. He rolled over while punching, catching Marc in the throat and in the chest. His legs came up like a jackhammer, hitting Marc in the stomach.

Marc staggered against the cage bars, dripping blood and fury.

Rico rolled and gained his feet but stayed crouched, waiting for the next attack.

Marc's eyes narrowed. That was the move he had been about to pick. He realized Rico was reading his mind and trying to stay one step ahead.

Rico brought up a mental shield so Marc couldn't do the same to him. The connection was lost. Now he had to do it on his own.

Marc charged forward, arms swinging in a decoy while he brought his left leg up and kicked as hard as he could.

Rico grunted in pain, leg disabled. He unleashed his anger this time, swinging large arms into Marc's ankle. He drilled his elbow into Marc's chin and then rolled while holding onto the leg.

Marc was pulled off his feet. He slammed into the mat, losing his breath and his balance.

Rico flipped over in a fast move and wrapped Marc up in a chokehold.

Marc used his elbows to punch backward in alternating blows, breaking Rico's hold. Both men rolled away from each other and quickly regained their feet.

People in the crowd were getting worried now, but not because they were afraid of losing their bet. The two tigers in the cage were evenly matched; people were suddenly sure that one of the men was going to die.

Rico ran toward Marc, ducking at the last minute. He slammed his head into Marc's stomach and lifted the man up, trying to flip him over his shoulder.

Marc kicked out with both legs, catching Rico in the shins in two vicious hits that broke Rico's hold and dropped them both back to the mat.

Instead of rolling away this time, Rico scrambled toward Marc and slammed his body on top of his target. He kicked out with his knees, catching Marc in the chest while his fists battered Marc's face, not giving him a chance to recover this time.

Marc's inner Marine tried to take over, but he had already waited too long. Rico's blows dazed him. He tried to roll over, but Rico neatly planted a knee on either side of him. As he rolled, Rico's legs encircled his waist in a python-like hold while his fists continued to batter Marc's face and upper torso.

Marc brought his arms up between Rico's hands and slammed his cupped fists into the man's chin as hard as he could.

Rico's vision blurred. Determined to come out on top, Rico punched Marc in the throat with his right and then did it again with his left.

Marc went down.

"Rico wins!" Adrian was stunned and also concerned. There was no way he was going to be able to break them up if Rico didn't stop.

Rico followed Marc down and drew his fist back to deliver a killing blow.

Marc tried to defend himself, but he had taken too many direct hits. He was able to get his hand up, but he wasn't able to turn away from the punch.

Rico pulled it at the last second, hitting Marc in the chin instead of the throat.

Marc slumped to the mat, groaning.

Rico forced himself to retreat. He slung blood, his and Marc's, from his hands and stayed ready in case Marc got back up. He had only disabled his furious nephew. It was possible that this fight wasn't over yet.

"Rico wins!" Adrian banged on the bars, trying to get his attention. "You can come out now!"

The crowd around the cage wasn't sure how to react. It had been a vicious fight and none of them had expected Rico to survive a minute of it, let alone to win.

Rico looked at Angela through the bars.

Angela gestured. "Take it out into the street."

Rico wasn't confused by the order like the crowd was. He stumbled out of the cage and walked toward the only clear spot on the runway next to the dance area where no one was dancing anymore.

People retreated from him in fear and respect.

Angela motioned again. "Mission team! Get to it!"

Most of the mission men were furious and eager to punish Rico for what his brother had put them through. They moved toward him eagerly.

Angela focused on Kenn with clear intent.

Kenn was horribly disappointed that Rico had been the one to walk out of the cage. He let go of Tonya. "Get a shield up around the boss."

Tonya brought her shield up around Angela and stayed on her heels as the boss marched toward the runway without glancing at the injured man in the cage. The medics were hurrying toward Marc, who had managed to get up on all fours while he tried to regain control of his body.

"What are you doing?!" Adrian was horrified.

Angela ignored him.

Tonya pushed Adrian out of the way as she went by. "Let the boss work!" She was keen to observe how Rico did against multiple defenders.

Biff, Gus, Kenn, and Greg surrounded Rico. Two of them had casts and all of them had scars. It gave them more flashbacks of facing Marc in the cage the first time, but all of them hesitated to trigger the melee. Watching Marc lose had been an

obvious sign that Rico was more dangerous than he appeared to be.

Angela stopped nearby. She used a furious tone of command to get things rolling again. “Attack! Do it now!”

She sounded so much like Thalia, Reicher’s cruel daughter, that all five men were triggered. Fists began to swing and blood began to fly.

Even four against one, the mission men couldn’t handle Rico. Now that he was out of the confines of the cage, he let loose, throwing disabling hits and kicks with every carefully controlled movement of his body. It quickly became clear to the crowd that he was going to win this fight, too.

Marc staggered out of the cage toward the battle even though Charlie and Terry were forbidding it. He’d never been taken down so quickly by only one enemy. Fury kept him on his feet.

Angela waited until Marc reached them and then switched it up. “Marc and Rico on defense only! Attack!”

For a brief instant, all six men paused and turned toward the sound of her voice even though half of them had blood dripping into their faces and couldn’t see her. Then the order sank in. Rico automatically slid over to allow Marc room next to him.

Only Angela was sure that Marc was going to respond the way she needed him to. “Attack right now!”

The four mission men advanced, saving the hardest hits for Rico.

Only allowed to defend, Rico's hands were a blur as he deflected fist after fist and kick after kick.

Marc automatically put his back to Rico so both sides were protected. He also began to deflect the hits; his movements were identical to Rico's.

"Mission men on defense!" Angela marched over the runway next to them, yelling orders that were immediately followed. "Attack!"

Marc and Rico advanced, throwing identical tandem hits while Greg and Kenn deflected and Gus and Biff protected. The fury slowly began to drain out of all of the men as they ran through the routines.

"One minute pause and then repeat!" Angela was aware of the blood flowing from several gashes the men had received so far during the fight. She scanned them quickly to determine if anyone needed medical attention yet.

Tonya instinctively knew what Angela wanted now. "You have 45 seconds left to place bets, people! Hurry up!"

The crowd let out a cheer and began placing wagers on which team would win.

Angela stepped between the paused, gasping men without fear. "This last set will be a free-for-all. Don't kill each other. That's the only rule. Last man standing earns the title." She didn't give any of them time to question or argue. "Twenty seconds!"

She got off the runway as the crowd hurriedly finished placing their bets and waited for the group fight to resume.

Rico couldn't help it; he burst out laughing.

Now standing shoulder to shoulder with his uncle, Marc frowned through his swelling eyes. "What the hell is so funny?!"

Rico gestured toward Angela. "Your wife."

Marc heard the new respect in Rico's voice and nodded. "Yeah, she hits me like that, too."

"Does it feel like this?" Rico spun around and drilled Marc in the face, knocking him to the ground.

The crowd roared as the fight restarted.

It echoed to the entity observing from the dark jungle. Nature stayed still so she wasn't noticed. *Enjoy your fun while you can, Safe Haven. It'll be over soon and you'll all be gone. I only need to close one more dangerous deal and then I win.*

Chapter Twenty-Five

Not Just Me

1

“**G**et those legs up! Punch faster!” Angela shouted like a drill instructor at the five dozen men and women now doing sets on the runway and in the muddy weeds all around it. “Harder! Act like you mean it!”

Tonya kept a tight shield over Angela, trailing the boss as she walked the uneven rows of camp members and Eagles. After watching the lab men, everyone had wanted to learn how to defend themselves like that. Angela had taken advantage of it with this training session.

The drillers were dripping sweat, bruised, smudged, and wearing huge grins. They were exactly where they wanted to be right now.

Angela and Tonya were also sweaty and dirty and it looked good on them, to the surprise of Marc’s uncle. Rico was used to women staying perfectly neat and riding in the rear. This was an eye-opening experience for him.

“Did you see them slack off?! Did they stop when it hurt?! Punch faster! Hit harder!”

Her demand was obeyed. Students of all ages and ranks moved together, sweat dripping and hearts pounding.

Neil and Adrian were also moving through the people, straightening stances and giving advice, but both men watched Angela more than the drillers. She was in the center of chaos. Anything could go wrong.

“Don’t they know she’s happy right now?” Rico could feel it from here. The waves of contentment and even short blasts of joy were spilling from Angela in a golden light. It was so bright that Jennifer had left when it started, unable to contain her jealousy.

Marc grunted as Charlie taped a splint in place on his broken wrist. It was swollen again and turning colors, but Marc barely felt it. He was still high on the rush from an amazing battle. “One of them owes her his life. The other one owes her his freedom. They won’t relax until it’s over.”

Biff held an ice pack to his swollen jaw. “Which is which?”

Kenn sat in the chair next to Marc. “Doesn’t matter. They’re interchangeable.”

Predictably, Marc and Rico had won the team fighting, but Kenn was stunned that Marc had lost the individual match to his uncle. He just wasn’t sure what to say about it.

Biff shrugged and then winced at the pain. His entire body hurt. “Fair enough.”

They were sitting in chairs that had been lined up outside the medical tent. The partiers who weren't drilling were gathered around the tents and the runway, watching Angela and watching the bruised, bloody men while Charlie and Terry tended their wounds.

Marc's wrist began throbbing in time with the beats of the music. His sore throat did the same.

Rico swallowed another gulp from the bottle, hoping the alcohol would hurry up and numb him to the hurting ribs and swollen jaw. He hadn't been in a fight in a while. He'd forgotten about the aftermath.

Greg rubbed his aching arm through the cast and fought his queasy guts. He'd taken a lot of stomach hits tonight. He was surprised he hadn't vomited yet.

Gus stretched his legs out, wincing at the soreness. Marc and Rico had both drilled his legs to bring him down. He was feeling that now.

"What does she get out of this?" Rico held his arm out so Terry could wrap a bandage around the long slice that had come from Marc's boot. "I mean, I feel it, but what causes it for her?"

The mission men thought of their last therapy session with Angela on the submarine. They offered different thoughts about it.

Kenn didn't look at Rico. "She gets pleasure from helping people."

Greg shook his head. "*Their* happiness is vital to her wellbeing."

Biff snorted. “You’re both wrong. She loves them.”

Rico regarded Marc, who hadn’t answered yet.

Marc chose to make it a teaching moment, like his wife was doing. “Tell me what you see.”

Rico didn’t mind this type of lesson. He studied Angela, tuning out her voice so he wasn’t pulled away from the bigger picture.

He immediately noticed her chin was up and she was standing taller. “She’s proud.”

“Exactly. She’s proving that she’s a good leader, that she can do this no matter what’s trying to hold her back.”

“Did she arrange this to convince me?” Because he still wasn’t, though Rico’s opinion of her was certainly different now.

All five bruised men chuckled or snorted.

Greg slapped at a determined gnat and missed. “She doesn’t do anything singular.”

Gus grunted. “Unlikely.”

Biff scratched at a bug bite. “I forgot you’re new here.”

“Haven’t you been paying attention?” Marc already expected more from his uncle now. He sent Rico’s words right back to him. “Your brother and my wife could have been born from the same egg.”

The mission men winced.

Rico understood he was overlooking her capabilities because she was a female. He broke into a reluctant smile. “What was she like before she got pregnant?”

“Which time?”

Marc glared at Greg for that.

Greg leaned back in the folding chair. “This is the fourth time she’s been pregnant.”

Rico counted. “But she only has one son.” He understood it all at once. “She lost the two before this.”

Marc and Kenn both flushed.

Rico caught their thoughts. His hatred for Kenn grew. His dislike of Marc eased a little more. He turned toward Angela and found her staring at him.

Rico saw it all in her face at that moment. He recognized a survivor. “She would have done better than any of you in the lab.”

“Again, pay attention.” Greg had no sympathy. “We’ve all been in a lab since the war. And she has done better than us. That’s why she’s in charge and the rest of us are her evil subordinates.”

Rico snorted as Angela resumed drilling her fighters. “We’re all too nice to be evil.”

He ignored the leers and inviting smiles from women around them who were impressed and eager to get laid. “How did she know?”

Kenn frowned at the man through swollen, bruising eyes. “How did she know what?”

“That I would win.” Rico wasn’t trying to rub it in. “I’ve kept my mind closed to everyone. How did she know?”

Kenn motioned toward Tonya, who was still on Angela’s heels and loving every second of it. They almost always used a man in that guard position and

for her to be doing it now while Angela was so big was a huge honor. “Tonya gave you away.”

Rico’s brows came together. “I’ve also kept my mind closed to her. She hasn’t snooped until recently.”

“She said you were a Brady.” Kenn even knew the exact moment Angela had recognized it. “That was all it took for the boss’s mind to add up the clues. You and Marc both avoid people because you’re scared of hurting them, of killing.”

“Well now we know Marc’s human, so he can be part of the camp again.” Terry slapped Marc’s shoulder to show he was joking.

“And I’m scarred for life.” Kenn knew he should be jealous and angry, but all he felt was scared. Rico had beaten Marc. Tonya had witnessed it all. She would want the man even more now.

“Maybe he’ll be busy with one of the lot lizards.” Greg automatically gave Kenn comfort. “He showed he has honor and he can fight. Hopefully one of them will shine his knob so well that he doesn’t want her anymore.”

Rico grunted in contempt, but he didn’t ruin the mood by declaring his intentions. He was enjoying the moment; he didn’t want it to end with another fight.

“The Eagles will want you to train them now.” Marc was certain that was another reason Angela had done this.

“So will the camp. They like knowing we have strong defenders.” Charlie handed an ice pack to Rico.

“She did it so Marc would stop feeling like an outsider because of his family.” Greg knew that had been bothering the man. “Now people will know there are two good Reichers or Bradys. Whatever.”

Greg didn’t tell them he’d also faced a fear about still being able to fight with only one eye. It had gone well, all things considered.

Rico regarded Marc. “Did that work? Are we now bonded through our hatred of my brother?”

Marc slowly nodded. The ball of bitterness in his guts had shrunk a bit with every hit he’d taken and delivered. “This doesn’t mean we’ll be swapping spit in the shower.”

Rico laughed at the old movie quote, sending out a thick wave of happiness.

Marc realized Rico had put on a tough act because he’d been afraid of being rejected.

Rico sobered. “It’s not rejection, Marcus. It’s self-preservation. My brother damaged me for decades. Friendships were nonexistent and family was only something to be used against me. I had to be sure you weren’t like him.”

“And?”

Rico’s face darkened. “You’re fine. It’s your wife I have to watch out for.”

All of the mission men nodded in tandem.

“Duck and swing! Duck and swing!” Angela went by Neil, bellowing out orders.

Neil glanced at the crowd, doing a safety sweep. He noticed a very late arrival.

Anna hurried toward the party location with a shawl over her head that almost hid who she was. She blended into the crowd and waited.

Adrian saw Anna and flashed a charming smile at her.

Anna blushed, smiling back.

Neil frowned. His mind replayed a scene from the cafeteria on the cruise ship.

Tobias stiffened suddenly. “You son of a bitch.” He rose and stomped toward Angela.

Angela sighed. “I asked him to be here.”

“Doesn’t change my reaction.” Tobias stomped by her and swung through Adrian’s shield.

Adrian hit the ground, shield vanishing.

People gasped and shouted at his sudden appearance.

Eagle descendants who’d missed him immediately cursed themselves. Those who’d known laughed at those who hadn’t.

Adrian rubbed his jaw and glared at Tobias. “I said I was sorry fifteen years ago. That’s your last free hit.”

“Don’t speak to me—ever!” Tobias went back to his wives, who weren’t surprised by his reaction.

Kyle offered Adrian a hand up. “You sleep with one of his wives?”

Adrian studied the two women, causing them to blush. "No. I think."

Kyle snorted. "Then why'd he clock you?"

"I stopped him from killing someone, a long time ago."

Neil chuckled. Adrian had gotten revenge the Mitchel way. *I wonder how long they've been having an affair.*

Angela had caught it all. She turned, orbs lighting up bright red.

Adrian froze, staring back at her.

Tonya answered Angela's silent command with a huge smile. "It would be my honor." She spun around and punched Adrian in the mouth.

Marc burst out laughing as Adrian hit the muddy ground. "Now this is what I call a party!"

2

"Hurry! The guards went to check on the party. We don't have much time." Tim waited for Ralph and Ed to come out, then shut the door.

The barn was dark and empty of people. The bunkhouse was well lit, but the windows didn't look out onto this side of town.

"Stealing is wrong." Ralph carried two boxes, limping through the mud. These boxes had been under the steps for months. The bottoms were starting to rot from the dampness.

“This is our share of camp supplies. It’s not stealing.” Tim hurried toward the church, hoping the guards stayed at the party so they could return for another load.

“Someone will notice.” Ed carried two boxes in one hand, shining the flashlight with the other so they could get through the jungle.

All of them were wearing dark clothes and guilty expressions. No matter what was said, they knew it was wrong.

“This is all stuff we don’t use very often. It’ll be a while before anyone notices it’s gone.” Tim shifted his two boxes and hurried up the dirty steps to the church.

Ed shut off the flashlight, but he paused as the others went inside to unload their stolen supplies. He peered into the darkness. *I heard something.*

After a minute, he went into the church and shut and locked the door.

Nature didn’t care that someone might have heard her. She leaned closer to the drunken woman who was sprawled at the base of a tree. “She killed him so she would be the only one who could live forever. It’s not right.”

Allison let the bugs crawl on her, moaning in mental agony.

Nature stopped those bugs from biting the woman so she didn’t get up and leave. “I can help you.”

Allison couldn't read Nature's mind; she was too drunk to concentrate on using the new gifts that she was afraid of. "I didn't want to be unlocked. I wanted to stay normal!"

"She also took that away from you."

Allison was so angry she was crying. "There has to be some way to get that knowledge back! I'd do anything for it."

Nature smiled, huge teeth gleaming in the darkness. "Would you kill for it?"

Allison nodded without hesitation. "Yes. Immortality is worth any price."

Nature sent a thick wave of pleasure and confusion into the woman's mind. "Let's make a deal."

3

"Deal me out. I have to go now." Lisa stood up from the awkward Rummy game. She gave Dace an embarrassed smile. "I'll see you in a week. Take care of your brother."

Dace chuckled at her joke, but his expression had become concerned. "Okay."

Jack frowned at Lisa. "Now?"

Lisa made sure her voice didn't shake. "I asked the boss to get it over with since Dace doesn't really need me around right now."

She patted his tense wrist and walked away from the two men. "Be safe, both of you."

“Where’s she going?” Dace felt bad that he’d hurt her feelings, though he was glad to get a break from her.

Jack sighed. “Jail, bro. She made a mistake on the sub and now she has to pay for it.”

Dace tried to read Jack’s mind, but his gifts were still locked. He hadn’t been able to unlock them or the missing parts of his memory. “Oh.”

Lisa’s brawler escort felt Jack’s stare. He nodded at the man. *I’ll get her there safely.*

Jack still fought the need to go along. He watched as the brawler helped Lisa outside and shut the main door.

Dace saw Jack’s concern. “What’s the issue, tissue?”

Jack snorted at their old rhyming game. “She’s pregnant. It’s not good for her to be in that cold cell.”

Dace froze.

Jack started to explain...then decided to let it ride. If Dace thought the baby was his, it might trigger his memory.

It went the other way.

“How the hell can she be pregnant and I don’t even remember her?!” Dace slapped the bed. “I want my life back!”

His tantrum echoed, bringing frowns from the other people in the bunkhouse, but also sympathy. A lot of them missed their past lives.

Dace tried to hold in the frustration. “Deal the cards.”

He had the use of his body from the waist up. He was even able to sit against the bed frame and the wall, but he couldn't feel anything below that. A tear slipped out despite his willpower.

Jack took his brother's hand and stayed quiet. *I should have been more specific. I only asked for him to wake up, not to be healed. That was a huge mistake.*

4

“This is a mistake. My brother would never have allowed it.” Rico observed the crowd with concern. The party wasn't winding down yet even though it was 3 a.m. The music was still blaring loudly, though the training session was over. Almost the entire crowd was dancing; people were also passed out, having sex, or drinking heavily. None of that was the problem. “He would never have allowed us to show our true selves.”

“Reicher kept strict control over everything.” Angela and the other descendants were allowing their demons to show. Marc knew that had happened during the last matchups, but witnessing it firsthand made him uncomfortable.

Rico was focused on Angela. Tonya still had a strong shield around the woman, but that didn't matter to the hundreds of people around her, enjoying the vibe she was putting off while dancing with her. *Not that you can really call that dancing. It's more like slithering.*

“Angela understands people need space to be themselves. She accepts all of them for who they really are inside even while she tries to help them become better people. She demands the best out of everyone. In exchange, she gives every bit of herself in moments like this and in confrontations. She’s the most ruthless battle planner I’ve ever known and that includes your brother.”

Rico still wasn’t sold on Angela having been the sole mastermind of bringing down the lab, but he was slowly coming around to that idea. Everything that had happened tonight had been because of her and he knew that because he’d been scanning the minds around him since before the party started. No one had known what she was going to do except Adrian. “Imagine how different things could have been if the governments hadn’t hidden our kind. We might have all turned out like her.”

Marc snorted bitterly. “The abuse she suffered is what made her who she is today. If you take that away, it wouldn’t be the same.”

“Perhaps.” Rico watched Tonya now, able to feel how happy she was about still being the boss’s guard. “And perhaps souls like theirs would have shined through anyway. It’s impossible to say for sure.”

Marc was willing to give that concession. He looked over at his uncle. “You have to stop stalking her.”

Rico didn’t take his eyes off the stunningly beautiful redhead who was also dancing with the

boss while doing guard duty. Tonya's demon face was fierce. Rico adored it. "Have you ever loved someone so much that you thought your heart would explode?"

Marc remembered when he had felt that way about Angela. Most of the time, he still did, but a lot of dramas had come between them. "If you don't stop stalking her, Angela will have you removed or banished. I've witnessed it time after time. She's not going to tolerate it much longer. Frankly, I'm surprised she's already let it go on this long."

Rico knew he should heed that warning, but he couldn't. He handed out some advice of his own. "You shouldn't leave. The birth of a child is a rare event in a man's life."

Marc tried to blow him off. "What if you have 10 kids?"

Rico shrugged. "A man should be there for the arrival of his child. Even if it's only to gaze upon his son in pride."

Marc had a sudden flash of intuition. "You don't want me to leave because you're enjoying the time we're spending together now."

Rico laughed. "Your wife isn't the only one who's smart."

Marc was also enjoying having an adult family member he could talk to, who understood what he had been through, but it wasn't enough to get him to change his mind. "She's better off without me."

Rico scanned the blond man who was staying close to Angela and occasionally sweeping her with

a longing stare that Rico identified with every time he regarded Tonya. “You love her and you hate him. Why would you leave...” Rico turned toward Marc in surprise. “It’s not just me.”

Marc reluctantly shook his head. There was no point trying to deny it. Rico would find out from someone else anyway. “Female leadership feels wrong to me, but so does her intelligence. I’ve seen more than enough to know she can handle anything that comes our way. I still can’t accept it without interfering.”

“That’s why you’ve been avoiding her.”

Marc nodded. “It’s the only way we can be together and it’s not enough for either one of us. That’s why I have to leave.”

Rico grunted. “Get the rest of it out so it’ll stop eating you alive.”

Marc let the truth fly. “I’m going away so I don’t challenge her for leadership like Jennifer’s been doing. I want to be running this camp, but I love her too much to try to take it away from her. So I’ll stay gone on runs and Adrian and Greg will help her through it.”

Rico realized he had misjudged the relationship. “She doesn’t want either one of them.”

Marc smiled. “It’s always been me.”

“And what of the Roberts woman?”

Marc’s face iced over. “Kendle made me pick between her and Angela. She lost. Anyone who ever forces me to make that decision will lose.”

The bonds between them grew quickly. Rico lowered his voice. "I can kill either one of them for you, or both."

Marc laughed. "I've actually done that. It felt good, but it didn't last."

Rico had heard the story of Marc shooting Adrian. "You used bullets. I'll use my hands."

Marc shook his head. "Like I said, Adrian and Greg will help her adjust while I'm gone."

"So if you can't have leadership, and control over your woman, then you're not willing to live here. You'll go wherever she sends you and risk your life while knowing that nothing will ever match being here with her." Rico leaned back in the chair and shut his eyes. "You and I could have been born from the same egg. This is exhausting."

Marc agreed completely, but he didn't know how to change. He turned toward Rico suddenly, voice desperate. "Can you help me?"

Rico thought about it for a minute. A number of scenarios and techniques went through his mind. "I'll talk to your wife about it."

Marc didn't ask why or push for details. He allowed the small bit of hope the conversation was generating to improve his mood. He wanted to be able to have a happy future with her, here, without destroying everything she'd built. If Rico could help him with that, Marc would find a way to let everything else go, including Kendle's ghost. *I drowned her once. I can do it again.*

Rico's head rolled to the side as he finally passed out.

Marc rose and padded toward the drunken dancing crowd.

Tonya lowered her shield when Marc gestured, smiling as he gently took Angela into his arms.

Angela kissed Marc. The spark between them healed the worst of his new injuries, bringing more approval.

Marc sighed contentedly as her light washed over him and enveloped his mind. *I wish it could always feel like this between us.*

Angela refused to ruin the moment by reminding him it was his issues that were always keeping them apart. She held onto him and pretended the night would never end.

Tonya brought her shield back up around both of them, nodding in satisfaction. *You miscounted, Boss. It was actually 11.*

Angela held onto Marc, delighted that he had joined her. *I couldn't be sure. Brady men are hard to predict.*

Tonya glanced over at the chair, where Rico was slowly sliding toward the ground. Then she looked at the man sitting in a chair next to the empty, bloody cage. Kenn was staring at it, trying to figure out how Marc had lost.

Kenn felt her stare and glanced over.

Tonya motioned at him to join her. *It's not just Brady men. I think they're all fragile. It's our duty*

to protect them, even when they don't think they need it.

Angela tightened her arms around Marc's neck.
I couldn't agree more.

5

Dari groaned as she woke, body hurting. She pried her lids open and blinked repeatedly to clear her blurry vision. Her stomach rolled. She groaned again, hand coming up to her skull as pain shot through her temple.

Dari sat up; the warm male bodies around her shifted, but none of the men woke. Loud snores made her ears ring.

Dari groaned a third time. She was naked, filthy, and sore. *I've been here before.*

Dari slowly stood up and looked around the body pile for her clothes.

The dark jungle around her was silent. Dari spotted her jeans and fell over as she picked them up.

She finally got the pants on and stood; chills went over her skin. "Someone's out there."

The passed-out rookies didn't respond.

Dari picked up a damp shirt, not sure if it was hers or one of theirs. She slid it on. "Wake up. We're being watched!"

The rookies had finished off a bottle of tequila after their orgy. They didn't budge.

Dari stumbled along the dark path, calling for a guard.

Footsteps crunched behind her.

Dari took off running toward town, still trying to find a guard. "Help!"

She could hear the music from the party, but she was too disoriented to follow it. She took the only path that looked familiar.

Mud flew up from her fast steps, splashing the foliage as she went by.

The steps behind her grew louder, closer.

Dari panicked, screaming. She lost the dark path and tripped in the vines. She sank into the muddy grass.

A heavy body fell on top of her, hands going around her throat.

They squeezed until she died.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Banished

1

“**G**ood morning! It’s time to wake up now.”

Daisey moved through the reeking tent, passing out mugs of hot coffee from to those who were already awake. “Good morning! It’s time to get up now.”

Daisey eyed the body pile in the center of the tent in disapproval. Three dozen people had crashed there, many of them without clothes. The tent stunk of old whiskey and vomit. Puddles of it were all over the runway and even here in the tent. Daisey was glad she hadn’t attended last night. *It’s definitely not my scene.*

Jennifer entered the tent and began pointing. “Check your lists before you give them the injections. Make sure you only give it to the people on your list.”

The medics came in behind her and began delivering shots of the rage vaccine.

Tonya had preloaded the needles. They didn’t have enough for everyone; she and Jennifer had spent the last two hours identifying people who needed it the most while keeping their thoughts locked to each other. The rage illness moved slowly

in most people, but the genetic predisposition of some camp members was speeding things up.

Angela sat up on her cot, yawning and clearing sleep from her eyes.

Jennifer approached Angela carefully, not sure what mood she was in yet. “We have food going at the restaurant and a cleanup crew is about to come up here.”

Angela yawned again. She wasn’t hung over; she was sore from all the dancing. “You have point for the day, with Wade, Amy, and Cody.”

Jennifer’s anger sprayed out. “I don’t need to be supervised!”

Angela gave the girl a dirty look. She wasn’t ready for attitude. “Well, they do. Try to be nice. Your problems are not their fault.”

Jennifer backed off. “Fine! Tell them to meet me at the cove.”

Before Jennifer could exit the tent, Kyle came in. He gave her a quick smile and then went to Angela, adding to Jennifer’s moodiness.

Angela took the arm Kyle offered, using her free hand to cradle the stomach that felt larger. “It’s going to be a good day.”

Kyle lifted a brow. “Really?”

Angela sighed. “I’m trying to convince myself.”

Kyle chuckled, drawing attention to how well they were getting along.

Jennifer stomped out of the tent. “Get that cleanup crew in here!”

Den mothers shoved coffee mugs into barely awake hands, trying to hurry the process.

Tobias and Terry supervised most of the injections, quickly sticking people before they realized what was happening. Jennifer had told them not to give anyone a choice. The medics agreed, though they wished it was possible to get everyone vaccinated. All of them hoped Tonya would be able to identify the ingredients in the vaccine, though the odds of reproducing them were slim.

Angela kept ahold of Kyle's arm as they left the tent. She skipped the disgusting port-o-potties, opting for a fast stop in the bushes.

Kyle waited with his back turned, eyeing the party scene. There were people passed out everywhere even though the sun was climbing higher in the sky. Rough clouds rolled toward the island in warning of yet more rain coming.

Kyle narrowed in on two snoring guards near the charred ground where the small runway shed had once stood. "They're supposed to be on duty in town."

He wrote it in his book and then resumed scanning for anything that needed to be handled. Angela had asked him to return this morning as her escort, but he would also be her eyes and ears until she was alert enough to cover it on her own.

Angela waddled out of the bushes, sniffing the air. "I smell food."

Kyle laughed and steered her toward town. Many of the mission men were already there despite the heavy drinking, fighting, and partying overnight. Even alcohol couldn't dim their nightmares for long.

Kyle nodded toward Adrian, who was now dozing in a chair near the big tent. Adrian had spent all night here, keeping an eye on the boss even after she crashed. Kyle expected him to go to his shack and sleep for the next 10 hours. He was impressed with the man's stamina, though not in the same way as with the fighters. All of the mission men were covered in new bruises, scratches, and even stitches in a few places, but they weren't fazed by it.

"This is nothing compared to what they went through on that warehouse floor."

Kyle knew that was the truth. "The brawlers are in the middle of accounting for everyone. It will still be a while yet before they're done."

"Any problems at the jail?"

Kyle shook his head. "I was by there a few times before I finally crashed and I'm sure Jennifer did rounds there, too. Missy is still in her cell and her parents are in the one right across from her."

Both of them were glad that Shawn hadn't tried to get Missy off the island.

"Samantha had another nightmare. She's been awake since then, working on Missy's case. She wants a word with you as soon as you're ready. I think she's trying again to get you to let Missy out until the trial."

“Good.”

Kyle frowned. “I thought you didn’t want her out.”

“I don’t, but I do want the old Samantha back. That’s the only good thing about this situation.”

“Fair enough.” Kyle kept his good arm around Angela as they reached the muddy path just outside of town. It was strewn with bottles, clothes, and trash despite no one being allowed to party anywhere except the clifftop. “We’ll be cleaning this up for a week.”

Angela was careful on the slippery jungle floor. “Give me a few months and it won’t be like this afterward.”

Kyle didn’t know how she planned to accomplish that, but he was positive she would. Just seeing her drilling with dozens of drunken partiers last night would have been enough to convince him of that even if he hadn’t witnessed her other impossible feats. “How are things between you and Marc?”

Kyle felt her tense under his fingers before she forced herself to relax.

“You’d have to ask his uncle.” Marc had helped her to bed around dawn and crashed in the cot next to her, but he hadn’t stayed there for long.

Kyle had noticed Marc’s return to town without her. “He’s been in the restaurant for an hour, drinking coffee and brooding.”

“We gave him a lot to think about last night. He needs time to work through it.”

“Is there anything I can do on that front?”

Angela shrugged. “Again, you’d have to ask his uncle.”

Kyle scowled, letting his personal feelings show for the first time. “Are we supposed to accept Rico as a good guy now even though he was accused of rape?” Kyle didn’t like him. Now that he knew how dangerous Rico was, that feeling had only grown stronger.

“None of us here are really good, Kyle.”

Kyle noticed she hadn’t answered the question. He saved it for a different time as he led her toward the busy restaurant.

Angela smoothed her hair. “Feed me and then I’ll answer your questions. If I don’t get food first, I’ll start chewing on your arm.”

Kyle laughed, drawing more attention.

2

Marc was at a table near the front window of the restaurant. Morgan had just replaced his cast; his wrist was throbbing in time to his headache now. He saw Kyle and Angela approaching.

He kept his mind blank as he observed their happy early morning banter. *It’s been a long time since she’s been like that with me.*

Neil had just gotten a mug of coffee. He dropped down at the table across from Marc. “What’s going on with those two?”

Marc shrugged. “Another master plan, I assume.”

Neil studied Marc. “It’s odd that you’re not flipping out about it.”

“I did enough of that in the lab.”

“Do you want to talk about it?”

Marc sighed. “No, but she doesn’t give me a choice.”

“Therapy sessions?” Neil was curious. “Do they work?”

“It helps us to see the small parts we’re missing, so no.”

Neil chuckled. “How about some shark fishing later and we’ll talk if you feel like it?”

“I’ll let you know.” Marc didn’t want to see another shark for the rest of his life, but he didn’t tell Neil that. He watched Angela lean against Kyle’s hip and quickly turned his attention toward the kids who were at the table next to them.

Neil was impressed and confused. “That was one hell of a run you guys went on.”

“Yeah, hell about sums it up.”

Both men were quiet while Angela came in. She only stayed long enough to get a mug of coffee and a piece of slightly burnt bread. Thelma’s concern over Brittani was affecting the food again.

Both of them noticed Angela didn’t eat more than that. She spent a few minutes talking to people and flashing that fake smile around before leaving.

Adrian had stumbled through the jungle behind them, still keeping an eye on her while also coming

to town. He grabbed a mug off the counter now and joined Marc and Neil at the table, though he didn't sit. "She didn't eat much yesterday either."

Marc glared at Adrian. "Isn't that your job now?"

"No." Adrian smiled tiredly. "But I'd give anything for it. Excuse me." Adrian left, whistling softly.

Neil frowned. "He hasn't changed."

"Why should he? As the asshole in our camp, he gets to work, mate, and walk away when things get tough." Marc didn't mention the fact that Neil had forgiven Adrian. Marc wasn't upset about that, though he would never be able to do it.

Neil understood what Marc hadn't said. "He's scared."

Marc nodded. "Leadership now intimidates people."

Neil grunted. "Jennifer will settle down in time."

"I wasn't talking about Jennifer." Marc glared mildly toward Kyle through the window and then once again turned his attention to the kids.

Neil noticed who Cate was sitting with this time. "How do you feel about that?"

Marc shrugged. "I'll let you know when his paternity test comes in."

"If he's your family, they can still have a friendship. But if he's Adrian's son..."

Marc grimaced. "I'm hoping I don't have to make that call."

“How did your drunk test go?”

Marc stared in surprise. “You’re more observant now.”

“I try. Well?”

Marc shrugged. “The bottle hadn’t been touched and I made sure it was left where they could get to it.”

“I assume you’ll do it again in the future to make sure?”

“Yes.”

“What about Reicher’s other kids?”

“The town doesn’t know who they are. The den mothers are looking for adoptive parents.”

“And Kendle’s cousins?”

“The same. Angie decided to keep it quiet about who they are so they can all have a shot at a good life in safety.”

Neil grunted. “Now if the adults could just have that, too.”

As if to mock him, a distant alarm at a guard post began echoing faintly through the jungle.

Both men rose and began to track the noise without commenting on the irony.

3

“I need a minute.” Angela stepped out of sight behind the small church bunkhouse and let it fly.

Kyle listened to her getting sick, worrying. She’d only been on rounds for half an hour, but this was the second time she’d had to stop and empty her

stomach. He knew it was because of the pregnancy, not an illness. He doubted Marc was aware of the problem, however. There had been a cool distance between her and the Wolfman since he had been rescued from the lab. Their dance last night had been the first time he'd seen them touch at all since getting home.

Angela came out from behind the small bunkhouse, waving toward the path. "Let's go to the beach."

They both missed Tim's relief. He'd been watching them through the bunkhouse window.

"It's almost time for you to give up leadership for a while, Boss. The baby is more important than keeping power."

"There's no one else who can do it, Kyle." Angela let him in. "They don't trust Jennifer now and there's no one else I trust to do the job."

Kyle said what she was thinking. "You have to bring Adrian back in."

Neither of them saw Adrian as he moved along the path toward his shack bunker. Adrian paused, waiting to hear her answer.

Angela wiped her mouth on her shirt. She forced her shaking legs to move, eager to get into the jungle and out of sight of everyone. They didn't need to know how rough things were on her right now. "You already know I want that. Most of us want that."

"What's stopping you from doing it?" Kyle had been curious about that. "You have the authority to overrule anything."

“Adrian. He’s not putting in effort. He has to win the camp over and I can’t help him with it. If I do, it will only backfire.”

“Maybe I can talk to him.”

“It really would be better if he figured it out on his own.”

“We don’t have time for that, Boss. He needs to get his shit together and do it right now.”

“I couldn’t agree more.”

Adrian stayed still until they were out of sight and then he slowly turned toward town. He headed for the shower, mind spinning in 100 different directions. As he got in line with everyone else, he was aware that the only dirty looks he was getting came from members of the camp. The Eagles didn’t have a problem with him being here now even though Jennifer had made a stink about it.

Adrian scanned and saw things that still needed to be done. For one brief moment, he was back in America, struggling to make the camp happy while he led them through the apocalyptic wastelands. It had worked then. *Why not now?*

Adrian sucked down the rest of his coffee and then went to the barn to see what supplies were being stored there. *I can sleep next week.*

“Shut that alarm off right now!” Neil glared at the brawler in the guard post. “You’re not supposed to use that unless it’s an emergency!”

“It is.” Stuart shut off the alarm. “Over here.”

Marc scanned the empty post while ignoring the pains from his battered body. “Where are the guards who are supposed to be at this post?”

“I have no idea.” Stuart led them 100 feet into the jungle and then pointed.

Neil stopped, staring. “Another murder.”

Stuart nodded. “I found her about 20 minutes ago. I didn’t want to leave the body unguarded long enough to go to town to get anyone. That’s why I used the alarm. I didn’t think anyone would appreciate it if I called it in over the radio and panicked the camp.”

Neil looked over his shoulder toward Marc. “Can you use your private hive connection to call Kenn?”

Marc was already in the middle of doing that. He stared at Neil in surprise. “How did you know?”

“I know almost everything that goes on in this camp now.” Neil motioned to Stuart. “Go find Morgan. Marc and I will stay here until you get back.”

Stuart hurried off, eyeing the muddy jungle suspiciously; a murderer was now among them.

Neil stayed where he was and studied the body, looking for similarities between this murder and Pam’s. “She was strangled.”

Marc was also scanning the body. “That’s a man’s shirt. She was at the matchups last night. Her shirt was green.”

“Maybe one of her many partners got tired of her being so easy.”

“Maybe, but from what I’ve heard, everyone knows she’s not a one-man girl. And this has a personal feel to it.”

Neil heard Kenn hurrying toward them. He pointed toward the body without revealing any of his thoughts, but he was almost relieved. Missy was still in jail. She couldn’t be accused of this crime, and it might absolve her of the first one. *The boss was right to keep her in there.*

Marc frowned. “That means we have a serial killer on this island targeting women.”

Kenn moved by them and knelt next to the body, ignoring his soreness. The black eyes were the worst part, but his body felt rough today from all the hits he’d taken last night. “Keep those suspicions to yourself so you don’t taint my investigation.”

Neil and Marc retreated so they could still converse without distracting Kenn.

“I passed a body pile a little ways back. It was full of rookies. Send someone to collect them and escort them to the jailhouse.”

Neil frowned at Kenn’s order. “Why? Do you think they did it?”

“I don’t, actually. Everyone at the party last night saw Dari go off with the rookies. I’m hoping

one of them will remember a detail that will help me solve this.”

“Good idea.” Neil walked toward town to collect backup in case the rookies woke up in a bad mood and tried to resist.

“Neil?”

Neil stopped and turned. “You want me to arrest them, don’t you?”

Kenn immediately nodded. “If the person who really did this thinks someone else has been arrested for their crime, they might be easier to find.”

Neil’s frown was huge as he went to town. Kenn’s reasoning was perfectly logical. *Why didn’t I think of that?*

Neil pondered the new differences the mission men had returned with while he walked through the wet, windy jungle.

Marc stayed with Kenn as he began to examine the crime scene.

Kenn didn’t touch the body yet. He would wait until the medics examined her first so he didn’t contaminate the evidence. The deep purple marks around her neck were almost a perfect set of fingerprints. “Is it possible to pull prints off skin?”

“I think so, yeah.”

Kenn stood up and began scanning the muddy jungle floor. “Help me.”

Marc pointed. “To your left, next to the tree.” He had spotted them upon arrival. “One set probably belongs to her, based on the shallow impression.”

Kenn examined the prints in the mud and then took out his phone to snap pictures. “That second print goes all the way down. That was done by a man.”

“Yep.” Marc heard people approaching and went back to the path to direct them away. “Those are prints from standard Eagle boots. Her killer is one of us.”

Kenn paused. “I feel something else coming.”

“Same.” Marc turned on the radio on his belt.

Grant’s voice blared through the speaker. “We have incoming! There’s a boat approaching the beach!”

“Damn it!” Kenn wanted to rush down there, but he couldn’t leave the body.

The radio filled with a garble of responses, telling him other people were on the way to handle it.

Kenn resumed his investigation while listening for news.

Marc turned toward town instead of going to the beach. *At least one good thing will come out of today.*

5

“Incoming! There’s a boat approaching the beach!” The radio was still blaring with Grant’s alarmed voice.

“Clear this channel!” Jennifer’s angry response brought calm to the camp and the radio this time.

Everybody was suddenly sure that whoever was approaching their island was going to be very sorry. They didn't like Jennifer's methods, but they were confident she would protect the camp.

Angela finally made it to the beach. She and Kyle were the first ones here, but only because they had already been on the way down before the call came in. She heard footsteps running through the jungle toward them. The brawlers and Eagles were also close.

Kyle began scanning the approaching RIB, trying to estimate the threat. He frowned. "I think that's one of ours."

Angela agreed with his observation. She narrowed in further and felt a brief wave of desire that was followed by an intense flash of loathing. Her lids narrowed. "Go get Charlie."

Kyle keyed his radio instead of leaving her. "Charlie, report to the beach ASAP!"

"Copy." It was clear from the confusion in his tone that Charlie hadn't expected to be called for the action.

A lot of people were surprised upon hearing that. The mission men and rescue team were supposed to be getting a break now, though Kenn had been put to work, but that was an emergency. It told everyone listening that this might also be a serious problem.

Cate and Bret flew over the cliff cove path and came to a halt on either side of Angela and Kyle.

Both kids lifted dense shields around the adults and prepared to fire as soon as they were given an order.

“Let them land.” Angela watched the approaching boat in complete surprise. She was reading the minds of those on board; she hadn’t expected to see either of those people again, let alone for them to return to Safe Haven.

Angela saw longer hair, weathered skin, and lean bodies that were now capable of survival. Their minds weren’t as strong, but she wasn’t going to make them stay. The woman in the boat was terrified of that happening. *Welcome back. Your stay will be short.*

“I can’t believe he did that.” Kyle was also reading the minds of the two adults on the RIB that was bouncing over the choppy ocean.

“Neither can I.”

“You didn’t know this was going to happen?” Kyle scowled at the man steering the RIB, making his displeasure clear.

Angela shook her head. “I knew Marc was going to try to save the baby. I had no idea Ivan was going to hold her hostage until she delivered. I honestly thought Ivan had gotten tired of my insults. Marc declaring him unworthy publicly was the final straw.”

Ivan bounced the RIB up onto the beach and neatly killed the engine. Sprays of water and sand flew up, creating a waterfall of debris as Jennifer and the Eagles reached the beach.

Ivan climbed out of the RIB and tugged it further up onto the sand so the tide wouldn't pull it away. Then he turned toward the woman in the boat with him.

Tracy handed him the baby. She didn't say goodbye to it or expend any emotion on it. She saved that for the people on the beach, glaring at all of them.

Ivan came straight to Angela. He ignored the people who were ready to fire on him with magic and bullets as he got close; the attraction between them lit up as she motioned.

Cate and Bret dropped their shields, but stayed ready to react.

Ivan gently put Angela's grandchild into her arms and then retreated. His obsession for her flared in his mind, trying to take control. "Boss."

Angela was furious and grateful. The tiny life in her arms determined her reaction.

Angela stepped forward and tilted her chin up. "Take your reward and then go wait in the boat."

Ivan gently lowered his head and kissed her. Thick sparks flew between them, lighting up his body and sending peace into his chaotic mind. He quickly stepped back as everyone frowned or glared.

"Bring down a week's worth of fuel and food. Dip into our ammunition, too. Make it fast." Angela looked at Ian, who had come with the brawlers instead of the Eagles because it was his off day.

Grumbling, Ian ran toward the jungle to do what she wanted while rubbing the bruises on his neck from Panaji's chokehold during the matchup. *Next time, I'll get mean.*

Charlie passed Ian on the clover path but didn't get an answer to what was going on. He hurried, trying to read minds to determine the threat. He made it to the beach and stopped in shock at the sight of Tracy sitting stiffly in the boat.

Angela focused on Tracy. She connected mentally, against the woman's will. "Are you sure?" She spoke aloud so everyone could at least hear half of the conversation even if they were normal. This was an important story that would fly through Safe Haven almost as fast as the news that they'd had another death overnight. She wanted people to get it right.

Tracy glared back. *Yes!*

"You're Invisible. You know that. The magic is inside you. There's no running from it."

Not if I never unlock it!

Angela studied the healthy, sleeping baby. "Are you sure about leaving your child here?"

Yes! Tracy was rabid about getting rid of the magical infant. *I'm calling in my marker. You owe me! Make them leave me alone now.*

Angela nodded. "I won't let anyone hunt you or force you to return. Thank you for being a part of Safe Haven and thank you for not killing the baby. Go in peace."

Ivan had stopped next to the boat. He stared at Angela in deep longing. “Can I return here after I deliver Tracy to wherever she wants to go?”

Angela shook her head. “Absolutely not. You kidnapped a member of this camp and forced her to have a child she can’t love. You’re banished, forever.”

To everyone’s surprise, Ivan smiled at her. “Thank you, Boss.”

“It’s my honor.”

“You have no honor!” Charlie had pulled it all from their minds now. He advanced toward Ivan even though he knew he was likely to be hurt.

Angela turned and placed the baby in his arms. “Meet your son.”

Charlie stopped, startled.

Angela gestured to Ivan. “Go wait in the cove. The supplies will be brought down there.”

Ivan immediately began pushing the RIB back out into the choppy water.

Charlie stared at his son as love filled his heart. He didn’t watch Tracy leave. He had already figured out that he had no right to hold her against her will, like Kenn had done to his mother for so long. He couldn’t help sending her a brief message. *If you change your mind, you know where we’ll be.*

For one instant, Tracy remembered why she loved Charlie. Then she scanned the people watching her and turned away without answering.

“Where did he get the RIB?” As far as Kyle knew, all of them had been destroyed in the atoll

battles. The only ones they had left were the ones that had been on the submarine.

Jennifer joined them, digging into Ivan's mind. "We've been doing rounds of the atolls every two weeks. We noticed the supplies were disturbed. We assumed a survivor had found the stash."

"But where did the boat come from?"

Angela had already pulled that from Ivan's mind. "Marc ordered them to leave it on Henderson Island. He told them it was in case any of our people were accidentally left behind. There was only enough fuel in it to get here."

Jennifer realized her mistake. "The ocean wouldn't have allowed a survivor to get here on their own. So far, it's only been the people who set sail with us from America!"

It was a simple, amazing plan that had been kept from everyone. Angela was shocked about that.

Kyle was also in shock. "Why did he do it?"

Adrian had also made it to the beach now. He heard Kyle's question and snorted. "She said she'd be very grateful to him, remember?"

Angela denied that. "Marc didn't care about credit or gratitude. He did it to remove Ivan from our lives for good. He knew from his moments with *you* that he had to handle it without me knowing exactly what he planned."

"Marc did this?" Kyle was shocked again. He'd been talking about Ivan.

"I'm not the only one who can put together a great scheme." Angela smiled at the infant sleeping

peacefully in his father's arms. "After going through all this, I'm positive the mastermind has an explanation that will satisfy everyone who needs a pacifier."

Adrian and Kyle laughed.

"He saved the baby." Charlie's troubled mind finally eased. "Dad saved my baby!"

Angela waved at her son. "Let's get him to the medics and have him checked out."

Charlie headed toward town with a large escort that included Cate and Bret. They were staring at the new baby curiously, already able to feel that he was gifted, like them.

Adrian couldn't let it go yet. He'd had several conversations with Marc and even though he'd known this plan was in the works, he didn't agree with the reasoning behind it. "He's leaving you here with me and Greg. Why would he try to get Ivan out of your lives forever? Ivan clearly loves you as much as your other unwanted men. Wouldn't it have made more sense for Marc to keep him around so you'd have extra protection?"

Angela looked over at Jennifer. "Would you like to fill in the blank for him?" Angela walked toward town, slowly following the crowd without giving Jennifer a choice.

Jennifer was still watching Ivan direct the boat toward the cove. She answered distractedly. "You and Greg might be able to get along someday and share the boss if she decides to go that way. Ivan is completely obsessed. He'd never be able to share.

Both of you would end up dead and then he would claim the spoils.”

It bothered Adrian to know Ivan was that much of a threat. “Should we go rescue her?”

Jennifer shook her head. “Because of who Tracy is bonded to, Ivan will protect her and make sure she gets to where she’s going. She’s safer with him than she is with us.”

Kyle asked the next question. “Do you think we’ll ever see her again?”

Jennifer shrugged, turning toward the opposite path that everyone else was taking so she could do rounds of the areas they hadn’t gotten to yet. “Maybe we should ask Marc.”

Adrian stared. “Did you just make a joke?”

Jennifer didn’t answer.

Adrian chuckled. “Mind if I tag along with you for a minute?”

Jennifer’s tension immediately returned. “I told her I don’t need a chaperone!”

Adrian realized Cate and Bret had gone with Charlie, and Wade was currently helping Neil round up the rookies who would spend at least one night in jail. “It’s not for you. I have a couple of questions that only a boss can answer.”

Jennifer’s ego was soothed. She motioned him along. “What can I do for you?”

“Tell me what you want done first in town—lights or showers?”

Jennifer understood what he was about to do and why. She spun around, glaring. “You’re never going to be let back in! Stay out of town now!”

Adrian’s eyes narrowed as she marched off. “Only one woman can get me to obey that order and it isn’t you.”

Chapter Twenty-Seven
Come Back To Me

1

“I didn’t hurt that skank!”

“I only watched!”

“She was having fun with us!”

The rookies who’d been with Dari were hungover and scared. They held onto the bars as Neil locked their cell.

In the empty area next to the cells, Lisa was sitting on a stool and reading a book, but her mind was stuck on Dace. She ignored the rookies and their harsh shouts.

“I want a lawyer!”

“Let me out! I’ll find out who really did this!”

Neil dropped the keys onto the desk and quickly jumped aside as the front door slammed open.

Samantha marched in with a sheet of paper in her hand and a triumphant expression on her face. “Let Missy out. The boss just granted my no-bail release request.”

Samantha was soaked, with short curls dripping water onto her shoulders, but the paper in her hand was pristine. She’d protected it under her jacket the entire way.

Neil got the mop from the corner and began cleaning up the mess so it wouldn't be spread across the entire floor.

Shawn and Selina hurried over to Missy's cell.

"Thank you."

"I knew you'd get her out!" Shawn unlocked it and then tugged Missy in for a quick hug. She'd needed that for days. "I owe you."

Missy pushed out of his arms and hugged Samantha.

Samantha held the girl, trying not to cry. "The boss wants her in the bunkhouse, general population. Her trial hasn't been scheduled yet, so I don't know when that will be."

Shawn paused. "Why not upstairs?"

Samantha gestured toward the watching rookies who were now hoping she would help them. "A second murder that she couldn't have done has changed opinions. You'll all be well-cared for bunking with the camp."

Shawn frowned. "And watched."

Samantha nodded. "That's for the best."

"Why?" Selina was confused.

Samantha turned toward the other cell. "Two women were killed. The camp is starting to believe we have a serial killer."

"We didn't do it!"

"I didn't kill anyone!"

The rookies were half-clothed, stinking, and filthy from sleeping on the ground overnight. They

were also hungover and scared. They understood her point.

Selina didn't. "What does that have to do with Missy?"

"She'll be right there showing everyone she's just a little girl." Shawn scooped Missy up and put her over his shoulder.

Missy giggled.

Selina followed them out, already feeling better.

Neil motioned Lisa toward the empty cell. "Change the bedding on the cot and put all the garbage into a bag."

Lisa obeyed without complaint. She was looking forward to stretching out on the cot. Her tailbone was sore from all the hours on the stool.

As soon as the door shut, Samantha went over to the full cell of rookies. "Tell me everything that happened last night, one at a time." Her voice hardened. "Don't leave out a single detail or I can't help you."

All of the men spilled their guts, giving details that would have made a porn star blush.

Neil observed in relief as Samantha handled it like a professional. *Thank you, Boss. Once again, I owe you everything.*

He slipped out the front door and went to the nearby guard post, trying not to cry.

Neil didn't think Angela had arranged all of this, but he was certain she was using it to accomplish another list of goals and Samantha's recovery was

at the top. *I'll never be able to repay her, but I'll spend my life trying.*

Forgiving Adrian had been just the first step in a long line of support that Neil planned to give. *Whatever the boss wants, she's going to get and everyone else can go to hell, including her husband.*

2

“Welcome back!”

“It's Shawn!”

“Clear a path!” Jennifer shoved through the crowd that wasn't as scared of her anymore. She barely stopped herself from sending out a community zap to remind them how dangerous she was.

Shawn lifted Missy onto his shoulders and tugged Selina closer, betraying his nervousness.

Jennifer got in front of them and turned around, forcing the camp to make a path as she led them through.

Shawn immediately felt better. Strong leadership was both a curse to him and a comfort. *We can all thank Reicher for that.*

Yep. Wade nodded at the family as they went by. He was waiting for Conner to finish changing Candy's little girls. Then they were going out for a short walk. The den mothers were forcing Candy to go get a shower at the same time. She definitely needed it. The smells in the bunkhouse were thick

anyway, but body odor was hitting everyone as Candy got out of the dirty cot.

“Over here.” Jennifer had insisted on giving them a corner near the kitchen.

Shawn didn’t protest. After Samantha’s words, he understood they needed to be where everyone could see them until Missy was officially cleared. He was just glad that Allison wasn’t here making a scene. He’d read thoughts and knew she was causing problems. Allison was handling the rest of Pam’s things from the ship right now. It would get ugly later when she returned and found them here. If they got lucky, she would spend the night on the ship.

Shawn thought about Missy’s prediction that Pam would die for him at some point. Then he thought about Cody’s words. The boy had said he and Pam would die together in the final battle. *Angela was right. The future changes with every choice and event. How the hell does she manage to predict anything at all?*

Selina put their wet bags on the floor by the three cots while Shawn sat the girl on her feet. Both adults stayed between Missy and the camp while they started unpacking things into the footlockers.

The camp kept offering encouragement and support while observing their every move.

“We knew she didn’t do it. We’ll make sure she gets a fair trial.”

“Might not even be one when Kenn catches the real killer.”

“Do you think the rage illness is causing it?”

“Yes. We need more of that vaccine.”

“They should have gotten our permission before sticking us.”

“Would you rather turn into a madman? We’ve all heard the stories of what happened to the people who lived here before us.”

“I haven’t.”

Shawn tuned out that conversation, not needing the reminder of how bad the rage illness could get. He folded a shirt and put it into his locker; a conversation happening in the kitchen caught his attention.

“It has to be one of us.”

“Normals wouldn’t do this!”

“I meant camp members in general, but yes, normals could have done it. Don’t act like the magic users are the only ones capable of violence.”

“You’re always protecting them!” Ralph pushed by Parker and limped toward his cot.

Parker frowned. He looked over at Shawn.

Shawn nodded. *I’ll let the boss know.* He wasn’t concerned with Parker freaking out over the mental communication. Parker was tough. He’d been with Safe Haven for a long time now; he’d weathered all of the storms.

Parker brushed dust from his long-sleeved shirt. He liked being clean and dry, but he was also hot. *I’ll talk to Tim later about the dress code even though he isn’t going to agree. Long sleeves in hot weather is crazy.*

Parker turned back to the other church men who were trying to figure out who was killing defenseless women on their island.

“Maybe the Dragon can do a search when the weather clears.”

The group laughed cruelly at Jennifer’s new nickname.

Parker walked away from them. He didn’t want to be around people who insulted others. He believed conversations, and even debates, should be civil.

The church men realized they’d gone too far. They stopped talking and looked around to see who had noticed.

Shawn smiled coldly.

Jennifer walked by, glaring.

The group quickly disbanded, going to different areas in the bunkhouse.

The boss is going to have to do something about them.

Jennifer knew Shawn was right, but it still angered her. *You just watch your step! You’re in enough trouble already.*

Shawn laughed aloud.

Jennifer flushed as people turned toward them. She stomped upstairs for a patrol.

Selina lifted a brow. “What did I miss?”

Shawn waved it off. “She thinks she’s dangerous. She has no idea where we’ve been.”

Selina froze as memories hit her hard.

Shawn took her hand. “Come back to me.”

Selina slowly thawed, blinking. Her pupils dilated and then she let out the breath she'd taken in and held. "Fire."

Shawn hugged her.

Sitting on her cot nearby, Jayda bonded with the scarred lab woman. *Maybe we can be friends.*

Thunder rumbled in the distance as the main door opened again.

Jayda was recounting the supply numbers for the trip and wondering how many of the mission men were actually going with her. Some of those strong men were starting to settle back into camp life now. She doubted they would all leave when the time came.

Jayda saw Terry enter the bunkhouse and hang up his red raincoat. She watched him in longing until she realized he was making eye contact and coming straight toward her. She braced for something embarrassing.

Terry handed her a damp sheet of paper. "I'm sorry. It wasn't my call."

Jayda read the paper. "What does this mean?"

"You can't go yet." Terry was aware of how many people were listening, but he still finished the duty he'd been given because he was the CMO. "Your run is grounded."

"Why?!"

Terry pointed at the sheet. "We can't allow the rage illness to spread to the States. You're grounded until all of the people going are cleared."

Terry included the shocked, quiet camp members. “That just came down from the boss and it applies to every single person on this island. Until you’re cleared, you can’t leave.”

3

“This is more like it.” Molly baited her hook and gently cast her line into the shark pond. “I’m not a farmer.”

Molly still felt bad about bashing Jack’s hand even though Megan had bumped her. Molly frowned. “She never did apologize to Jack for that.”

Thomas was on a stool next to Molly. His crutches were on the ground nearby. He also had a sturdy fishing pole with a strong line, but he hadn’t baited the hook yet. He was staring at the small sharks while trying not to vomit.

Molly caught his thoughts of the shark that had hunted him and almost killed him. “That’s awful!”

Thomas gestured with his cast. “I hate them all now.”

“Then why are you doing this?”

“I’m facing my fear.” Thomas forced himself to bait the hook with a dead fish. He cast the line into the shallow impression and held his breath.

Molly was proud of him when he held steady against the vicious snaps of the sharks. They were small, but deadly. Her own experience with the ruthless animals had given her a new appreciation

for nature. “I don’t hate them, but they do scare the hell out of me.”

Thomas felt a bond trying to form, but it couldn’t break through his fear as a long shark snapped down his bait. His fingers loosened, letting the pole get tugged from his grip.

Molly put a bruised hand over his, trapping the pole. “You can do this.”

Thomas drew in a ragged breath. He yanked the pole to hook the shark.

Molly did the same with her own line.

“We got it! Them.” Molly laughed happily as she reeled in the short line and brought her shark to the shore. “Now we just swing them over to the holding pond.” She demonstrated, arm muscles bulging as she lifted the shark with the line.

Thomas copied her, swinging the thrashing shark into the holding pond.

“Now we cut the line and let them drop.” Molly drew her knife and leaned forward.

The shark went wild, slapping against her arm.

Molly cut the line, dropping the angry animal into the water.

She grinned at Thomas through her black eye. “Fun, right?”

He grunted again. “Only if I had a grenade.”

Molly shrugged. “We get to cut off their heads on meat gathering days so we can reclaim the hooks.”

“Now I have something to look forward to.” He drew his knife, but sitting on the stool didn’t give him enough reach to cut the line.

“I’ll get it for you.” Molly was surprised that Thomas was alive at all, let alone out doing things on his own. The scars and healing wounds under his shorts were awful.

Thomas held the line still while Molly leaned forward.

The shark thrashed violently. It turned itself and clamped down on her arm.

Awful screams sent Thomas back to his own misery. For a few seconds, he couldn’t move and he didn’t breathe. Then he snapped out of it. He used the knife in his hand to stab the shark’s eye. He slid the blade into its mouth and popped the jaws open.

The shark dropped into the pond where the blood from its dead eye triggered a feeding frenzy.

Thomas pulled off his shirt and wrapped it around Molly’s bleeding arm as guards came running.

Molly stopped screaming, but tears rolled over her cheeks nonstop. “I was wrong! I fucking hate them!”

Thomas hugged her. “I think we’ve faced enough fears for one day.”

Molly laughed bitterly against his chest. “We need more grenades.”

Thomas chuckled, now directing her up the path toward the clinic. “We’ll talk to Jennifer about it. She’s the type to want more explosives.”

Molly shuddered. “Keep away from her. She’ll pull out every thought you don’t want known and use it against you. She’s bad news.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

4

“Why are you doing this?” Conner held tightly to his end of the large generator box as they brought it across the vibrating walkway. This dock was well anchored, but still swaying in the rising wind and water. “Jennifer may explode when she finds out.”

The two males were in jeans and tank tops and still covered in layers of sweat and dirt. The storage rooms of the cruise ship hadn’t been cleaned in months. Cobwebs and dust bunnies were everywhere.

Adrian tried to ignore the anxiety that was warning him to hurry up and get away from the ocean. “Angela can’t do it and everyone else is busy. It needs to get done.”

They paused to let a line of brawlers go by. Those men were sweeping the dock and the cove now.

Conner rolled his eyes. “It makes no sense to hunt for evidence down here. The crime scene is in the jungle.”

“They’re hoping to find something out of place that will connect the two deaths. Kenn told them to cover the entire island.”

Conner had been listening to the radio alerts for the last two hours. “I heard. We’re all supposed to go places in pairs. Guards have been doubled and Kenn is interrogating the men who were with Dari.” Conner frowned at his dad as he came back to his point. “Jennifer doesn’t want *you* in town.”

“I know.” Adrian was clear on Jennifer’s feelings toward him. “It doesn’t matter.”

“You need to obey the rules.” Conner was worried that Adrian would be told to leave the island. Word had spread about Ivan being banished.

Adrian thought of Anna. “Sometimes it’s okay to break the rules.”

“Tell Jennifer that.”

Adrian grimaced. “I’m sure I will. For now, save your energy for the climb.”

Conner knew that was good advice. The generator would go to the clifftop via pulley, but they would still have to climb the wet ladder in this wind. Neither of them were used to so much exertion. Adrian had been on a submarine for a month and Conner had stayed next to Candy, feeding her all of his energy.

“Candy wants to use the cancer treatment you brought back.”

Adrian wasn’t surprised. “I’ve only run a few tests on dead tissue so far. Angela won’t clear that yet.”

“She’s always in pain.” Conner’s voice broke. “Convince the boss?”

Adrian put his end of the generator box on the platform. “Give me a few more days of testing. Tell Candy she’ll have to stop breastfeeding because it might hurt the babies.”

“But we don’t have much formula.”

“Exactly.” Adrian had observed Candy yesterday for a while. “Get her out of the bunkhouse for walks, let her feel the sun. All she does is stay in that bed and stress.”

“I’ll try.” Conner activated the pulley and turned toward the stairs. Candy was usually too shaky for walks.

“That’s not all from the cancer. Sitting around makes your muscles weak.”

Conner groaned. “You don’t say!” His legs were already hurting and they hadn’t even started climbing the ladder yet. He sobered. “Why isn’t it working?”

“What?”

“Bunkhouse living. Tobias said it would help, but it hasn’t.”

Adrian sighed. “Because there’s no love in that den, Conner. It’s full of lies, tension, and fake support.”

“Without change...”

“Yeah.”

“Hey!”

Both Mitchels turned toward the dock.

The ocean swelled and subsided all around the island as another storm pushed into the area. It made the ships bob and the dock vibrate. Grant placed his

feet carefully as he hurried across it to join them. “Pass a message to the boss. The weather’s about to get ugly.”

“She knows there’s a storm coming.” Conner pointed at the gray clouds. “We all know.”

“No, you don’t.” Grant looked at Adrian. “The radar is showing a huge storm coming. Three systems are converging near here. It’s going to start raining again and it might not stop for days. Tell the boss to dust off those evacuation plans. We’re probably going to need them.”

Conner scoffed. “We’re on a cliff. It doesn’t flood in high places.”

Grant headed back across the dock. “You have a lot to learn about how the world works, kid.”

Conner sighed. “Being young sucks.”

Adrian struggled to hold his end of the box, dripping sweat, legs aching. “He’s right. You have a lot to learn.”

5

“I wonder how they’re taking it.” Morgan put the stack of gauze boxes back onto the clinic shelf.

Tonya shrugged, peering through the microscope. “Not well, I would imagine. But that’s why Terry gets the big bucks.”

Morgan chuckled. He was glad he hadn’t been drafted to tell Jayda and the others they were grounded.

His amusement faded. The letter in Harry's burn box was still haunting him. Harry had been so excited to go on his first real mission with Marc as the medical officer. *I'm glad the boss grounded Jayda's run. We all need to stay right here, where we're safe.*

He winced at the thought of the coming autopsy on Dari's body. *Well, safer anyway.*

Everyone in the lab right now was working, sorting, but not really talking. Tonya was concentrating on test results and Morgan didn't have anything to say to Isabel. He didn't trust the new woman yet, but that was a common feeling for him after everything that had happened. It took time for him to warm up to anyone now.

"At least Molly's injury isn't serious." Timmy wanted to think about good things. They all had too much stress.

"True." Morgan had treated that wound. Molly had some stitches that would become a new scar in time. The shark had been small, so it hadn't given her a permanent disability. She was in the bunkhouse now, resting. Thomas was caring for her.

Morgan went by the guard in the corner to reach the coolers. He slipped the security mechanism into place over the lock that also required a key. Tonya had gotten a note from Kyle about enhancing security in here and then Adrian had stopped by and handled it. Now they had to get used to using it. All of them were forgetting.

“Where do you want these packs of Neosporin?” Isabel was helping them unpack the supplies that had been gathered for Jayda’s trip even though she still had a cast on. She didn’t know where everything went yet; she was just happy to have been given a job working around Tonya. The redhead had guarded Angela at the matchups. Tonya was special.

“The drawer over there.” Morgan pointed. He was helping Isabel while keeping a cool distance. Tonya was officially in charge of the new woman, but she was overloaded with samples from the returning teams and from the murder investigations.

Dari’s body was on the cruise ship now, stored in the small morgue cooler; she was scheduled for a full autopsy. Morgan didn’t want to do it. He’d cried the entire time he’d handled Pam.

Two gophers came in and picked up the metal boxes that Tonya had put by the door earlier. Adrian had requested locking medical boxes to put in the bunkhouse, the restaurant, and the barn. Tonya hadn’t bothered to get approval for it; she knew the boss would love the idea.

“How much do we have left?”

Morgan knew Tonya meant the rage vaccine. “Two vials, but one is only half full.”

Tonya sighed. “We have to save those for the people who start reaching the next stage.” She only had one sample to work with and so far, she hadn’t been able to identify a single ingredient. *I have to figure out how to copy it and I’m not good enough!*

Rico hated to see her upset. He spoke up, something he rarely did when people were around. “Other labs would have the components written down and listed in the computer files...if you could get into one that hasn’t been ransacked.”

Tonya’s mind began running through the options.

Morgan frowned at the bruised, bandaged guard. “We’re not going to another lab. The boss won’t agree to that after what the mission men went through.”

Morgan had heard about the matchups, but he couldn’t believe Marc had lost. He assumed Rico had cheated somehow.

“The other labs are dark. There shouldn’t be any danger there.” Isabel wanted all of Safe Haven vaccinated so things would stay good. She really did love it here already.

“Go help with the boxes out in the shed.” Morgan pointed again, trying not to get upset. He didn’t want Isabel to believe she had a full voice in their camp yet because she didn’t.

Isabel went out, frowning at Morgan. *I don’t like your tone, mate.*

Morgan snorted. *Tough.*

Tonya ignored their drama and peered harder into the microscope. Her stomach dropped. *It matches. Damn it!*

Tonya cleared her mind. She reached for her coffee mug and dropped it, spilling it on the slide she was observing. “No!”

She hopped up for a towel, cursing herself.

“What happened?”

“I spilled coffee on the test. I have to do it all over now!” Tonya wailed and wiped, drawing comfort from Morgan and Timmy.

“It’s okay. You’ll just redo it.”

“Accidents happen.”

Rico turned to scan the wet jungle through the window while a small smile came over his split lips. Her act hadn’t fooled him. The prints had matched and Tonya had hidden it the only way she could. *She bought you some time, kid. I hope you’re worth the risk she just took.*

Morgan also acted like he didn’t know what had happened, but in his heart, he began to like Tonya a little more.

Voices in the hall drew their attention.

“Can I go on in?”

“Sure.” Timmy held the door for Hannah.

Hannah tracked mud in as she came over to Tonya. “Can I get you to look at something for me?”

“Just a sec.” Tonya finished cleaning up the mess.

Hannah smiled at Morgan.

Morgan could tell she was upset. He went to her. “What’s the problem?”

Hannah lifted her shirt to show the swollen, black spot on her stomach that was now the size of an apple.

“Oh, shit.” Tonya knew what it was without testing.

So did Morgan.

Hannah began to cry. “It’s cancer, right?”

Both medics slowly nodded.

One of the gophers, Nero, stopped by Morgan. “Talk to Isabel. She handled all the cases like this in the lab. There’s no one better at interpreting data and picking the right cocktail to kill it.”

Out in the hallway, Sadie’s hand went to her own stomach. She’d been having pain for a long time. Hearing Hannah’s diagnosis sent terror through her heart.

Sadie slipped on the muddy floor as she turned. She caught herself on the wall and quickly left, blocking her thoughts from everyone.

In the lab, Morgan held Hannah while she cried.

6

Piper moved aside so Sadie could get out of the clinic. The blue-haired woman was off the wet porch and gone before Piper could mock her for losing the matchup.

Piper heard someone crying and forced herself to go to the lab anyway. She didn’t like sad scenes, but this couldn’t wait.

Piper straightened her jacket and ran a hand over her wet hair so she looked more presentable, but she doubted it would matter. She had no illusions that what she wanted would be given to her without a fight.

Piper stuck her head in and found Tonya. “Can I have two minutes?”

Tonya wanted to get away from Hannah’s misery. She came out into the hall, shutting the door. “What’s up?”

Piper smiled at the talented lab technician. “I need a huge favor. You won’t want to do it, but I’m willing to make a great deal for it.”

Tonya was curious now. She scanned Piper’s bruised forehead and fat lip in amusement. Sadie really hadn’t known who she was messing with by challenging Piper. “Tell me what you want and we’ll go from there.”

Piper braced. “I want you to remove the curse you put on Adrian. Let him go, please.”

Tonya’s eyes lit up. Her fists clenched. She went back into the lab and slammed the door.

Piper sighed. “So much for plan B.”

She headed for the exit. “But I’m not giving up. I will get him cleared and accepted back into this camp even if it kills me.”

Another loud slam echoed behind her.

Piper hurried outside. “And it just might. She’s pissed.”

7

“Here she comes. She looks pissed.”

“Just don’t make eye contact and it will go away.”

Conner paused. “What?”

Adrian shrugged, grinning. “We’re not supposed to make eye contact with wild animals, right?”

Conner laughed despite being so concerned.

Adrian and Conner were miserable, yet content. They’d been working hard for hours, trying to get a lot done before Jennifer made it back here from doing rounds of the island.

Adrian finished tightening the nut onto the bolt. “Start unboxing that water heater.”

Conner went to the other large boxes they’d brought to town, searching for the right one. They’d made multiple trips from the cruise ship while trying not to fall in the mud. He and his dad were both grimy and tired.

Jennifer was muddy, sweaty, and annoyed. The sight of Adrian in town after she’d told him to go away changed the annoyance to anger.

Jennifer marched over to Adrian, drawing attention from the camp members who’d been happily observing. They were eager to have the hot water. Many of them frowned at Jennifer. They didn’t want her to interfere.

“What are you doing?!”

Adrian slid the generator into the middle of the pallet now that he had the cords attached. “Sweating, while bracing for you to make a scene that isn’t needed.”

“What?!” Jennifer’s anger flared. “How dare you!”

Adrian plugged the cord into the battery pack that Kenn had rigged up to carry power to the path lights. “Hand me that tiedown strip.”

“Get out of here!” Jennifer glared. “Do it right now and I won’t punish you.”

Camp members scowled at the girl now. A few of them protested. Jennifer didn’t care.

Adrian shrugged. “I’ll get it myself.” He stepped around her.

Jennifer reached out to grab his arm.

Kyle was there to block her hand with his cast. He absorbed her short blast of pain with a grunt.

Jennifer stopped firing. She jerked her hand back. “Get out of the way!”

Kyle had been expecting this moment. He still hated to be the one to handle it, however. Every time he had contact with his wife now, it was negative. It wasn’t good for their marriage. “The camp has to come first. We need these things finished.”

“By someone else. He’s not allowed to be here!”

“I gave him permission.”

“You’re not the boss!”

“Neither are you!” Kyle was fed up. “He has Eagle permission. That’s all he needs. Go find someone else to zap!”

Jennifer glared furiously. “We’re not letting him back in!”

Kyle felt an honor moment arrive. He stood steady in the face of whatever would come from this. “Yes, we are. As far as the Eagles are concerned, Adrian is no longer banished.”

He turned toward the blond man. “How can I help?”

Adrian hefted the water heater out of the box while Conner held the sides. He fought back tears. “You already have.”

Jennifer stomped off, muttering openly. She looked crazy to the camp.

Kyle observed from the corner of his eye. He let out a sigh of relief. “I thought that would be worse.”

“Same.” Adrian didn’t say more. He just basked in the feeling of knowing half the barrier to his future had just been removed.

“Don’t let me down this time.” Kyle helped them tug the box off of the heavy appliance. “You’re out of passes.”

Adrian set the water heater onto the pallet and straightened. “This wasn’t a pass. It’s survival.”

Off duty Eagles and even mission men understood what Adrian was working on. Now that he’d been cleared to be here, they came over to help.

Nearby, Debra and Ian came out of the restaurant.

Debra scanned Ian’s perfectly neat clothes and hair in annoyance. Ian rarely did any manual labor now.

Her gaze went to the handsome, healthy man entering a shed with one of the camp relief sources. *I miss him, but I don’t think he feels the same.*

Debra caught Ian’s eye and signed. *I want to help Adrian.*

Ian frowned. "I don't. You go on. I'll finish planning our trip. They can't keep us here forever."

Ian was upset that all trips had been grounded, but he also didn't think anyone in their group had the rage illness. They would all go to Tonya to be tested in the next few days. Then he would insist on Angela sending them out of here.

Ian turned away, missing the doubt that crossed Debra's face.

She walked over to the gathering work crew, wondering if she was making the right choice by leaving.

Adrian began pointing at people, putting them to work while smiling at the intently watching camp members. "Who wants a hot shower tonight?"

The camp cheer echoed to the angry teenager now descending into the tunnels. Jennifer growled. "I can't take much more of this!"

Nature was waiting at the bottom of the ladder. She was pristine, as always. Jennifer felt ugly in comparison.

"You could be even more beautiful with my power keeping you young and healthy. All you have to do is say yes."

Jennifer stomped through the ankle-deep water. "I don't care about vanity. I care about people following the rules!"

"Tell me all about it, child. I'm always here for you."

Chapter Twenty-Eight
No More Water

1

“Hot water again! Can you believe it?”

“It’s wonderful. I don’t care that there’s a 10-minute limit or that we have to wait for the water to heat up. It’s amazing!”

Half of the camp was in neat lines for the three shower stalls that had been hooked to the large water heater. Adrian had even used useless kiddie pools from the ship to collect the dirty water and direct it into a filtering system so the water could be reused.

Everyone was in a great mood despite the murders and the stormy weather that was coming their way. The blowing wind and spats of drizzle couldn’t dampen the good vibes caused by Adrian once again caring for their needs.

Adrian and his helpers had stayed busy all day. The outdoor dining area was now netted to keep out bugs and more lights had been connected. The barn had power, and all the cords had been attached to the roofs and trees so no one would trip over them. Locked medical boxes had been attached to the walls of all the main buildings, more water barrels had been brought up to collect the rain, and straw

had been put down on the main paths to soak up the muddy water that was starting to pool on top of the ground again. One day had given them a long list of improvements.

Adrian and Gus came out of the jungle carrying a huge box with a picture of a freezer on it. They walked it into the restaurant that now had another generator hooked up. The cooks were also happy with the improvements.

Camp members were at all the tables, chatting and snacking. Normals and descendants were getting to know each other without problems. They'd finally adjusted to sitting together. They even laughed this time at the sight of Madison going by, followed by all of their animals.

Madison was making sure the animal pens were going to be large enough. The horse was also following her around now, making that easier to judge.

Dog and Duke stayed on her heels, whining for another treat. She'd found a bag of dog bones mixed in with the animal feed. They'd been begging and doing tricks all day and getting a treat for it each time. Madison couldn't help it. She loved all animals. *People are my problem.*

There were people everywhere right now. Many were in line for a shower or going to the restaurant to eat, but dozens more were still working on chores that Adrian had assigned them to. Even the lab subjects, Nero and Gio, were out here now, getting to know their housemates. Madison envied their

quick adjustment to a new situation. *I've never adjusted that fast.*

A stiff downdraft blew through town, sending leaves and grit into the air.

Standing next to the barn, Biff heard an ominous creak. He turned.

A tree by the barn tilted, roots ripping out of the ground. It fell over, dropping toward Madison.

“Look out!”

“Run!”

Biff reacted without thinking. He conjured his stone defender right next to her.

Madison shrieked and cringed as the stone warrior crouched over her.

The tree hit the stone and bounced. Pieces snapped off as it rolled to the ground without hurting her.

Biff and Madison locked eyes across the shouting, running men and women.

Thank you!

It's my honor. Biff pulled the warrior back in and went to the barn to get out of sight. He hated the way everyone was now staring and pointing at him. *I think it was easier in the lab. They wanted me to do stuff like that.*

Madison watched him flee as people surrounded her in concern. *He's like me.*

Yes. Angela smiled at the woman as she came from the bunkhouse where she'd been doing a therapy session with several team members who hadn't had one since they'd gotten home.

Parker used the moment to quell more of the unease the normals were feeling. “Without magic, we would have just lost another camp member.”

Church people and observing normals smiled and nodded.

Ralph glared at Parker. He knew what the man was trying to do now. “You can’t replace me! She’ll never put you on the council!”

Parker and everyone else stared in disapproval.

Ralph hurried toward the church to get ready for the evening service. He refused to speak to anyone who tried to explain why magic was good for them all.

“What’s his problem?” Jennifer had come up from the tunnels, drawn by the noise of the tree falling.

Angela’s eyes had narrowed. “I think he’s been making dangerous deals.”

Jennifer flinched. She quickly covered. “He’s been very temperamental since being removed from the law council.”

Angela let it go. She walked toward the restaurant, scanning the improvements.

Jennifer fell in step with her, also approving of the changes. She didn’t want Adrian here, but if he had to be, at least he would be sweating for the greater good. “You work fast.” Jennifer knew this was really Angela’s doing, to help the camp. It wasn’t just for Adrian.

“You will too, in time.”

Jennifer grunted unhappily. “How do you get it all done so easily? So perfectly?”

“I plan it out no less than 20 moves ahead now.” Angela noticed Jennifer was covered in mud from her knees down, but she didn’t ask what the girl had been doing in the tunnels.

“Twenty?”

“And sometimes more, depending on what I’m facing. In time, your mind will do the same.”

Jennifer sighed. “My emotions hold me back.”

Angela didn’t pull any punches. “Your evil side holds you back. Get rid of it and things will get better quickly.”

Jennifer admitted the real reason she was afraid to take the power back. “Kyle will be defenseless!”

Angela laughed as she walked away. Then she whistled to get attention. “Enjoy the meal and the hot shower, folks. Then take cover. There’s another storm coming. It may get a bit rough.”

Camp members groaned.

Mission men stiffened.

“We’re also suspending the trip to Henderson to dump trash.” They were supposed to do that in a few hours, but it wasn’t safe.

People on the garbage crew grinned happily.

Tim made a face. “Is that wise? We have a lot of it piling up.”

Angela wasn’t concerned with that right now. “We’ll get to it after the storm.”

Tim frowned deeply and didn’t say anything else.

Wade shivered. He'd been helping with the lights and cords for hours, while listening to the wind and ocean. "No! No more water!" He shuddered, trying to lock it down.

People stared at him in concern. Wade had seemed like he was doing so well.

Angela motioned toward the loft of the barn. "Let's talk."

Wade went gratefully. He'd been doing fine until today, but now his throat was clogging up and his stomach was burning. "No more water, Boss!"

Angela took his hand. As she led him into the barn for a therapy session, the sky opened up. Heavy rain began to fall across the island.

2

"Thank you."

Angela smiled at Wade. "We all need these moments. It really was the hardest run any of us have ever been on."

"Except Zack," they said, at the same time.

Wade looked over at the wolf. Dog had come into the barn behind them and laid by his boots for the entire session. "Are you okay?"

Dog whined.

Angela's guilt flared back up. "He misses Mr. Sneaky. Losing another cat hurt him deeply."

Dog buried his snout under his paw. He didn't know how else to get the pain to stop.

Wade felt bad vibes coming from the wolf. He recognized them. “He’s not ready for whatever’s coming.”

Dog rolled over onto his back and stared at Angela upside down. *I can smell it building.*

“Dog? Do you want a break this time?”

The wolf shivered. *Yes.*

“Then you can have it. Stay here in the barn with your friends and let the humans handle things this time.”

A tear rolled down Dog’s snout and splashed into his ear. *Thank you.*

Angela focused on Wade again. “Do you want a break this time?”

Wade was proud that he could make a different choice. “I’m okay as long as we’re above the water.”

Angela headed toward the barn door. “Keep in mind that doesn’t mean we won’t get wet.”

“As long as I can breathe, I’ll be okay.”

“I think so, too.” Angela paused, watching a dozen people walk to the church.

Wade didn’t comment on her wave of anger. He already knew the action would center around the church group. *I hope you’re all really as innocent as you seem to be. If not, this could be your last service in Safe Haven.*

“It’s time for Sunday evening service.” Tim walked through the bunkhouse, encouraging people to attend. “Service is starting. Let’s go on over.”

Dozens of people rose from cots and chairs and followed him. People began getting their radios out so they could listen to the service from their cots. Brittani and Candy were among those, though their movements were slower. Both scared women were converts.

Recovering in a cot nearby, Molly also reached for her radio so she could listen.

Thomas was in the chair by her cot. He helped her get the radio turned on.

Angela frowned from her seat near the kitchen.

Rain and wind were battering the walls of the bunkhouse. Mission men were twitching and trying to stay distracted. They were gathered around Charlie and the new baby. Many of the parents had just come from a walk in the rain to settle the stomachs of the children who were being called water babies. They all missed Angela’s displeasure at how many of the herd were docilely following a new shepherd.

Rico saw it. He had just escorted Tonya here from the clinic. She was getting a snack between shifts while he stayed by the lockers. He was trying to keep distance between them to please the camp, but Angela’s displeasure drew him, hard.

Rico casually joined Angela while making it seem like he was only getting closer to Tonya.

Better her than the boss, as far as people would believe.

Angela wondered how observant Rico had been during the month they were gone. She gestured subtly, using Eagle code.

Rico answered in perfect form.

Angela grinned and continued the semiprivate conversation.

Rico fell into the talk, calming. He even smiled a few times. He looked like all of the other fighters now with his black eyes, cracked lips, bruised knuckles, and careful steps.

People around them relaxed through the storm tension. The mood was okay, mostly because they have five murder suspects in jail. It made the camp feel safe again.

Tonya caught it all. She acted like she hadn't so it didn't stop. She didn't care what they were talking about; she just wanted Rico to be given a fair chance in their camp. She didn't believe the rumors about his past. *But even if he did it, this is a place for second chances.*

Tonya scanned the crowded bunkhouse as the church members went out into the storm. She saw Ed in the corner, waiting for everyone else to go first. Tonya narrowed in to determine what was causing his frown.

She spotted Megan moving through the rear area by the lockers. As she watched, Megan lifted something from one of the shelves and quickly put it into her pocket.

Tonya got out her notebook and added it to the nightly report that she hadn't turned in yet.

Ding! Ding! A bell began ringing outside, calling people to the church service.

Tonya assumed Tim had salvaged it from one of the pirate ships. She was fairly certain Angela hadn't brought it on the cruise ship since it wouldn't have been needed for anything.

A loud drill echoed upstairs.

Adrian was up there working. Tonya didn't care about that. She did care that Piper was trying so hard to get Adrian cleared. *She and I are going to have a problem.*

Angela looked over her shoulder.

Tonya grunted. *Please don't ask me to do that. I will, for you, but it's taking things too far.*

Angela patted the knife she'd won, brow lifting.

Tonya snorted at the offer to trade back her blade. *Only if I can stab him with it.*

Angela turned back toward Rico without laughing.

Tonya regarded the stairs, feeling how much Angela wanted her to forgive and forget. She knew she should. Angela had done it for Kenn and his offenses had been much worse.

Tonya shut the cabinet and walked toward her cot. *But I can't do it. I still want him dead and no amount of greater good labor will change that.*

Rico watched her go.

Angela assumed Marc was still with Kenn, helping him search for more clues to the murder.

Marc was avoiding them all so he didn't have to answer questions yet.

Angela was curious about what he would say, though she was certain he had a good excuse ready. Everyone was waiting on him to explain his actions, except for Charlie. Charlie was with the baby care group now that the medics had cleared the newborn. They were all doing baths and diaper changes. Charlie was happy for the first time in months.

Supplies had been delivered to Ivan and Tracy and the guards had watched them sail away. No messages had been passed; they were on their own now.

“Where's your nephew?”

“I believe he and Kenn are walking the tunnels.”

Angela was happy with the progression of Marc's relationship with his uncle. It had all been possible because their first talk had gone badly. If they'd gotten friendly too quickly, the matchup wouldn't have turned out the way it had. Angela opened a private line to Rico. *Have you had time to consider his request?*

Rico nodded and then realized she'd been able to keep track of that conversation even while drilling the partiers.

And?

Rico grimaced. *My brother would have given Marcus what he wants, and then made him regret wanting it.*

Angela had already considered that. *I don't want him to regret it. I want him to share leadership with a woman and not resent me because of it.*

Rico shrugged. *Then you have to make him appreciate the benefits of such an arrangement.*

I have tried. I just don't seem to use the right incentive.

It will take someone he looks up to and listens to, even if he doesn't like them.

Angela's eyes went to the steps.

Rico laughed. *You'll never be able to pull that off.*

Angela snorted lowly. *You obviously don't know who you're talking to.*

Rico relented. *No, but I'm learning.*

Angela smiled. *Welcome to Safe Haven, Rico Reicher. May it finally become your home.*

4

“You'll always have a home here if you follow the rules.” Adrian slid the thick power cord through the hole in the wall he'd just drilled for it. “But that's not always easy. You also have to know how to get back into the good graces of the people you've angered.”

Bret frowned. He had come up here to help and spend time with Adrian, not to get a lesson. He was also observing the mood of the camp for Angela. That was easier when they couldn't see him. She'd given him that job right before the matchups. So far,

the only ones who were a problem were Ralph and Allison. Bret was certain Angela already knew that. “Why would I need to get in good with the people here?”

Adrian met his eyes. “Because you’re a Mitchel and we always screw up. It’s in our DNA.”

Bret handed him the next cord. “It doesn’t have to be that way.”

Adrian connected the cords. “Tell me what you’ve learned about yourself since you’ve been here.”

Bret had stayed mostly quiet during his time in this camp so far, observing. He knew what Adrian was talking about. “I’m willing to break the rules.”

Adrian grunted. “Why?”

“Because my new friend asked me to.”

“Exactly. It’s sweet right now, but when you’re both older, it will be dangerous.”

“No, it won’t.” Bret glared pointedly. “I’m not like you when it comes to females.”

“*All* Mitchels are like that with females.”

“Not me.” Bret lifted his chin. “I’m gay.”

Adrian paused. *Gay?*

He replayed the admission. Then his brain kicked in. He snorted at the boy. “No, you’re not.”

Bret’s shoulders drooped; his voice lowered. “It’s going to be my excuse. Tell me what gave me away so I can cover it.”

“You’re a Mitchel, son. We chase frisbees, not balls.” Adrian stared at the boy, mind spinning. “But it’s not a bad lie.”

“It’s not bad to lie?”

“Not for us. If they all believe you aren’t a threat, you’ll be free to love her until she loves you back. Then they’ll have to accept her choice. You’ll get the woman you want.”

Bret smiled coldly. “There’s the Adrian I’ve been warned about.”

Adrian nodded at his son. “You’re already doing us proud.”

“Us?”

“Your family, Bret. You’re one of us in every way. This conversation is just more proof.”

Bret’s happiness sent out a blast of golden light that soothed their discomfort over the storm.

The squeal of happy children echoed from below. Footsteps ran toward the stairs as the school session ended.

Adrian stood up, releasing a happiness wave of his own that went down the steps and embraced the entire camp. “She was right. It’s been a good day.”

The kids mobbed Adrian as soon as they reached the top floor. The upper level became a whirlwind of laughing, playing kids who included Bret and made him glad to be out of the lab.

5

“We’ll have to come through and redo all of this after it dries up.” Kenn pulled the electrical cord free of the muddy tunnel wall. He needed these pieces to get power running to the cameras on the

jungle paths. His investigation and interrogations were done for the day. The camp was sure those five men were guilty. Kenn wasn't. When Angela read his report later, they would be cleared and scheduled for release.

Marc put it in the bucket. "We need a waterproof set up or we'll have to do it every time it rains this much."

"And it will happen again. Grant found some travel brochures for these islands. They get heavy rains when hurricanes come through."

"In this hemisphere, they're called typhoons."

"I'm American. They're hurricanes."

Marc chuckled roughly, throat aching. "Fair enough."

Kenn shined his dim flashlight down the dark tunnel and headed toward the ladder instead. His soreness had turned into real discomfort about an hour ago. "The rest of the cords can wait. We're out of here."

Marc didn't say he was relieved, but he still felt it. The muddy water was almost up to their knees. It was dark and the rain was flowing in around the hatches. It reminded them both of being underwater. Neither man ever wanted to experience that again.

Kenn waited for Marc to climb out, then he shut the hatch. "It was a nice thing you did for Charlie."

Marc wiped rain and mud from his arms, then picked up the bucket and followed Kenn to town. "It's my grandchild, too."

Kenn walked steadily through the jungle, mind flashing back to Angela's request before they'd left on the lab run. "Can I talk to you about something?"

Marc heard the tone and frowned. "It depends on the topic."

"It's not about Angela." Kenn headed for the shed by the barn so they could stand under the overhang and be out of the rain for a minute. "It's about you."

Marc stepped out of the rain with him. "I'm listening."

He didn't really want to have a heartfelt talk with Kenn, but it was preferable to being back in the hot, stinky bunkhouse with all of those people. He was adjusting to their looks and comments, and he understood why they were so pushy and curious. He just didn't feel like dealing with it right now.

"Did you take a dive in the matchup?"

Marc kept his thoughts blank. "Of course not."

Kenn wasn't sure if he believed Marc or not. "I'm good at keeping secrets."

Marc didn't doubt that. "What do you want?"

Kenn focused on Marc through swollen, black eyes. "I want to know if you trust the boss."

Marc was startled. "What?!"

"You heard me."

Marc stared at him in confusion. "Why do you care?"

Kenn shrugged, mind still closed off. "I thought I could help you with it and then you'd stay."

“Ah.” Marc assumed Kenn was trying to get him to stay for personal reasons, like Greg had done to Kenn on the sub. All of the mission men preferred to be around each other now even though they weren’t all friends. “I do trust her.”

“But?”

“But only to look out for the best interests of this camp and these people.”

“Does that include us?”

Marc slowly nodded. “She feels bad, but she had good reasons for sending us in there.”

“Would you do it again?”

Marc shuddered at the very thought. “Yes.”

“Why?” Kenn wouldn’t. It was the worst mission he’d ever gone on. He would never be the same.

“Because I changed. Thanks to Reicher, I no longer hate women just because they’re women, and we eliminated a monster who needed to die. In fact, it feels like...the Marines.” Marc stiffened as an epiphany hit him. “It was a Marine run. She sent us into hostile territory to assassinate a leader who wouldn’t align with American values of freedom and democracy.”

Kenn hated that.

Marc loved it. A small ray of hope began to lighten his dark mind. “That’s also why she put two tigers in the cage, then drilled everyone.”

“I don’t get it.”

“I’ve been missing the simple life of a Marine. She gave that to me...and showed me it was never simple. I just didn’t see it when I was in it.”

Kenn got the point, but it wasn’t the same for him. “She’s like the old world leaders who sacrificed their armies to gain ground, resources, or power.”

Marc nodded, now smiling. “Exactly.” Marc had trusted the government for all of his life until the war. This felt like coming home.

Loud squeals echoed from the bunkhouse. They watched small shadows on the walls as they played and laughed.

Kenn wondered if Tonya was inside with her better man.

Marc couldn’t resist the hive connection. He put a hand on Kenn’s big shoulder. “A couple more days.”

Kenn nodded. He knew most of what was coming. Marc had shown him to keep him from breaking the rules and ruining his reputation with the camp.

“I did it to keep her from killing you instead, Grunt.”

Kenn shuddered this time.

Marc let go and headed for the bunkhouse. “Let’s get this over with and spend some time with the kids. They need socialization and we need their light to remind us to keep fighting for what’s right.”

Kenn shoved ugly thoughts from his mind and followed his fire team leader into a different type of hell.

6

Kyle blocked the steps to keep Jennifer from going up there and stopping the noise. “Let them have fun.”

Jennifer scowled. “He shouldn’t be here! He can’t be alone with our kids!”

Kyle pointed at the little boy just now reaching the top of the steps. “Roy has loved Adrian since the rescue and he’s lonely now. Leave him alone!”

Their argument was interrupted by the main door opening.

Kenn and Marc entered the tense bunkhouse and paused. Muddy water dripped from them onto the mats. Their legs were soaked, proving where they’d been and reminding Angela why she’d insisted on this bunkhouse being built. The tunnels were now a complete mess.

Marc knew the tension wasn’t because of what he’d done. He regarded Angela.

Angela sighed. “Domestic issues.”

Marc heard the happy kids and Adrian’s delighted chuckle. He put the pieces together. Thoughts of Adrian being forgiven hit him next.

Marc ignored it all. He walked toward the baby care area. “Lucy, I’ve got some ‘splainin to do!”

People who'd seen that TV show laughed. Even if he didn't have a good excuse for lying and masterminding Tracy's captivity, just saving the baby was going to clear him with most of the camp.

Jennifer spun around and pointed. "You're under arrest for the kidnapping of a camp member!"

Marc smiled coldly. "She wasn't a camp member then. Our laws don't apply to her."

Jennifer hadn't expected that. She huffed. "You told Ivan to do it!"

"Can you prove that?"

Adrian and Greg both locked down on their thoughts so hard it hurt.

Greg resumed considering Angela's reputation. He had come to the conclusion that Adrian was wrong. Now he was trying to verify it. No one seemed to care if Angela was having an affair with Kyle. They only cared that she was here and caring for their needs. The same had been true of her flirtation with Ivan. She only wanted Marc and everyone knew it.

"Well?"

Jennifer realized she couldn't prove it since Ivan and Tracy were gone. Marc's mocking tone sent red streaks into her eyes.

Marc's grin widened. "Maybe the law council will close those loopholes, but I'm in the clear." He strolled toward Charlie while the camp and the Eagles snickered at his cleverness.

Jennifer stomped toward Angela to protest.

"Help!"

Daryl's shout stopped it all.

"She's in labor again!"

Brittani's clenched fists and whimper sent tremors of fear through the witnesses.

Isabel spoke over the panicking medics. "Put her to sleep!"

Angela sent a mental call.

Adrian flew down the steps a few seconds later. He didn't ask questions; he followed orders, blasting Brittani with his sleep spell.

Daryl caught her as she slid over.

Morgan and Tonya hurried over to determine if her labor had stopped.

Isabel caught Angela's gesture; she joined the medics but stayed out of their way.

"How long will it work?" Morgan felt Brittani's stomach softening under his gentle fingers. That was a good sign.

"He'll have to use a stronger version each time. When he runs out of levels, she'll deliver." Isabel had observed that repeatedly in the lab. "It might buy her a week. Two, if you have someone else with a sleep spell that's stronger."

"Adrian is tops for that spell." Daryl gestured at the blond leader. "Bunk down here with us tonight."

Adrian felt the renewed approval of the camp and the jealousy of his enemies. He enjoyed both. "You got it."

Jennifer couldn't take it. She went out into the rain, slamming the door.

“She’s been spending a lot of time in the tunnels alone.” Morgan helped Daryl get Brittani settled on the cot, but he was talking to Angela.

Kyle heard it and scowled. “You did a piss poor job while we were gone!”

Silence fell through the bunkhouse again.

Kyle’s anger was at full boil now. “You were supposed to keep her safe!”

Morgan winced. He’d known this was coming. “I’m sorry.”

“You should be.” Kyle wanted to stay calm, but his fear for Jennifer burst out of his mouth. “Any deals we made are off! You can’t be trusted!”

Morgan straightened, lips thinning. He came over to Kyle with stiff steps. Then he braced. “Do it.”

Kyle swung, hitting Morgan in the mouth with his good hand. He swung again as the man staggered, taking Morgan to his knees.

Everyone watched, but they didn’t interfere with the violent correction. They agreed too much.

Kyle swung a third time, putting all of his anger into it.

Morgan slumped to the dirty floor by Kyle’s boots.

Kyle forced himself to walk away. “Someone clean that up!”

The rookies who were due to receive a punishment from Kyle hurried over, hoping it wouldn’t be as bad for them. Morgan was barely conscious.

Kyle wiped his hands and then went up the stairs to keep the kids under control while Adrian was down here.

7

Jack helped Dace sit up. He chuckled as Morgan was put into the empty cot near them. “He’s had that coming for a month.”

Dace didn’t care about Eagle drama. He was staring at Brittani’s large stomach. “Will it be like that for Lisa since she’s having a descendant baby?”

Jack shook his head, now feeling bad about letting Dace believe it was his baby. “Brittani is having a hard time because it’s triplets.”

Dace relaxed. “Oh, good. I wouldn’t want her in danger just to have my baby.”

Greg looked over. “What did you say?”

Jack flinched. *Uh-oh.*

Dace gestured toward the unconscious woman. “I’m glad Lisa isn’t going to have problems like that.”

Greg’s frown covered his unshaven face. “You said *my baby.*”

Dace paused, not sure what the problem was. “She’s pregnant. We’re having a baby.”

Greg looked at Jack.

Jack grimaced. “Yeah, uh, about that...”

Dace glanced between them, confused. “What?”

Greg glared at Jack. "It's not yours, Dace. Lisa is carrying *my* baby."

Dace froze.

Jack tried to explain. "I was giving you a reason to stay awake, bro. I was going to tell you as soon as you were better."

Dace shut his eyes. The tension left his body. "Thank God!"

"What?"

"Say that again."

Jack and Greg were both surprised.

Dace smiled through the tears that were forming. "I can't be a dad. I can't even walk. Thank God it's not mine!"

Greg snorted, but it bothered him to hear that. *I only have one eye. What kind of dad will I be?*

Erin came over and hugged him. "The best kind. You know what's important."

Greg let her ease his troubled mind. When she led him over to the baby care class, he went without protesting. He needed to learn how to care for an infant, too.

Jack stiffened as Dace finally glared at him. "I'm sorry."

"Well, now I know. So stop pushing us together. She has a baby daddy already."

Jack couldn't let it go. He retrieved Dace's burn box from his footlocker. "You gave me this right before you left."

Dace didn't remember that. He pried off the tape that had already been cut and opened it.

Lisa's smiling face stared up at him from the single image in the box. A weak memory floated through his mind. "Shawn gave me this."

Jack nodded, ignoring the people who frowned at the memory of Shawn's mistakes. He had become the camp hero a few months ago. They didn't want to see him any other way.

Dace picked up the picture and flipped it toward the garbage can. "Tell her to stay away from me. I don't have anything to say to her."

Jack and some of the others were disappointed, but they didn't push. Everyone hoped Dace would regain his memory in time.

Jack quietly got the photo and put it back into the box. Then he stored it in his locker. He'd been hoping for a better reaction. He fought the part of his heart that was glad Dace had rejected her. *I'm not making a move on her now that Dace doesn't want her. I'm not that kind of man.*

Angela glanced over.

Jack stared at her in horror as he finally understood what price she'd demanded.

Angela had sympathy for him, but she refused to let him out of the deal. She shook her head and then turned back to Rico, resuming their conversation.

Jack tried to seal up his breaking heart and failed.

“She’s working on her tree again.”

Marc nodded at Greg’s comment. He peered at the sleepy infant in Charlie’s arms. “How’s the kid?”

Charlie beamed. “Perfect. Thank you.”

Marc scanned the baby and was relieved to find only goodness and light. “You’re welcome.”

“He needs a name. Tracy didn’t give him one.”

“That’s your job now.”

Charlie considered it and came up with a name that held special meaning for him. “Mathew.”

Marc cleared his sore throat. “That’s nice.” Charlie and Matt had been good friends.

Charlie carried the baby over to Angela. “Please?”

Angela had already scanned the child. She ran a hand over his small head to give her alpha blessing. “Welcome to the family Mathew Charles Brady.”

Marc and Charlie grinned. Neither of them had been sure what middle or last name to give the child.

“I’m a dad!” Charlie didn’t ask why Marc had done this. He no longer cared now that he had his son.

Greg did care. “I asked you why when it first happened. Can I get an answer now?”

Erin and the others realized Greg had known what Marc was doing.

Greg grinned, putting a finger over his split lips. “Don’t tell the Dragon.”

People sniggered, forgiving him instantly with that joke.

Marc shrugged, letting the truth out with a smile as he looked toward his curious wife. “She’ll be very grateful.”

Adrian burst out laughing. “I was right!”

Marc chuckled. He was in a great mood now. “Even a broken clock is right twice a day.”

Adrian went by them and climbed the stairs to resume playtime with the kids. “Good work, Brady. You deserve whatever reward she gives you.”

Charlie nodded. So did everyone else who heard it, including Greg. They all knew how important this was to Angela.

“But what did Ivan get out of it?” Greg needed to know that. Ivan was obsessed with Angela. Greg didn’t understand why the man had taken such a risk when he might have gotten a life with Angela someday.

Kyle gestured at the baby. “He saved her grandchild.”

Greg frowned. “He should have tried harder to stay and get a reward for that. It doesn’t make sense.”

Kyle frowned. “You didn’t see how happy he was to be banished. He got to reclaim his honor and his life. That was enough for him.”

Greg had to be content with that answer, but he wasn’t. *I’d never do that and lose a possible future with her.*

Angela met Greg’s eye. *There is no possible future for you or Ivan. He walked away because he finally understood that.*

Greg glanced away, ashamed of himself.

Marc stared at his wife, seeing how happy she was right now, surrounded by friends and family. *Maybe I'll stay for a while and let her keep working her magic on me.*

Marc knew all trips were grounded, but he wasn't trapped anywhere. If he insisted, she would let him go.

Angela subtly nodded. *Whatever you want.*

What do you want?

Angela's desire rushed out and surrounded him in a shield of love, sending peace through both of them. *You, Marc. It's always been you.*

Marc smiled. *I love you.*

Angela tried not to cry as her emotions overwhelmed her. *Right back at ya.*

Marc ignored Rico's knowing gaze and Greg's slight frown. He joined his wife and refused to think about anything that would ruin the moment. *If it was always like this, I'd never leave.*

Angela took his hand. *That's the plan. I just need help with it.*

Marc kissed her cheek, lingering to create sparks for both of them. *Anything for you.*

The camp shield came to life over the bunkhouse. It expanded to cover the entire town.

Now descending the soaked ladder into the flooding tunnels, Jennifer snarled angrily. She didn't feel that way. Darkness brewed steadily in her heart as she shut the hatch.

Chapter Twenty-Nine
Good News Or Bad News

1

The door to the bunkhouse opened. Dwight came in with Troy and Quincy. All three males were carrying kitchen utensils and gear.

“Fresh brewed soup!”

Daryl and Conner hurried over to help with the food delivery. Brittani had woken up hungry and Candy was having another rough evening. They wanted the women to eat so they would get a little peace.

Morgan rose from the chair next to Hannah’s cot and joined them. Hannah had been put in a bed on the other side of Candy. Her face was puffy and red from all the crying she’d been doing. Candy and Brittani had welcomed the scared woman. They understood exactly how she felt.

Morgan’s black eyes glared at everyone as he walked through the bunkhouse, but he was feeling better now that he had been corrected. It was an odd mix that allowed him to understand more of what the mission men were going through.

People were sitting in small groups all around the bunkhouse, enjoying the company and talking about everything that had happened. The trips being

grounded and the storm coming were hot topics, but the biggest one was Marc's reaction to the Eagles forgiving Adrian. Everyone had expected a blow-up. Those same Eagles were making rounds of the camp members right now, trying to convince people to support them if Marc called a vote on it. The Eagles were still expecting a problem.

Angela didn't think they had anything to worry about. Marc wasn't in any condition, or position, to challenge Eagle decisions. "Give me an update on our storm prep."

Shawn and Neil began digging through the nightly reports for that information. Angela had chosen them to be her assistants overnight while she had point.

The door opened again, letting in part of the medical crew.

Most people frowned at Tobias. They all knew he had been conspiring against Kenn, but even worse was that he had been putting his hands on one of their females. Because he had no marks on him, most people didn't believe the story that Kenn had attacked him. They were still waiting for Tobias to be punished. Some of them even glanced around for Kyle, wanting it to happen now.

Terry saw the women were about to be fed and chose to start with the minor issues first. He waved Ralph into a chair. "Let's check on that toe."

Terry glanced around while Ralph limped over. He saw Jayda in a chair with a notebook and quickly looked away from her. He opened his journal to the

calendar in the rear and put an X through the first box. *One day down, 89 to go.*

Terry motioned toward Trent. “Tobias will start your checkup.”

Trent’s burns were fully healed now. Thick scars covered most of his body. It was hard to view, let alone to examine. “Looking good.”

Trent snorted. “Blow smoke up someone else’s ass.”

Hannah watched the medics nervously. She expected them to examine her, too. Their white coats and stern expressions frightened Hannah. She’d always been intimidated by doctors. She forced herself to sip the cup of soup Morgan brought over. She wasn’t hungry. She was terrified. *They’ll have to try surgery on me, like with Candy!*

Candy reached out and took Hannah’s free hand, trying to comfort them both.

Molly watched with her thoughts locked and fear beating in her heart. She was due for Tonya to retest her soon to determine if her cancer was still in remission. The shark bite on her arm was nothing compared to that.

Ralph waited until Terry leaned over his toe. “Nature tried to recruit me today!”

Terry examined the toe. It was healing nicely, with a thin, glossy nail starting to grow back over the bed. Terry replaced the bandage. “You’re such a gossip, Ralph. I don’t believe a word you say.”

Terry moved away from the speechless man. After he rinsed his hands off, he made a note about

it in his book. It wasn't the first time he had been told that. He assumed Angela already knew, but it was his duty to put it in his nightly report anyway.

Hannah caught Tobias's eye while he recorded the results from Trent's quick checkup. "Is there anything you can do for Brittani?"

Hannah had only heard Brittani wasn't doing well with her pregnancy. Being here for hours and watching the woman's misery when she woke was awful.

Tobias shook his head. "We'll lose all four of them if a solution isn't picked."

"Picked?"

"She has to let us remove one or two of the fetuses." Tobias's insensitive words floated over most of the people around them.

Hannah was horrified. "Abortion?"

"Partial delivery. We have to sacrifice the others or we'll lose them all."

"I'm not doing that!" Brittani clenched her fists. She tried to stay calm. "I'm willing to die for what I believe in. Get the hell out of here!"

Tobias went to the kitchen to wash up, ignoring the dirty looks from the witnesses. "Everything I said was true."

Sitting nearby, Daniella glared. *Why does he have to be such an asshole?*

Anna snickered and kept her eyes on the pink blanket she was knitting.

The sister wives were also fed up with Tobias, but there was nothing they could do about it.

The main door opened again, admitting Tonya, with Rico right behind her. Tonya's grim face told everyone they weren't going to like what she had to say either.

Tonya had been working double shifts all week. She smothered a yawn as she hung up her dripping coat.

Tonya and Rico were both drenched. Angela didn't ask why they weren't using shields. She already knew. Rico didn't use his around Tonya because he wanted to suffer with her. Tonya rarely used hers because she didn't want to draw attention to herself. Angela approved of that, for now.

Tonya went to Angela first. "Good news or bad news to start with?"

Angela didn't like that game anymore. "Just get it over with."

"All of the tests on the mission men and rescue team have been negative. The people we vaccinated after the matchups have also tested negative. It appears that the vaccine is working."

People around them let out cheers and claps.

Tonya wished she had more good news to deliver. She handed Angela a sheet of paper.

Angela read it quickly and then handed the parentage paper back. "Most of us already suspected anyway. Let Bret know."

Bret and the other kids were over at the restaurant, enjoying a late snack while giving people in the bunkhouse a few minutes of quiet.

Tonya handed her the next paper. “I’m sorry that it was inconclusive. I just don’t have enough experience to be able to definitively state that the DNA under Pam’s fingernails belonged to anyone else. It could have been her own.”

Angela also handed that paper back so it could be put into Pam’s file. “What about the other tests you’re running?”

“It will still be a couple of days. I’ll let you know as soon as they’re finished.” Tonya didn’t mention the spilled coffee. She allowed her mind to go to the next awful thing that had to be handled so no one could pull it from her thoughts.

Angela gestured. “Let’s get that over with now. Morgan will do a scan while you’re connected mentally so you can both decide if surgery is even possible.”

The apple-sized tumor in Hannah’s stomach might not be able to be removed due to the location or whatever organ it might be attached to.

Angela scanned the cot where Allison was lying. Hot tears were slipping from underneath her lids, but she wasn’t shouting anymore or threatening anyone. It was progress. Her outburst upon finding Missy here hadn’t been pleasant. Timmy had sedated her with half a normal dose.

Zack was avoiding the woman, like he’d been doing since they came home. Angela knew it wasn’t just because of the cancer or the misery. Allison was taking advantage of people and craving attention.

Zack didn't want to call her on it, but he also didn't have the patience to deal with it.

And it's not all an act. She really is terrified of dying. It broke Angela's heart that she wasn't able to heal any of the people who desperately needed it. *Hold on, ladies. Please hold on.*

Morgan and Tonya quickly set up the portable screen around Hannah's bed, but it was only an illusion of privacy. Everyone could see their shadows and still hear everything that was said.

Hannah lifted her shirt.

The medics who hadn't viewed it yet scowled in dismay. The tumor was pushing against her skin, stealing blood from that area and turning it black. It was like rotten fruit.

Candy kept ahold of Hannah's hand around the edge of the curtain as Morgan narrowed in with his scanning ability.

Tonya and Morgan both stiffened and made faces.

Hannah began to cry harder. She could tell from their reactions that she was in trouble.

"That has to come out as soon as possible."

Morgan turned the image mentally so they could view the other side. "It's attached to her liver."

"Can you remove it?" Tonya was encouraged that it wasn't attached to her lung, but it was still a risky operation.

Morgan slowly nodded. "I've been practicing on a lot of people and objects. As long as I have

good assistants and a great night's sleep under my belt, I should be able to do it.”

But everyone heard the doubt in his voice.

Candy started crying herself, remembering when Morgan had said almost the exact same thing after one of her scan exams. They were only a week away from her surgery date now, though she thought Hannah might have to go first because it seemed more serious.

Morgan tugged Hannah's shirt down and then began to remove the curtain. “Don't give up hope, ladies. I'll do everything I can and so will everyone else.”

While the camp members and the church group tried to comfort all of the upset women, Morgan went upstairs.

2

Isabel glanced up. She tensed as the black-eyed medic came straight to her.

“I need your help.”

Isabel had been picking at her cast while listening to the conversation below. She felt bad for all of their patients. She reluctantly denied him. “Without the chemicals we had in the lab, there isn't much I can do. I'm not like you guys.”

Until recently, Isabel had never wanted to be a magic user. Now, she wished she had been born with a healing gift.

“I was told Reicher used you in the lab as more than just a medic and breeder.”

Isabel nodded. “He liked to have me interpret data and decide which chemicals to use on whatever awful disease he had inflicted on someone, but like I said, without access to those chemicals, it won’t matter, mate.”

“Adrian brought some vials back from the lab. I want you to tell me if they’ll help.”

“I’ll look at them, but that’s not how we treated subjects in the lab. Reicher always had me mix fresh cocktails. If it worked, then that combination was put into the files and a version was created that he could sell to governments around the world. That’s how so many politicians managed to live so long.”

Morgan didn’t understand her point. “But it might work, right?”

Isabel shrugged. “Anything is possible, but cancers are usually very specific. The treatments have to be specific, as well. It’s very unlikely that a treatment developed for someone else will work on everyone.”

Morgan began to get it. “Is it based on blood type or something else?”

“It depends on the cancer itself. Some of them only attack certain organs or areas. That’s why there are so many different kinds. Every treatment has to be created specifically for that type, mate.”

“We need to start working on that right now.” Morgan held a hand out to assist the woman to her feet. He knew firsthand that these cots made it hard

to stand up. He could only imagine how rough it was on her aging body.

Isabel jerked away from him. “Don’t ever touch me!”

Morgan caught her memories of being attacked by Joseph. It infuriated him that she had been hurt. He blamed Reicher more than his perverted son. “I’m glad he’s dead, but it happened too fast. He should have had to suffer like everyone else.”

Isabel recovered from the scare of being touched by someone she was afraid of. “Reicher had the most aggressive form of cancer that ever came through the lab, thanks to the experiments of his father. Even I couldn’t kill it. He spent years in agony.” Anger came through her tone for the first time since she had reached this island. “And I agree completely. It was still too fast.”

Stanley had been getting closer while trying to listen to the conversation. He stomped toward them upon hearing Isabel’s rough tone. “Are you giving her shit?!”

Morgan and several other people turned around in surprise.

Stanley pointed at Morgan, not stopping until his finger touched Morgan’s big chest. “You better not be giving her shit!”

“I’m not.” Morgan was shocked. He’d never heard Stanley raise his voice; he hadn’t been there when Jennifer zapped Stanley. This was completely unexpected. “What’s gotten into you?”

Stanley poked Morgan in the chest again. “You! Stop bothering Isabel!”

“I’m not bothering her.”

Isabel tried to calm things down. “He’s not bothering me, really.”

Stanley glared harder at Morgan. “Why don’t you go downstairs and leave her alone!”

Morgan was impressed that Stanley was finally showing a spine, but he was also embarrassed and annoyed to be the target of an unwarranted rant. “Back up or we’re gonna have a problem.”

Stanley bristled, puffing his chest out. “I don’t have to do anything you say!”

Morgan didn’t smell alcohol. This was all Stanley. It wasn’t encouraging. *He’s a hot head. When did that happen?* “Move out of the way or you won’t like it.”

Isabel didn’t want Stanley to get in trouble. She took his arm and tried to pull him to the side.

Stanley jerked out of her grip, bumping into Morgan.

Morgan slapped a hand on Stanley’s forehead and shoved.

He took Isabel by the arm, ignoring her flinch. He guided her toward the stairs as Stanley fell backward and landed on one of the cots. “Take a nap.”

Humiliated, Stanley jumped up, arm drawing back to swing.

Morgan kicked out backward, without looking. He hit Stanley in the stomach and knocked him over the cot this time.

Stanley smacked against the wall and slid to the ground, dazed.

Morgan now fully believed the zap had been justified. “Be glad she only zapped you, Stanley. The Eagles would have kicked your ass for an hour.”

Morgan escorted Isabel to the front of the bunkhouse, not stopping to explain what was going on. He was positive Angela would figure it out. He grabbed a slicker off the hook and draped it over Isabel as he led them out into the heavy rain.

Isabel zipped her Eagle jacket with one hand as lightning flashed. “Will he get in trouble?”

Morgan snorted. “Stanley saved the boss’s life. He could shit in the middle of the floor and he’d still be a golden child to the camp.”

Isabel locked eyes with him, ignoring the loud rumble of thunder and her fear of Morgan. “What about with the Eagles?”

Morgan was impressed that she knew Eagle code and camp opinion were different. “He’ll be fine if he settles down. I don’t press charges against hot heads. I push them into walls.”

Isabel chuckled. “Good onya.”

“You really like him.”

Isabel nodded. “He’s nothing like the blokes in the lab.”

Morgan scowled. “He’s young enough to be trained in what you need, right?”

Isabel shrugged. “I’ll be good to him, too. It won’t be all him giving.”

Morgan relented. “That’s good enough for me.”

Her answer was already better than what he heard from most women who liked a younger man and he now understood why she was so jumpy. *The Eagles will help her. That’s why the boss really gave her a jacket.*

Morgan opened an umbrella and hurried them toward the path. “Just don’t forget your honor. It’s the most important thing you have in this camp.”

“Is that how you got the shiners, mate?”

“Yes. I forgot my honor for a while. Kyle knocked it back into me.”

Isabel grunted. “This is an odd place.”

Morgan nodded. “You have no idea.”

3

Standing near the door, Gus pulled it shut against the wind. He turned around to find Bernice next to him.

Bernice smiled.

Gus’s heart thumped.

Bernice scanned his big, bare, bruised arms under the tank top and glanced away. She’d never seen a man as big as Gus. He did funny things to her body without even trying. “Would you like to go to dinner with me?”

Gus lit up. "I'd love to eat with you and Crissy."

"No." Bernice blushed. "Just me."

It took Gus a few seconds to understand what was happening. When he did, he quickly nodded. A huge grin spread across his face as she went to get her raincoat from her footlocker.

Several people around them clapped for him.

Gus looked over at Dace, who was watching sadly. Dace's unhappiness was almost palpable. "Are you okay?"

Dace shrugged. He was alone for the moment while Jack helped prepare for the storm. "Were you there when my relationship with Lisa started?"

Gus smirked. "I'm not sure I would call it a relationship. She didn't want anything to do with you, but you were so hooked on her that you didn't care about anything else. I guess you finally got her attention."

Dace frowned. "But do I really want it?"

Gus shrugged. "She's not bad; she's just a little shaken by everything that's happened—like the rest of us."

Dace fell silent, considering the information. He couldn't deny that there was a hole in his heart. He just wasn't sure if it was because of Lisa.

Gus held the door for Bernice. The couple was quickly out of sight, leaving one man staring at them in consideration and another man staring after them in unhappiness.

Theo was playing chess against Nero and Gio near the kitchen. Hearing Bernice ask Gus on a date

had reminded Theo that he'd hoped to have a future with the beautiful woman when he got home. *I still want her.*

It bothered Theo that his mind was so occupied with females now, but he didn't know what to do about it. Before the run, he'd been missing Debra, but he hadn't been actively hunting for sex the way he was now. *It's almost like Adrian's punishment on the submarine shocked life back into that part of my body.*

Theo forced himself to pay attention to the game instead of going after the couple and interrupting their date.

"Do you think we can have another serving tonight?" Gio was finding it hard to stick to a normal eating schedule. The sound of the rain was driving him crazy. Food was the only comfort he wanted.

Theo shrugged. "The cooks might be okay with it if you help them clean up the kitchen."

Timmy was walking by the table and heard that. "I'm on my way over there to get more tea for the boss. We can go together."

The three males went out into the heavy rain and mud while the Eagles on guard duty watched the rising water start to surround parts of the town. Tomorrow would be a nightmare getting around anywhere on this island.

Conner went out behind the trio, detouring to the bathroom. Once inside, he leaned against the wall and took a minute to get his head together. He'd

been in stressful situations before, but none of them had involved someone he loved as much as Candy. “I’d do anything to save her. Please, God.”

Conner had been converted by the religious group because they were the only ones who offered any hope. “Just tell me what you want me to do.”

Conner felt someone watching him. He wiped his face and went back outside.

Nature leaned against the wet bathroom wall. “I can help you.”

Conner kept walking. He didn’t even glance at the sweetly curved cheeks being presented to get his attention. He didn’t see any female that way now except Candy. “Slam you.”

Nature chuckled. “I can heal her with one touch, young Mitchel.”

Conner stopped and turned. “Heal her first and we’ll talk.”

“You’re lying.”

“Yep. Go away, Snot Lady. You have nothing I want.” Conner returned to the bunkhouse.

Nature wasn’t surprised, though she was offended. “As soon as Angela is gone, I’ll rip this camp apart, starting with those damn Mitchels!”

4

In the restaurant, the cooks were busy covering the two shifts of diners who were coming through for every meal. It kept them too occupied to worry about Brittani until their workday was over. Both

parents preferred it that way since they couldn't do anything to help her or to change her mind.

Thelma gave Biff a warm smile, then gestured toward the girl sitting in the corner. "She wants to talk to you."

Biff didn't like it that Madison was sitting by herself yet again. He had already scanned her mind multiple times. She wasn't anything like the other vets they'd had. She was just very uncomfortable around other people. Biff understood that more than he'd ever thought he would. He had been an outgoing, vivacious playboy before the lab run. Now, just being in a room full of people made him want to have his stone warrior out for protection.

The restaurant was busy, comfortable, loud. The chatter and clink of dishes was almost drowning out the sound of the constant rain. It was soothing to most of them. Biff hated it. He took his tray over and joined Madison at her table. "Hi."

Madison smiled. "Hi!" Her normal shyness had been replaced by gratitude. "I wanted to say thank you again and ask if there's anything that I can do for you."

She hated it that he had returned so traumatized and scarred. His new injuries from the matchup drove it in that he was used to being hurt, but she still didn't like it. She barely remembered the man he'd been before the run. Madison didn't pay much attention to the opposite sex. Men made her just as uncomfortable as women did.

“I’m just glad I was able to help.” Biff began eating, not sure what else to say about it. He didn’t need her to pay him back in any way. He did hope she wouldn’t bring it up again after this. Her gratitude made him uncomfortable.

Madison noticed Biff wasn’t in Eagle gear like most of the other mission men. He was dressed in jeans and a t-shirt, like her. He was just missing the long black sweater that she preferred to keep the bugs away.

She didn’t know why it felt good to be around him, but their matching outfits stayed with her. *He’s a lot like me.* Madison felt bad for him. “Are you okay?”

Biff slowly shook his head. The sound of the rain was getting to him a little more with every hour that passed. “I need to find a distraction to hold me for a few hours.”

“I could play cards with you.” Madison was just as surprised as he was to hear that offer come out of her mouth. She saw a frown starting on his face and hurried to reassure him. “As long as your girlfriend is okay with it.”

The truth came out before he realized it was going to. “I’m breaking up with her. Jayda doesn’t really want me, and I don’t have the mental capacity for a relationship right now. I thought I did, but I was wrong.”

“I understand. I’ve had enough bad relationships to last a lifetime. It always goes to shit.”

Biff nodded. “Even when I try really hard to do it the right way, it doesn’t work. I think I just need friends until I adjust to being around so many people again.”

Madison smiled softly at him, unable to resist the bond that was forming. “I could be your friend.”

Biff sighed. “Are you sure? I’m pretty broken.”

“I’m positive. Let’s finish our dinner and go play some cards. We don’t even have to talk.”

“That sounds great.”

Sitting at the table next to them, Kyle motioned toward Roy. “Finish your dinner and we’ll go play in the rain.”

The boy was neatly dressed, with brushed hair and clean skin, but he wasn’t happy and it showed on his little face.

Roy pushed the tray away. “Not hungry.”

“Is someone being mean to you again?”

Roy’s brown eyes filled with tears. “Mommy.”

Kyle frowned. “Jennifer was mean to you?”

“She doesn’t love me anymore. She never hugs me. I miss mommy.”

Kyle pulled the boy onto his lap and held him, being careful not to scratch the child with his fraying cast. He understood exactly how Roy felt. “She’s sick. The wonderful, loving girl we’re missing might not return. We have to hold on to the memories.”

Kyle peered through the window and saw Jennifer standing outside in the rain. Tears rolled down her cheeks.

Kyle glanced away. He didn't want to be swayed by her misery. All he could do was hold onto his honor and hope things worked out for them in the end.

Jennifer got away from the window before anyone else saw her. She didn't go to the bunkhouse. She went down into the tunnels again. It was the only place where she felt wanted.

A green glow drew Kyle's eye. He watched Nature materialize near the barn.

Nature smiled, loving the feel of the rain. She connected to Kyle mentally. *I can help you get her back.*

Kyle glared.

Nature tried again even though she was already sure it wouldn't work on the stubborn man. *The two of you can rule these people like a king and queen. All you have to do is give me a chance to help you. We don't have to be enemies.*

Kyle burst out laughing, drawing attention from everyone in the restaurant.

Kyle shook his head at their curious glances. "It's just the gall of some people, you know?"

Camp members nodded and resumed what they'd been doing.

Kyle glared at Nature through the rainy window.
*We'll always be enemies. Go peddle that shit to
someone without a brain.*

Nature vanished.

Kyle put it in his report.

The storm continued to roil overhead, dropping buckets of rain. Heavy wind blew over the island, knocking things over and down. Thunder and lightning created a constant, tense atmosphere that prevented Safe Haven from relaxing. As the evening slowly approached overnight, most people stayed awake and waited for dawn to arrive.

A few of the braver souls ventured out in pursuit of their own interests. They didn't care about the storm or the personal dramas that were taking place all around them. The obsessions that had taken over their minds were impossible to fight.

Chapter Thirty
A Huge Mistake
Dawn

1

“**W**e are under a severe weather alert, Safe Haven.” Grant kept a calm voice as he delivered the latest storm update. “All activities are on hold until after the storm passes. Take shelter now and do not go out after sunset tomorrow. We’re expecting heavy rain for the next 36 hours.”

Grant hung up the mike and moved toward the exit ladder. He and Ray, along with the skeleton crew who were being punished for dereliction of duty with double shifts for the next month, had just finished rounds of all their reachable ships. They had ended here on the submarine so they could view the radar. This one was more detailed than the one on the cruise ship.

They’d discovered this cove received less waves, making it safer for their ships, but the boats still had to be separated so they didn’t lose the entire fleet if one broke loose. That lesson had been learned the hard way.

Grant still considered Shawn a hero for saving them. The tanker that sank that night had been salvaged, though part of it was still on the rocks. It

would be dumped on Henderson as soon as they figured out how to lift the heavy metal onto a garbage ship.

The group hurried off the sub and across the dock. Rain drenched the men in seconds. The wind hadn't gotten bad yet, but the rain had been nonstop. Every bit of ground on the island had standing water, including the clifftop. It was creating a mini waterfall that was beautiful to Grant but gave Ray the shakes.

Ray led the group over the beach path, deciding to take them across the less traveled path toward town because of the weather. There weren't as many trees along this route. Several of the older banyans had now fallen over around the island, causing debris piles and scares. Thankfully, no one had been injured.

The path that wound by Luke's cabin was also covered in running water, thanks to the hillside above it. Rainwater hit them from above and met their boots with every step. It was coming down so hard that it was tough to see where they were going.

The sound of the ocean echoed in mocking roars that had been making the mission men cringe. Ray understood how they felt as he hurried along the muddy path.

He saw Luke's cabin ahead of them and detoured that way. He and Grant were off duty now and the Eagles with them weren't due for another shift for an hour. "Let's wait out some of this in the cabin."

The men jogged toward the porch, eager to be dry. They hadn't been all day.

"The door's open." Grant got in front of the amateur Eagles, stopping them from going up the wooden steps.

Ray had halted on the first stair, narrowing in on a familiar shape lying face down on the floor just inside the entrance. "Don't come up here!"

Ray carefully stepped up onto the porch and pushed the door open the rest of the way.

The cabin had been ransacked. Drawers were open, personal items were all over the end tables, and several necklaces were on the floor next to the body. *It looks like she was stealing and got caught.*

The rookies crowded closer to the steps.

"Is that another body?"

"I know her. That's Megan!"

She was fully clothed. Blood was pooled around her waist and back. She'd been stabbed, repeatedly.

"Sound the alarm. All of you go to the first guard post and wait there until somebody comes from town." Ray stayed on the porch. "I'll guard the body. Go on now."

Grant didn't like the idea of leaving Ray here alone when the premises hadn't been cleared yet, but the rookies couldn't be left alone either. He pointed at one of the low-level men. "Stay with him."

Ray approved of that order. He stayed quiet as the others left, listening to determine if anyone was still inside the cabin.

A minute later, an alarm began to sound from the guard post; rain fell harder.

The somber rookie who'd stayed put a hand on his gun belt. "We're going in, right?"

Ray nodded. "We have to clear it so it's safe for the medics."

"It feels like someone is still in there."

"Yeah." Ray had sent the others on for that reason. The rookies weren't trained for this and Grant was exhausted from doing ship shifts and then still trying to attend Eagle meetings and lessons. "Stay behind me and watch our six."

Ray carefully went around the bloody smears. He drew his gun and advanced further into the cabin, shedding mud and debris from his boots.

Ray reached the kitchen in time to see the rear door shut. He hurried to the window, but the rain was coming down too hard for him to get more than a glimpse of a shadowy figure in a red rain slicker running into the jungle.

"Do we follow?"

"You bet your fat ass."

"Fat?!"

"Kyle will work it off of you. Come on." Ray hurried out the rear, holstering as the rain soaked him again. Shooting in this weather was a bad idea unless he had a clear target.

Chasing someone through the jungle in a heavy downpour was the last thing Ray had expected to be doing when he'd woken this morning. He ran faster,

trying to catch up, but it was clear that his target knew this island better than he did.

Ray and the rookie hurried over the flooding path, but there weren't any prints to follow and it was raining too hard to hear steps. They made it all the way to the intersection near the church without seeing anyone.

Ray wiped rain from his face as he scanned the church. There were no wet prints on the wooden porch and the singing people inside weren't acting like a killer had just rushed in to hide among them.

The rookie slung rain from his hands into the jungle that didn't need it. "It's like they're using Eagle evasion training."

"Yeah. Let's go to the bunkhouse and see if anyone just came in soaking wet, other than us."

They hurried into town, but Ray didn't find any signs that their mystery person had come here either. "Try not to wind people up. We'll talk to the boss first."

"Okay." The rookie opened the door and stepped inside. "There's been another murder!"

Ray groaned. "I should have left your fat ass in the jungle."

2

"If I had known it was going to rain here all the time, I would have stayed in America." Greg pulled the small window shut with his good hand. He was

standing in the loft of the barn, watching the angry sky while trying to control his anxiety.

“We could have stayed on the sub if we wanted to be surrounded by water.” Wade flashed a smile around, also trying to lighten the mood. His session here yesterday had helped him make a little more progress on his fear of water.

The other men in the barn snorted or rolled their eyes, but it didn’t alleviate their concern. Even the floor of the barn was covered in an inch of water now. It was an awful reminder of Howland Island.

Almost all of the mission men and the rescue team were in the barn right now. Angela had just held a group session. None of them were eager to go back into the crowded bunkhouse yet. Even Dog and the puppy were in the barn, along with the Golden Retriever and the cats. The only ones missing from that group were the goats and the horse.

Daryl and Isabel had also been told to attend this therapy session between shifts. Daryl was working on storm preparations and Isabel was working in the clinic again. She was still examining the vials and trying to match one to any of their cancer patients. It was a slow process with their primitive equipment.

They were both still here now, though the session was over. So was Stanley; he was doing guard duty near the entrance. No one was sure why Angela had invited Stanley to stay for the session, but they hadn’t minded him being here. He hadn’t

spoken a single word. Everyone could tell he was more interested in Isabel's mental state than theirs. It was nice to see him finally reaching another milestone in his life.

Many people were curious about how that new couple had spent the overnight hours after the matchups. Isabel and Stanley hadn't been in the community tent or in the party area come dawn. They had walked out of the jungle around noon and gone their separate ways.

The Golden Retriever whimpered as the bunker cat stood up to get a better grip on his fur. It was cleaning time.

Greg glared at the animals that were piled in the corner of the barn. "Do you have to do that in here?!"

Angela decided it was a good time for another type of therapy. "I want everyone to take turns calling the puppy over and giving him some attention."

None of the mission team liked that order.

"The puppy needs socialization and so do all of you. Get on it."

Greg forced himself to snap his sore fingers.

The puppy responded instantly, rushing over with its tail wagging furiously. It was easy to see Angela was right. The animal wasn't getting much attention from the camp, thanks to the rule of not making the dogs too friendly. Angela wanted them to still be able to perform guard duty.

Greg steeled himself to the feel of the puppy licking his hand. At any other time in his life, it would have been easy to handle. At this moment, he was both terrified and furious.

“Give it a rub.” Angela continued to direct the moment while listening to the rain fall. She thought she heard another noise underneath the falling water that was hitting the roof and drowning out most of the sounds of the people in the bunkhouse and the restaurant.

Greg rubbed the puppy’s dirty ear. He ran a hand along the animal’s back and then stopped. Deep down, he knew the puppy wasn’t a threat. *But I’m never going to like any canine now other than Dog. I don’t think that will ever change.*

The Golden Retriever whimpered again. *The poking! Make the poking stop!*

The bunker cat peered down at him in contempt. *Human pets! So weak.*

Duke barked excitedly. *I heard it! I heard it!*

Dog grunted. *Good job. Now tell me how to make them shut up.*

Our tails are fun.

Yes. We chase.

Your tail is too big.

Must cut it off!

Duke yelped as both cats attacked his tail.

Laughter rolled over the rain, improving the mood a little. The barn was cool and smelled a bit moldy, but it was still better than the crowded heat of the bunkhouse.

Kenn rubbed the puppy with his bruised hand and then stopped, doing the bare minimum to get by. *We need to get some fans running in there.*

Angela caught that thought. “We only have the industrial fans from the cruise ship. It will take an engineer to set it up so the kids can’t get their hands in the blades.”

Theo nodded at the unspoken request. “I’ll handle it.” Theo didn’t want to be put to work yet, but he also didn’t want to go back into that bunkhouse as hot as it was.

Angela turned toward the door, hearing the noise again. She tried to narrow the familiar sound. It clicked for her at the same time that it clicked for other people in the barn.

“That’s an alarm from one of the guard posts.” Kenn recognized it now. “There’s been another attack.”

Angela nodded, eyes becoming dazed as she scanned the island with energy she couldn’t spare.

Marc put a hand on her wrist. “We’ll cover it.”

Angela let go of the magic, grunting. “This is also part of the reason the trip was grounded. I need you all here to help me with this.”

Jayda wasn’t surprised; neither was anyone else. They hadn’t fully accepted the medic’s explanation about spreading the rage illness. They’d been traveling to other countries all along. It was a good excuse for the camp, however. No one wanted them to panic.

Angela looked around at the men who were getting up and going toward the door. “I know you’ve all been breaking the rules for personal gain.”

Men stopped in their tracks, waiting to be punished.

“I haven’t interfered because you haven’t let it take control. You waited until you had free time. You didn’t let it endanger anyone, including yourselves. You stopped when you needed to and came back to reality. That was all I required from you.” Angela gestured toward the bunkhouse. “Now use your new skills to find the killer and remove them.”

Men nodded quickly, relieved that she wasn’t angry and proud of themselves that they had been able to control their obsessions.

“Split off into teams. Cover the clinic and the town. I want a doubled guard over the main buildings and send someone to the jail to stay there until we’re finished.”

Biff frowned. “Finished with what?”

Angela moved toward the exit. “We’re about to go on lockdown while they do a complete search of the island. I want my people in place before Jennifer makes that call. She has point today. It will take her a little while to go over the crime scene and then decide on what to do next. Get in place and don’t let her order you away.”

“Is there a specific reason for that, Boss?” Kyle didn’t like how it felt to be conspiring against Jennifer.

“I have a specific reason for everything I do.” Angela stepped out into the rain before he could repeat the question.

3

Daryl fell in step with Gus. “Can I have a minute?”

Gus shook his head. “I can’t help you.”

“Please!”

Gus stopped with anger flashing across his face. “She doesn’t listen to me. If she did, she wouldn’t be married to you!”

People around them kept walking through the rain, but they listened to the conversation.

Daryl was desperate. “You have to try anyway!”

Gus controlled his temper. He was angry, but he also felt bad for Daryl. The man was exhausting himself to keep Brittani alive. “It’s pointless. Dwight went through this with Thelma. You’ll never convince her to abort.”

Daryl frowned. “What do you mean they’ve gone through it before?”

“Thelma almost died giving birth to Brittani. It’s her only child that lived.”

“But they have all those boys.”

“Those are Dwight’s sons.”

No one had known that. Daryl stared in dismay. “It’s genetic.”

Gus nodded. “That’s why we didn’t have kids yet. She wanted them. I told her no for years, for this reason.”

“I didn’t know.”

“Would it have mattered?”

Daryl slowly shook his head. “I’d give her anything.”

“And in doing so, you’ve doomed her.” Gus suddenly understood why Daryl was approaching him now. “There’s an evac coming and she won’t make it through that. Say goodbye to her while you can. You’ll be a widower soon.” Gus walked away, heart shattering.

Daryl began to cry.

Observing from the wet jungle nearby, Nature smiled cruelly. She didn’t approach either man with a deal. Neither of them could be trusted to uphold their end of it. They were too set in their Eagle ways.

Nature wasn’t disappointed. She was pleased. *I love their misery. It makes my green heart happy.*

4

“We have to do something! We’re not safe here!”

“Settle down!”

People were crowded around the main entrance and the kitchen. It was loud and tense.

“Don’t tell me what to do! You’re a man! They aren’t hunting you!”

“She’s right! Someone is killing women in our camp. We have to do something!”

“I say we go to the jailhouse and drag out those rookies! They know who it is!”

“Good idea!”

Jennifer slammed the front door as she entered, eyes glowing bright red. “Stop it!”

She marched into the crowd that was on the verge of rioting. “We’re handling it! Settle down!”

Allison was terrified. She’d been friends with Pam and Megan. “You’re not handling anything! All you care about is power!”

“Settle down.”

“No! We’re all in danger!” Allison’s focus swung to the little girl now cowering behind Selina. “You let a monster back in here with us!”

“Shut up!”

“Go to hell!”

Jennifer zapped her.

Allison fell to the ground, screaming.

Eric nodded in satisfaction. He couldn’t stand Allison now.

The rest of the crowd retreated, but they glared at Jennifer. They weren’t going to take much more.

Jennifer drew energy for a community punishment.

“That’s enough.” Angela entered the bunkhouse, speaking calmly. “I want everyone accounted for. I also want to know if Megan, Pam,

and Dari had any common enemies. Line up by the kitchen and give me your details.” Angela went to the kitchen without waiting for anyone to protest.

The crowd slowly followed her while casting dark glares at Jennifer.

Angela went by Allison without looking at the crying woman. “Get her onto a cot. Find a medic to sedate her.”

Molly hurried out of her bed, ignoring the pain in her healing arm. “She can have my spot.” Molly quickly went into the bathroom to get away from Jennifer. She kept a tight lock on her thoughts.

“She was stirring them up!” Jennifer didn’t like it that Angela had waltzed in and taken control. “She should be in the jail overnight.”

“She has the rage illness.” Angela sat in a chair by the kitchen sink. “Get started. You have point today with Kyle.”

Jennifer almost refused.

Samantha surprised everyone by pointing at the angry teenager. “Maybe you should be sedated, too!”

Jennifer swallowed a nasty response.

Samantha turned to Angela. “I want Missy cleared of the charges. She was here the whole time. There’s no way she could have done this.”

Angela reluctantly shook her head even though most of the crowd voiced agreement. “When the investigation is complete, I’ll go over the reports and make a final call on that.”

“But she’s innocent!”

Angela grunted. “We have to follow procedures.”

Samantha helped Allison to her feet and led her toward the cot. She had just come from the jailhouse, where she’d interviewed the rookies again. “What about the men we’re holding?”

“They can be released after we do the search.”

Samantha was satisfied with that. She sat next to Allison and held her hand while they waited for a medic.

Angela got busy. “Who’s first?”

The camp lined up or stood in small groups, discussing the situation while she worked.

“Someone else is on this island. Ray saw the killer!”

“Our people wouldn’t do this.”

“None of this started until the boss came home. Maybe it’s one of the new people.”

“They’ve all been under guard. It had to be someone else.”

The radio lit up with Jennifer’s furious voice. “We are on lockdown, Safe Haven. Stay where you are right now. Lock the doors and windows and do not come out until I tell you it’s clear!”

Angela waved at Neil. “Get them accounted for and do a search here so it’s covered. Everyone will help you.”

Put to work, the camp still continued to mutter about who the killer could be, but the mood was calmer and it hadn’t come from Jennifer. Everyone

was glad the boss was home. In a moment like this, there was no one they trusted more.

5

“Amen.” Tim closed his Bible as the congregation copied his ending. He was glad that Parker had suggested they gather here to ask God for an end to the rain, and to escape the crowded, gossip-filled bunkhouse. With the doors and windows shut, it was hot, it stank, and the mood was unstable.

The church people were heavily clothed and sweating. It made for a smelly service that bothered Tim. He took great pride in keeping the building clean, but that didn't matter if his congregation stank. He knew they all bathed regularly. It had to be the covering clothes, but he refused to change the dress code. It was a church, not a bistro. It deserved respect.

Tim glanced toward the open window they'd put in right under an overhang of the roof so it was protected. A cool breeze was coming in, but it wasn't enough to stop the sweating.

Tim paused, sharp eyes catching movement. The window looked out onto the jungle and the small bunkhouse they'd built onto the rear of the church.

The shadow vanished behind the bunkhouse; the rain was falling too heavily for him to determine who it was. *But I know. Damn him!*

Tim smoothed out his expression. “We’ll try again later, folks, but none of us knows God’s will. This rain may be a blessing to someone else.”

“I can live with the rain.” Ed stretched and yawned.

Daisey nodded. “We need the killer to be caught.”

None of them thought Missy or the jailed rookies were guilty now.

“I trust the boss to handle it.” Tim comforted the congregation who often gathered in the church to pray between services. It had become a steady routine while Angela was gone. “Return to the bunkhouse now and ask Angela what you can do to help.”

Ralph frowned. “Jennifer said to shelter in place.”

“Jennifer isn’t the boss.”

“We don’t even have a bathroom here!”

“Exactly. There’s no need for all of you to be uncomfortable.” Tim opened the front entrance of the church. Rain and wind blew in. “Go on now. Stay together.”

He kept a smile on his face until everyone was out of sight.

Then Tim locked the front door and casually walked around to the small bunkhouse while fighting the rain. The storm was picking up now.

Tim spotted red splatters on the steps as he went inside.

Tim hurried to the center of the floor, spotting more blood. He rolled up the carpet and opened the small wooden hatch.

Three men all wearing wet red rain slickers peered up at him with scowls and excuses.

“It wasn’t us!”

“We’ve been here the whole time!”

Tim scanned Corey and the others in dislike. If not for doing his religious duty, he would have already reported them. He didn’t ask where Martin was, though he worried over it.

The hole in the ground was three feet deep and six feet wide, with a small tunnel that led to the rear room of the church. It was blocked right now by dirt that had fallen during the last tremor on the island and by pieces of the lifeboat these men had survived in. Tim planned to dig it all out again when there was time. Right now, it was hiding the refugees who’d made it back to the island and were scared to face Angela. Tim had given them sanctuary and he regretted it.

Corey put his hand under his leg to keep Tim from seeing his injury. “Shut the hatch.”

Tim glared. “There’s a blood trail leading right here!”

Corey quickly found an excuse. “I cut myself.” He held up his hand. “I’ll clean it up.”

Tim recognized an offensive injury from his time in the Eagles. “I can’t give you sanctuary anymore. Come out of there. We’re going straight to Angela and she’ll handle it.”

Amos and Corey exchanged glances.

Corey conceded. "Okay. We're coming out."

"Yeah, you're right. We'll let Angela handle it."

Tim was relieved that they were being reasonable. He turned toward the nearby cabinet. "We'll clean up the blood first so it doesn't look so bad on—"

Tim grunted at the heavy blow to the back of his head. He fell forward, stunned.

Corey hit him again with the butt of his gun.

Amos grabbed Tim's legs and dragged the religious leader down into the cubby. "Clean up the blood. Use bleach."

Corey rolled Tim over so he could breathe, then climbed out of the hole. "Now what?"

"Now we slay a dragon and then go to Angela. She'll understand."

"What about Tim?"

"We'll keep him here for a few days. No one will notice he's missing if we're careful."

"You mean use this hiding hole like we've been doing."

"Yes. When he wakes up, feed him, water him, and then knock him back out. He should be able to last a few days that way."

"If he dies, Angela won't be pleased."

"I wouldn't be so sure. She doesn't like the church having so much power. She might just thank us for this one, too."

The refugees finished cleaning up the blood and then climbed back into the cubby with Tim, pulling

the carpet over the hatch by a string that had been sewn on for just that purpose. It wouldn't be long before the searchers made it here, but only Tim knew about this hidey-hole.

That was a huge mistake.

Chapter Thirty-One
Sloppy Search

1

“Do a complete search. Every nook, cranny, cabinet, and storage space. Go through it all.” Jennifer held the door to the clinic open so the brawlers she’d picked for this duty could enter.

The clinic didn’t have patients right now. Wade was glad of that as the brawlers tracked mud across the lobby, pulled out chairs without putting them back, and knocked irreplaceable supplies off the shelves.

Thunder cracked, matching Wade’s mood. The search crew was fully geared, soaking wet, annoyed, and not good at their jobs. Wade was disappointed in Kyle. He understood this wasn’t as important as the camp thought, but he’d still expected Kyle to treat it seriously.

Kyle stayed in the rear of the group and watched everyone they encountered. He was digging into their minds while the brawlers did the search. It was a good time with people distracted.

Jennifer saw Wade standing near the reception desk. He was fully geared and a bit intimidating as he sent cool eyes over her escorts.

She frowned. “What are you doing here?”

Wade pointed toward the men who were now hurrying into the rear rooms. “We have a lot of equipment that can’t be replaced. Keep them under control.”

“Hey! Be careful!”

Tonya’s shout made Jennifer hurry after the brawlers. She sent a glare over her shoulder at Wade.

“Settle down!” Jennifer’s harsh bark echoed. “Don’t touch the equipment!”

Kyle stayed by the main entrance and waited for them to finish. He dripped on the drenched floor mat and fought his own issues. Being out in a storm wasn’t pleasant anyway; going through a month of fog on the submarine made this harder.

“What are you doing here?”

Jennifer’s repeated question drew Kyle’s attention.

Greg’s cold voice came right back. “Wipe the mud off your feet! This is a lab. It’s not supposed to get dirty in here!”

The brawlers exited quickly, eager to avoid Greg’s displeasure and Jennifer’s rebuttal.

“You don’t make the rules here!”

“Go finish your search before it gets dark. You still have a lot of ground to cover.”

“Don’t tell me what to do!”

“Should I call the boss?”

Greg’s calm question sent fury through the clinic. Jennifer’s anger was felt by everyone.

Wade pointed. “Hey! She’s drying up the floor. Nice!”

Kyle chuckled; he couldn’t help it.

Jennifer stomped out of the rear hall with bright red eyes. She shoved by the brawlers.

Kyle held the door for her, still grinning.

Jennifer let the cold rain soothe her nerves. “Check the storage shed.”

They’d already covered the clifftop, several private bunkers, and the jailhouse, where Zack and Ray had been on guard duty but wouldn’t tell her why or who had assigned them there. *Like I don’t know!* Angela had put her people in place. What Jennifer didn’t know yet was why. *But I’ll find out. You can’t hide anything from me!*

Several small storage sheds had been put up around the island, along with new guard posts. They were big enough to fit two short shelves and two warm bodies for a shift and that was about it.

The brawlers jogged over and wrenched the water-logged door open, almost pulling it off the hinges.

“I’m glad you’re here...” Tobias saw who it was and jumped. Lightning flashed; rain came down heavier.

Tobias quickly began pulling up his pants. “Hey!”

Jennifer eyed the romantic picnic he’d set up on a shelf. She read his mind and saw he was meeting a lover here.

Tobias snapped his pants. “Don’t be mad at her. She only gets a break from that lab once a day. She deserves a personal life.”

The food for the picnic looked like it had been swiped. Thelma usually wrapped the leftovers for their ill people. She didn’t cram them into a bag for horny medics.

Jennifer kicked at a puddle, sending muddy water flying into the shed. It hit Tobias. “Tonya would never hook up with you. You’re a liar!”

She kicked again, drenching the cringing man. Then she slammed the door. “Lock it and leave him there until we’re done searching.”

Kyle burst out laughing as Stuart locked the door and Tobias began pounding on it. “Maybe this won’t be a boring day after all.”

Jennifer splashed toward the next location. “He’s trying to get Kenn in trouble. Make sure Kenn knows to let it go.”

Kyle stopped laughing. “We’ll all warn him, but Kenn will make up his own mind. You know that.”

“He’ll be punished.” The path sank beneath her boots, squeezing thick mud to the top of the vines.

Kyle nodded. “I know. And you know Tobias deserves it.”

“We have to stop beating on each other! It’s not civilized!”

Kyle began to understand her reasoning. He connected it to the abuse and injuries she’d suffered, and then to the bad choices she’d made. He broke it to her as gently as he could. “You can only control

your own life, Jenny. No matter how much you want other people to see it your way, to do it your way, you can only control yourself. You have to stop trying to change everyone. It's their life, not yours."

"I'm the enforcer!" She glared. "You can't keep interfering! People have to be punished for their mistakes and that's my job now!"

Kyle knew she was still furious about him stopping her from punishing Adrian and for Adrian being forgiven by the Eagles, but Kyle sensed he'd done something else that was keeping her fire lit. "Tell me what I did."

Jennifer's fury flew out of her mouth. "You told Roy I'm too far gone to help. You told my kids their mother isn't coming back!"

Kyle studied her. "Are you? 'Cause we miss the old Jennifer. We can't stand this new woman."

Jennifer clenched her fists. "I'm the same person you married!"

"Not even close." Kyle walked up the path before she could answer.

Jennifer caught up, changing the subject. "What do you mean you thought this would be boring?"

Kyle snorted. "That's what you're focusing on?"

"Yes." She crossed her arms over her ample chest. "Being with me on a hunt for a serial killer is boring to you now?"

"This is a waste of time. The boss knows it, I know it, and so do you."

Jennifer had to uncross her arms to keep her balance in the rain and mud. “If you know so much, tell me what we should be doing!”

“We should be posting mission men at every location so they can scan thoughts and hiding places, while creating a great distraction so no one knows what’s really going on.”

Jennifer realized that’s exactly what they were doing. Her lips curved. “Funny.”

Kyle shrugged. “I thought so.”

A guard post came up on their right.

The brawlers rushed over to it.

The post was a mirror of the storage sheds, just with a simple half swinging door that hid the locked gun cabinet on the bottom shelf. The overhang kept out most of the rain, but the little that was coming in wasn’t bothering the couple inside.

“Hey! Get out of there!”

Thomas waved Jennifer off with his broken wrist. His cast was the only thing he had free at the moment.

The brawlers laughed, retreating so Kyle could see what was happening.

The den mother hadn’t noticed they were busted. She was wiggling like a snake and groaning louder than the wind.

Kyle chuckled. “Well, the boss did tell him to sniff a few skirts.”

“He’s doing more than sniffing.” Jennifer kicked the door shut. “Mark them off the list of missing people.”

Kyle was already doing it while trying to keep the rain from soaking his notebook or his cast. “Thomas and the den mother, found. They were...getting to know each other.”

Jennifer huffed. “They know each other. Even dogs don’t lick that much.”

Kyle laughed, storing his book. He sent her an image of their wedding night.

Jennifer took the lead and stomped up the flooding path.

Kyle shrugged. “I’m just sayin’. We know each other.”

The brawlers snickered.

Jennifer blushed and walked faster.

“Something’s moving in the path ahead of us.” Stuart got in front of Jennifer while the other brawlers surrounded her and Kyle.

Kyle enjoyed the feeling.

Jennifer shoved through, trying to see what they were talking about.

She narrowed in on two furry shapes playing in the rain... “That’s not playing.”

Kyle smirked. “Well, in a way.”

The cats ignored their human audience as they mated in the middle of the clover path.

Jennifer kicked mud toward them. “Oh, get a shed!”

The cats didn’t stop as the group went around. They were already soaked.

“We’re in a crisis and sex is all people, and the damn animals, are thinking about! What is going on?!”

Kyle grabbed her arm and gently spun her around. He locked their lips before she could bring up a shield.

Desire flowed over Jennifer, hot and sweet. She sighed against his lips. “Oh.”

Kyle drew back and resumed the walk up the cliff path. “Nature brings it out in all of us.”

Jennifer hurried to catch up. “Isn’t it wrong to combine danger and sex?”

“Nope. It keeps life interesting.” Kyle grew serious as they reached the road to Luke’s bunker. “It’s one of us.”

Jennifer’s mind switched gears as fast as his had. “I know. We’re not going to find them through a search or a mental eval because they’re expecting it.”

“The boss has a plan.”

Jennifer’s anger returned in force. “So much faith in her! Where’s your loyalty to me?!”

Kyle kept his cool. “In my heart, where it’s always been.”

Jennifer didn’t know how to respond without shouting. She clamped her lips shut and followed him up Cliff Road.

The brawlers stayed close and listened to everything that was said. All of them left muddy tracks from their standard issue Eagle boots.

“The bunker door is open.” Kyle held up a hand. “Let us clear it first.”

Jennifer marched forward, ignoring his order. She shoved the door open the rest of the way and hurried inside.

The bunker was neat and clean, though empty now of everything but the stove, the shower set up, and the curtain around it.

Daisey jerked the shower curtain closed. “Get out!”

“What’s going on in here?”

Daisey scowled through the curtain. “What does it look like?!”

Daisey hadn’t had time alone with her husband in weeks. She waved Ralph closer.

Jennifer stuttered, unable to look away from Ralph’s shadow.

Kyle snickered. “He’s hung.”

“Get out!”

“You get out!” Jennifer forced her gaze away from Ralph’s long schlong. “This isn’t okay.”

Daisey leaned back so Ralph could reach her. “Old people like sex, too! Now get out!”

Jennifer turned away as the elderly couple began to mate. “I may be sick.”

Their escorts laughed and cheered him on.

“Slap those rolls, Ralph!”

“Way to ride those waves!”

Jennifer went out into the rain. “I’ll never get that out of my brain now.”

“Shut the door!”

Kyle did, still chuckling. “Adrian’s shack next?”

Jennifer groaned. “If I see one more penis today, I may scream.”

Kyle opened his mouth.

“No!” Jennifer marched toward the shack path.

Kyle’s laughter stayed with her all the way.

3

They heard moans and grunts before they arrived. The drenched shack was clean, though the table was being used in ways that would require a new scrubbing when the couple was done.

Jennifer stopped, kicking mud into the trees. “We’re under a lockdown!”

Kyle scanned the drenched couple in the topside of Adrian’s shack. “He’s got her locked down. No worries.”

Isabel held onto Stanley’s strong shoulders, smiling blissfully as he rocked her against the table. Her eyes were closed and her mind was at peace. He’d defended her and now he was pleasing her. Isabel was happy.

Stanley heard their audience, but there was no way he could stop. *I’m a man now!*

Their escorts cheered him on like they had the others, but there was also an extra note of approval in their praise. Stanley was making them proud.

Jennifer splashed along the path. “This is a waste of time.”

Kyle heard Stanley blow his top. “Not for him. That kid needed a moment like this.”

Kyle caught up to Jennifer. “Don’t be mad at them. When people get scared, they start thinking about connecting to others.”

Jennifer huffed again. “They aren’t scared.” She glared toward the brawlers who were all around them now and not flinching from her anger. “No one is scared of me anymore.”

“That’s a good thing.”

“Says you!”

Kyle drove in the point. “Why do you think the boss wanted you out here like this if it’s a waste of time?”

Jennifer wasn’t in the mood for a lesson. “I don’t care!”

“Exactly.” Kyle led them over the town path, worried gaze taking in how much water was running over the walkways. “I wonder what the creek looks like right now.”

Jennifer groaned. “We don’t need more water!”

Kyle changed directions. “Let’s go see how bad it is.”

Jennifer followed, upset at how this search was going. They weren’t finding anything except people

breaking the rules. *If Angela hadn't come back, none of this would be happening!*

Kyle felt her mood dip. He didn't try to fix it. There was a feeling of things coming to a head soon. He hoped Jennifer made the right choice in the end. *But I'm not sacrificing my honor for her like Adrian has for Angela. My honor means too much to me to throw it away.*

Kyle thought of the ice packs he was replacing every few hours from various freezers across the island. He could hold Jennifer down right now, maybe, and make her take the vaccine. It would endanger the baby, though. He wasn't willing to take the chance. He needed to catch her off guard and that was very hard to do now. *Time with the boss has made her sharper.*

Jennifer's rage took control again. "I made me sharper!"

She stopped. "I'm going back to town. Leave me alone!"

She stomped off before Kyle could protest.

The brawlers weren't sure what to do.

Kyle motioned them to go after her. "I'll check on the creek and meet you in town. We'll finish our search there."

The brawlers hurried after the unhappy girl.

Kyle walked toward the creek with concern growing. *If it floods, are we up high enough to avoid it?*

That question bothered Kyle the entire time he trekked through the sopping jungle.

“Clear the barn!” Jennifer waited outside. She saw two shadows in there that told her Angela had positioned her men here, too. *Why didn't she just tell me it was for a distraction?*

Zack frowned through the window. *Think about something else or it won't work.*

Jennifer's anger rose another notch. *Slam you!*

Zack grinned coldly. *Your husband might get upset.*

Jennifer flipped him the finger and turned for a scan of the town.

Zack swallowed a flinch as thunder cracked right over the town, rattling the buildings. *If I never hear that again, it will still be too soon.*

Jennifer spotted Molly hurrying toward the bunkhouse. The bandage on her arm was soaked. “Molly!”

Molly forced herself to stop and smile. “What can I do for you?”

Jennifer glared. “You have to be hooked into the hive now. No more hiding.”

“I'd rather not.”

Jennifer wasn't in the mood to be patient. She sent out a quick wave of power and connected Molly. She scanned the injured woman's thoughts without mercy.

Molly tried to hide it, but Jennifer was too strong. Her fight with Monica in the cage flashed up, showing Jennifer everything.

Jennifer's lips thinned.

Molly hurried toward the bunkhouse as voices in her mind welcomed her and tried to offer comfort. *I'm screwed.*

Jennifer watched the woman until she was out of sight.

Zack caught Jennifer's attention through the window. *Check with the Eagles before you punish her.*

Mind your own business!

No. She's covered under Eagle rules for the matchups. Stop looking for reasons to hurt people! Zack turned away, cutting off her answer.

The brawlers searched the barn in under a minute. Stuart reported back to Jennifer. "There are boxes missing from under the steps."

"What was in them?"

"Nonperishable foods that no one likes. We left them there so the cooks can play with recipes later when we're short on food."

"I'll find out who took it." Jennifer waved her escorts toward the bunkhouse. "Go dry off and have lunch. We're on a break now."

She didn't wait for them to argue. She wasn't sure she could take another confrontation without zapping someone. She went into the shed by the barn and shut the door.

Jennifer leaned against it in relief. She'd been going into the tunnels for these cool down moments, but it was flooded now. Two feet of water was moving through every inch of space down there. Jennifer missed the privacy.

Nature appeared in the corner. She studied Jennifer with false compassion. "Have you had enough yet, child? I can help you if you'd just help me. Waking your ill man should be proof that I can do it."

Jennifer shivered as the cool rain began to drip from her hair onto her neck. "Thank you for helping Dace, but I can't betray them that way. They love her."

"She'll get them all killed. You know that."

Jennifer had already come to that conclusion. She didn't answer.

"Taking over would be saving this camp."

Jennifer stared at the muddy ground instead of the enemy. She knew she shouldn't be doing this. *There's no one else who understands me now.*

"I'll weaken her. You'll finish her off."

"People will know."

"Then pick someone to take the fall."

Jennifer thought of the murders. "Who's killing people here?"

"I'll tell you that the instant she's dead."

Jennifer shivered. "I may not be strong enough to do it."

"I'll gift you with unlimited power." Nature reminded the girl of what she really wanted. "Your

people are dying. You need my regeneration power to save them.”

Jennifer tried not to make the deal. *Maybe I can just use it once and then give it back...*

Nature waited, hoping this was the time Jennifer caved. She was sick of these conversations, sick of the girl’s whining, and sick of the humans in general. With Angela dead, all of their deals would be void and she could resume hunting the normals.

“I can’t do this.” Jennifer left the shed.

Morgan was standing right there.

“What do you want?!”

Morgan frowned through his blackened eyes. “I have updates for you.” He didn’t want to go into the bunkhouse. He couldn’t stand to see Hannah and think about Megan. *Megan’s dead. Hannah’s next and I can’t stop it!*

“Are you okay?”

He shook his head, letting himself stare at her this time for the distraction, but it created more stress. Jennifer was still beautiful to Morgan, but the cloak of angry guilt she wore over her Eagle gear dimmed that for him.

Jennifer missed the way he used to stare at her. She missed that from Kyle, too, and from the kids in camp. *They all think I’m a monster now.*

Jennifer took the paper he held out and stuck it inside her drenched jacket. “Can I ask you something?”

Morgan didn't care that he was getting soaked or that she looked like a drowned rat. He needed a distraction from Hannah's future. "Shoot."

Jennifer had always admired Morgan's mind. "It's a philosophical issue."

Morgan waited, sensing she was about to cross a dangerous line.

"Would you kill one person to save four?"

Morgan immediately shook his head. "No. Murder is never okay, Jenny."

Jennifer flushed angrily. "What the hell do you know?!"

"I know if you don't take the power back, you'll lose Kyle. His honor is more important."

"He gave it up for me once."

"But you were good then. Now, you're making yourself into the enemy." Morgan left her standing there in the rain. His punishment was hurting, reminding him that he'd made a mistake. *I won't do it again, not even for her.*

Jennifer felt like she'd just lost something important. She swallowed the pain and went to the restaurant to continue the useless search on her own.

5

"This was a great idea." Neil enjoyed the rainy walk as it hit his shield and bounced off from the ankles up. "Nice work."

Kenn grunted, sore arms full of equipment and samples that needed to be taken to various places. “I saw Rico do it and copied.”

Neil shrugged. “Either way, I’m a fan.”

The body had been taken to the ship and a cleaning crew had been drafted for the cabin, but it would have to wait until after the storm. For now, the cabin was locked, with a notice on the porch. Both men hoped that would be enough to keep people out of there.

Neil smiled. “Did you know it mutes the sound of the ocean, too?”

Kenn’s tone was emotionless. “Does it? That’s interesting.”

Neil spotted movement ahead of them on the path. “Brawler alert.”

Kenn saw how fast the men were going and frowned. “Move aside.”

Neil jumped over as the group slid by, flailing and running with gravity to avoid falling.

One of the men tripped on a vine and hit the guy next to him. The entire group went down, sinking into the running water and mud.

Kenn and Neil kept going.

“I think it may rain.”

Neil chuckled. It was almost evening now. The search hadn’t turned up anything new, but there were still shifts to be covered, ships to be guarded, and a meal to be served. No one was locked down anymore. It was too busy.

The town was full of people. Madison and her helpers were trying to get all the animals into the barn. The Retriever was cooperating, but he was the only one. The goats were running wild, butting everyone who tried to grab them.

Neil watched as a rookie was hit in the ass and knocked into the water. He turned toward Kenn. “Cards later?”

Kenn eyed the happy trooper. “You’re going to get laid soon, right?”

Neil laughed. “You noticed my good mood.”

“Well, you were humming while we bagged a body. Some people might have found that odd.”

“Sam’s coming back, Kenn. I’ve missed her so much!”

Kenn understood as he watched Tonya hurry out of the jungle. She spotted them, saw their shields, and immediately brought hers up.

Kenn wondered why Rico hadn’t covered it for her.

Neil frowned for the first time in hours. “Are you really going to let him move in on her without doing anything about it?”

“I’ve watched you and Marc enough to know it has to be what the woman wants or we’re all miserable.” Kenn grinned, acting like it didn’t bother him. “I’m learning from your mistakes.”

Neil smirked at Rico. “I could handle it for you.”

Rico glared back. He was confident in his abilities, but he didn't know kai. Neil might be a real challenge.

Kenn went into the barn without answering.

Neil leered at Rico. *Let me know when you want to find out.*

Tonya ignored all of them. She walked into the bunkhouse with a grim face. She hated delivering bad news. It was the worst part of her job.

Neil saw Kyle hurrying into town from the least used path. It was the only one that went to the creek and the old store that had been run by the woman Kendle had called crazy. *And that said a lot coming from her.*

Neil's good mood began to fade. Tonya was tense and Kyle was upset. Things were going badly.

Neil's shoulders drooped. *It's because I was happy for a few hours, right? You just can't allow that without punishing me.*

Fate didn't answer, but Neil could almost hear the cruel laughter.

Kyle headed for the bunkhouse.

Neil followed.

All around the town, mission men and rescue team members did the same. Even without the team hive, they knew there was something else wrong.

Kyle didn't have time to be discreet. He hurried to Angela. "We have a big problem, Boss."

Angela had felt him coming. She was already pulling her boots back on over her swollen feet. "Tell me."

“The creek has flooded. There’s a wall of water rolling toward town and I don’t know how to stop it from washing us out. Even the gators are gone.”

“We’ll use that as a warning sign next time. When they leave the creek, it’s time for us to go.” Angela looked over at Tonya. Before she could tell the redhead to let it wait for now, Tonya’s news rolled out.

“I’m sorry, Allison. The cancer came back and it’s the aggressive version we fought before. We need to get you in for treatments right away.”

Allison broke down. “It all started with Pam’s death! That little bitch cursed us all!” She was still certain Missy had murdered her friend.

Brittani groaned. Tears began rolling from under her clenched lids.

“Adrian!”

The blond man ran, gathering energy for a strong sleep spell.

“It comes in threes.” Kenn had always hated that. One crisis at a time was more than enough.

Sitting with his family, Zack glanced toward the window. He spoke his thoughts aloud. “Has anyone searched the church?”

People got upset right away.

“Why would they search the church?”

“You’re not ransacking our temple!”

“We’re not sinners like you!”

Zack slid his good hand to his holster. “Do you have something to hide?”

Most of the church group clammed up, glaring. A few of them kept protesting.

Zack walked toward them to reach the window. He wasn't scared.

The tension didn't break, but the complaints paused as the man went through the center of their group. Zack was intimidating.

Wade motioned Amy to stay with Samantha, then he headed for the exit. "Come on."

Zack followed, ignoring the anger of the church people.

Jennifer appeared in the doorway. Her eyes were bright red.

The church people flashed back to their service where Tim had warned them about the evil of the devil and the many forms he could take.

Angela whistled to get attention. "Pack a bag and get ready for an evacuation call."

Zack and Wade slipped out as everyone else turned toward Angela in surprise and concern.

"Evac?" Marc's mind went to Howland Island. "Are we too late this time, too?"

Angela put a hand on his arm. "You'll be above the water."

Marc shuddered, showing the first signs that he was just as damaged as the rest of the men. "I'm sorry."

"So am I, but only for sending you to that damn place." She looked around, spotting mission men on the edge of a breakdown. She felt the same way. "Deep breaths. We're okay."

The camp began comforting those men, too.

“But why do we have to evacuate at all? Daryl did a great job on this building and we can go to the top level if we need to.” Sadie didn’t want to leave.

Panaji put an arm around Sadie and hugged her. “Not all. Never fit everyone up there.”

Sadie allowed his presence to comfort her. They’d talked last night about joining a therapy session. Panaji was angry with Daryl for dumping dirt on him and Sadie was pissed at Adrian and Piper. They’d both decided to let go of their grudges, but it was harder for her. Sadie wanted payback and all she’d gotten was a shitty apology. “Maybe just the sick people can stay here?”

Daryl wanted to agree, but he couldn’t. “We didn’t waterproof the wood. If it gets hit by too much water, it can weaken and become waterlogged. A few feet of water could cause serious damage.”

Angela finished it off. “It would also be a great time for Nature to send a tremor and then we’ll be in the water with no shelter.”

Mission men groaned aloud this time.

“Can we wait and see?”

Angela shook her head at Sadie. “The last thing we want is to be evacuating during a flood.” She signaled Rico, surprising everyone. “You have point over the medics. Get them prepped to leave.”

“Why him?!” Tobias was embarrassed and furious. He’d only been out of the shed for an hour; people were mocking him with every glance.

“Because he lived in an underwater lab for decades. He knows how the ocean works, how dangerous it can be. He’ll get you all to the ship alive.” Angela stood up, stopping more protests. “We’re evacuating to the cruise ship in half an hour. That’s an order. Get moving.”

Chapter Thirty-Two
We're All Liars

1

“We are going to the cove in 30 minutes, Safe Haven. Be ready for the evacuation in half an hour!” Radios blared with Jennifer’s angry voice. “Remember to stay with your group!”

Zack and Wade stopped on the small porch of the church, wiping water from their faces and arms. Rain was pouring, the wind was increasing, trees were blowing, debris was flying, and the sun was setting.

Wade eyed the water rushing over the town ahead of the creek flood. “We may have waited too long to call an evacuation.”

Zack nodded absently. His attention was on the dark church. “The door’s locked.”

Wade frowned. “Since when do churches lock their doors?”

Zack got his small tools kit out, fighting with his cast. “When they’re hiding something.”

Wade stood behind Zack, blocking the view from anyone watching through the windows of the bunkhouse or the restaurant. Most people were under cover now, but a few braver souls were

challenging the weather to go get a shower or a cold meal before they had to leave.

Zack popped the lock and entered while storing his tools.

Wade shut the door behind them and followed. Both men scanned the wooden pews and clean floor, searching for anything out of place.

Zack peered down the rows as he walked toward the altar area. It was perfectly neat in here, without a single smudge on the white tile floor. Small rugs lined the front and rear of the church and a tall, pointed ceiling had been outfitted with real lights, though they lacked power cords. Even the insides of the windows were spotless. “He puts a lot of work into this place.”

Wade nodded. That was obvious. “Shouldn’t he put it into the camp in general?”

“I think so. I’ve never understood why the boss allowed religion to take hold in our camp. We all know it’s a bad idea to restart the old ways.”

“Yeah.” Wade thought he did know why Angela had made that choice, but now wasn’t the time for a lecture on personal freedom. “I’ll get that other door open.”

Zack examined the windows. He found them both locked and positioned too high to provide an escape if one was needed. He narrowed in on the small bunkhouse that was attached to the rear of the church. He assumed the door Wade was unlocking would let them into it. If not, they would go back out into the rain and pop that lock, too.

“I’m in.” Wade wasn’t as fast as Zack at lock picking even with two good hands. It was a skill he rarely used. Wade opened the door.

Zack saw a cot that wasn’t made, garbage on the floor and rug, and layers of dirt and dust everywhere. It reminded him of being on the sub after the fog lifted. “This is a big difference.”

“This isn’t from Tim.” Wade knew that for sure. “Tim is a neat freak.”

A small rug in the center of the floor was the only decoration in the dirty room. Zack scowled. “He’s taking this self-sacrificing thing too far.”

“He should have been locked up for the shit with Courtney.” Wade was still hurting over that, though he rarely mentioned it anymore.

“Yep.”

Zack and Wade began digging through the drawers, the cabinets, and peering under the small bed.

“I thought there was a connector to the bunkhouse.”

“So did I.”

“Back out into the rain it is.” Zack led the way. There wasn’t anything in here.

Wade scanned the garbage pile in the corner. “Why would he have planks of rotting wood in here?” He followed Zack. “None of this makes sense.”

“If we have time, we’ll ask him some questions while people are distracted with the evac.”

The two men hurried around to the rear of the church.

Zack got the door open while Wade stood watch. The feel of danger was clear to both men.

Zack scanned the small bunkhouse. There were two dozen bunkbeds, half as many lockers along one wall, a small closet, and a large rug in the center of an open floor space. It was so clean they could still smell the bleach that had been used.

They started searching the closet and lockers, but there was nothing to find.

“Why aren’t they living here?” Wade hadn’t thought about that until now.

“Good question. It would ease the crowdedness in the main bunkhouse.”

“Maybe Jennifer wouldn’t allow it?”

“We’ll find out later.” Zack stopped in the middle of the room, scuffing his muddy boots on the rug to keep from dirtying the floor. “What are we missing?”

Wade felt the same way. “I don’t know.”

“But we’re not wrong. It’s hinky.”

“Yep.” Wade motioned. “Let’s talk to the boss about it.”

“We’ll get some time with her on the ship after the evac.”

Wade shut the door, frowning as he saw the wall of the bunkhouse was directly against the wall of the church. “Why would you put it so close and not make an entrance?”

Zack went over to the wall. He ran a hand along the drenched wood. “It has to connect.”

“Then where’s the entrance?”

Both men examined the wall again as the rain soaked them.

“It’s almost time to evacuate, Safe Haven. Line up at the exit and wait for your escorts. Stay together and follow your escorts!” The radio shut off.

Zack kept checking the wall between the church and bunkhouse. “You go on. I’ll be there in a few minutes.”

“Are you sure?”

Zack patted his soaked holster. “I’m good. Go help Neil with your beautiful family.”

Wade assumed Zack wasn’t looking forward to helping Allison get to the ship in this weather. Wade didn’t blame the man. Allison had fallen apart in just a week. It was surprising and scary how fast it had happened. Now, her cancer had returned. That would make Zack’s life rougher on top of the mental issues he’d developed on the run.

“It started before that.” Zack didn’t want the run to get all of the blame. “A warehouse wall hurt me first.”

Wade put a wet hand on Zack’s shoulder. Then he headed for the big bunkhouse. “Ten minutes and then I’ll send someone to drag you in.”

Zack chuckled. “Use a fishing pole and hook me like a trout.”

Wade chuckled as he left.

Zack didn't. His mind was zeroed in on the mystery. He had to have something to stop him from breaking down about Allison and the run. "It has to connect somewhere."

The bushes behind him rustled.

Zack spun around, hand going to his holster.

A man in a red rain slicker darted off around the side of the church.

Zack gave chase, splashing through the rain and mud.

Zack rounded the corner and saw the tunnel hatch closing. He stomped through the rising flood and dropped into the knee-high water at the bottom.

He shook off the shock of being in water again and followed the sound of desperate splashing. His fear was pushed aside by the need to catch a killer. Zack was certain he was chasing the man who had murdered three women on their island. "Run faster you piece of shit. You'll die tired!"

Zack saw water coming through the walls of the tunnels and understood why they'd needed to get the bunkhouse built. *People would have been upset to find out the tunnels weren't safe, but we needed them to shelter the camp while we worked on the town.*

Zack ran faster, using his time under the ocean as a drive. He knew how to move in high water now. "I'm almost on your heels, killer!"

The splashing ahead of him grew louder as Zack got closer. He ran faster, using high, hard steps to plow through the muddy water. "You can run, but

you can't hide anymore!" Zack laughed crazily, letting it all out. "Your ass is mine!"

Mud slid down the walls as he went by, pushed out by more water as every tunnel and hole in the island filled with rain.

Zack barely noticed. His anxiety had taken charge of his mind, telling him that catching the killer would solve it all. He ran faster, hunting for peace. He didn't think about calling for help.

A muddy man broke away from the wall and hurried up the nearest ladder after Zack ran by. He climbed out and shut the hatch without being heard. The storm was a perfect cover.

2

"We're leaving in fifteen minutes! Line up so we can mark you off the list!" Jennifer whistled over the chaos, trying to get attention. "Line up right now, people!"

No one paid her any attention. The camp was in chaos mode. They were throwing things into bags, pulling on shoes, and trying to wrangle wild children who'd decided it was time to play.

Angela was in the kitchen with a stack of papers and the medics. They were trying to determine the best way to move Brittani and the other patients. She knew Jennifer was getting annoyed.

"Line up right now!"

“Why is she making them line up so soon? Doesn’t she know they’ll just leave the line and we’ll have to mark them off again?”

Angela pointed at a paper. “We’ll go with that plan. No one will take better care of her than her husband.”

Morgan frowned, more at Angela’s choice than her not answering his question. “Are you sure? He gets very upset.”

Angela hadn’t witnessed that yet, but she believed Morgan. “We’ll get through it.”

Jennifer whistled again. “Get in a fucking line!”

Silence fell through the nervous people. Many of them scowled at her. Some of the parents placed hands over their kid’s ears.

Jennifer flushed. She looked at Angela.

Angela spoke to Terry. “I want her vaccinated as soon as we get everyone settled on the ship. If she refuses, have Adrian knock her out and do it anyway.”

Jennifer’s orbs lit up bright red.

Angela snorted. “I’ve faced worse than you in my sleep. Grow up!”

Angela’s words caused snickers and nods. The Eagles glared to show Jennifer she needed to settle down.

Jennifer’s cork almost popped. She stomped upstairs instead of screaming.

Angela motioned to Wade as he came in. “Point until we leave. Fifteen minutes.”

Wade grinned. “You got it.” He came to her and held out his wet hand.

Angela gave him the list of names and choices.

Wade read it and then got busy. “Daryl and Gus will move Brittani. Jack and Lisa will cover Dace, along with the rookies from the jail who were also let out for this. Conner, Piper, Adrian, Dario, and Ned will handle Hannah, Candy, and her twins. Neil and I will take care of Samantha, the boys, and Amy...”

Angela let out a sigh of relief as Wade handed out the assignments. “And that’s why he gets the big bucks.”

People laughed at the common joke; the tension broke.

Upstairs, Jennifer walked the mostly empty top floor, muttering. *Why didn't she just tell me to do that?!*

Kyle had followed her up. “You didn’t ask. You tried to take control and push people when it wasn’t time for that.”

“What do you want?!”

Kyle’s eyes darkened. “I want to help you. The rage illness is robbing you of your patience. At least take the vaccine. We’ll worry about the power transfer later.” He reached into his pocket.

Jennifer’s shield came up in an instant. “I don’t trust you!”

Kyle stiffened. He was horribly hurt. “That’s it. I’m done trying.”

Jennifer watched him walk away, but she didn't call him back. A small voice inside her heart cried out to him, but it was smothered by the evil side telling her she was better off alone.

Downstairs, Wade kept working, enjoying the reminder that Angela had picked him to be her XO. "Marc and Panaji will cover both sets of twins, with Charlie, who has his son." Wade smiled at the teenager. "The Roberts boys will also help. Shawn, Selina, and Missy will travel with Daisey, Ralph, and Stanley."

Wade's calm voice cut through the chatter. Everyone stayed quiet so they could hear who they were assigned to.

"Tonya will be with Kenn and Rico, their four kids, and the medics. Greg, Molly, and Erin will cover camp group A and Trent."

Kenn was packing his kit. He didn't blink at the assignment.

"Wait." Morgan came over to Wade, blinking and rubbing his swollen eyes. "I need Kenn to help me with the medical gear and the samples from the investigation. No one else can do it because he's the dick."

They regarded Kenn.

Kenn shrugged. "I trust Rico to cover her."

Everyone was speechless, including Marc. They'd all heard about Tobias trying to set Kenn up with a fake nooner, but there hadn't been an explosion over that yet, either.

Rico stared suspiciously while Tonya gawked with her mouth open.

Angela kept her mind blank, just like Kenn was doing. The hive connection was bright right now between all of them.

Wade resumed handing out the assignments. “Group B will be...”

Conner waited for Wade to go by. Then he joined Shawn near the lockers.

The row of lockers gave them a small bit of privacy, but it didn’t matter. Shawn knew people were listening. *And even if they weren’t, the answer would still be the same.*

Conner was almost drained again. He looked like he was forty. Shawn felt awful for him, but that didn’t matter either. *I can’t screw up my second chance. Missy’s future depends on me.*

“Can you tell me how Harry did it? Just me and just for Candy? I’d never use it again.”

Shawn shook his head. “I can’t help you.”

“Can’t or aren’t allowed?”

Shawn zipped his kit. “I don’t know how he did it. I was right there for one of those moments, but I have no idea how he pushed out the poison. Sorry, kid.”

“Me, too.” Conner went back to Candy and acted like he wasn’t crushed by yet another idea not working out. He was desperate to save her. *I’d do almost anything.*

Shawn sighed, keeping his mind clear. Adrian was right. *The bunkhouse isn’t working for them*

because we're all liars here. He knew how Harry had done it, but he couldn't ever tell anyone or Angela would kill him, too.

Raised voices drew Shawn and everyone else to the medical area.

“Please! It’s killing you!” Daryl cried, begging. “We’ll try again. Don’t let this kill you!”

“No!” Brittani rubbed his wet hair as he cried against her leg. “I love you. No.”

And that explains why they aren't spending much time together. Angela motioned. “We’ll have someone else help her. Daryl can trade off.” Brittani didn’t need the stress.

“No!” Daryl stood up, wiping his face. “I’ll help her!”

Gus watched the scene with a better understanding of the misery Daryl was suffering. His hatred of the man eased another notch.

Angela scanned her copy of the plans. “Who else needs help?”

“I think we’re all covered now.” Neil frowned. “Except for you.”

Marc turned toward her with a baby in one arm and a pacifier in the other bruised fingers.

Greg paused in counting camp group A. All the Eagles who didn’t have kids to care for had been assigned to a group of 20 people.

Adrian slid an arm around Candy and held her weight while Conner fought with her boots. He didn’t look over. “Bret and Isabel are with the boss. We settled it last night.”

Camp members gave Adrian approving looks. They liked it that he was still protecting Angela.

Bret lowered his shield and smiled at the surprised people. He was right next to the boss.

It would have made the normals nervous before. Angela wasn't sure how they would take it now; she watched for their reaction.

Marc laughed. "That's my boy!"

Bret stood taller even though his parentage test had said differently.

Marc kept his mind clear. He didn't want Bret to be punished because of his last name. He liked the boy and he'd become very protective of everyone who'd been in that lab.

Adrian cleared his throat. "That's a Mitchel."

Marc snorted. "He's too trustworthy to be a Mitchel."

Bret's happiness was felt by everyone around them.

"Five minutes, folks. Let's get lined up now." Wade came over to Angela. "We're missing some people, Boss."

Angela handed him a sticky note. "These are accounted for, and Biff is bringing Thelma from the restaurant. She went back over to grab the soup recipe."

Wade quickly compared the names. "We're still short Zack, Madison, and Biff. Zack was just outside. He should be in here soon." Wade realized it had been a little while. "Who has a free arm to hook Zack and the others?"

“I’ve got it.” Ray had returned to help now that Grant had moved the cruise ship to the dock. He hurried to the front door. “I’m with group B. They’re all lined up by the hallway.”

Wade went over to stand with that group.

“I can stay with Samantha.” Sadie liked the lawyer woman. She rubbed her stomach, but quickly stopped as one of the medics noticed.

Neil agreed. “Take Timmy with you. Mike, Eric, and Leeann can help with camp group C.”

People quickly readjusted.

“Check the barn!”

“Got it!” Ray had already planned to. Madison had been trying to corral the animals there all afternoon. The horse and the puppy kept evading her. Ray wondered if they were afraid of being split up. Those two had become a tight pair.

As the door shut, Lisa came over to Dace’s cot with two large kits. “Just put this on your shoulders. Jack and I will support your weight.”

“I told you, I don’t need your help!” Dace glared as both people ignored him and lifted him out of the bed. “You’re pregnant by another man! I don’t want you!”

Lisa swallowed the pain of that, and the embarrassment of so many witnesses hearing it, and kept working. They’d already forced Dace into clean clothes and his Eagle jacket. He even had boots on his feet for the first time since he’d been hurt.

Dace didn't like any of it. Little flashes kept hitting him of falling, of almost drowning, of being attacked on the submarine. *Something bad is about to happen.*

Jack grimaced. "Stop saying what I'm thinking."

Lisa didn't need to read minds to know. "We'll handle it, whatever it is."

Dace kept an arm around their shoulders and swallowed another protest.

Lisa didn't care about his attitude. Jack had told her what happened while escorting her back here from the jailhouse. She hadn't done anything wrong this time. *Even if I had, it doesn't matter right now.*

Lisa had felt bad when she woke up in the cell, knowing she still had five more days to serve. Being released early to come help with Dace had only made the feeling worse. *I'm not leaving his side until this is over.*

Angela motioned at some of the restless kids. "Run ahead and make sure Grant is ready for us."

Missy, Cate, and Cody hurried out the door before Shawn or Marc could protest.

Angela went to the exit, heart pounding as the sense of danger grew stronger. "Stay with your group, Eagles!"

The water was ankle deep across the entire town now. In the future, drainage ditches would be needed to keep the town from flooding, but it was too late now.

The sun sank faster in the sky, mocking her. They didn't have lightning bugs and the spare flashlights all had dead batteries. It would be dark by the time they reached the dock. "Hurry up!"

Angela's anxiety came through her voice. The entire camp shifted toward the door.

She started waving people out as she put a check mark by their names.

Jennifer was still on the second floor, but she knew the herd was obeying their shepherd with only a single sharp call. Rage pulsed behind her eyes as she forced herself to go down and join them.

3

"That's enough, damn it!" Madison shoved on the twitchy horse. "Get in the barn where you'll be safe!"

The goats were in the barn now, exploring the loft where she'd put down kitchen scraps to keep them occupied. Dog, Duke, and the cats were also in the loft, willingly. All of them hated boats now. The horse and puppy were all that was left to handle.

Thud-Thud-Thud!

Madison stilled. *What is that sound?*

The puppy nipped at her heels, trying to help his friend. Neither of them wanted to be shut in a cage, no matter what size.

"Ray! Take her to the bunkhouse!" Biff fought the wind and water to get Thelma across the flooded

walkway. The water was deep enough now that it was pulling on his legs, making him use more muscles to stay on course.

Ray took Thelma's arm. "Have you seen Zack?"

"No, sorry!" Biff stomped toward the barn, using a trick he'd learned from TV. He waved his hat in the air and let out a loud shout.

The horse pawed the muddy water.

Biff smacked the horse on its rump with his hat. "Get in there!"

The horse jumped and went forward, allowing Madison to shut the barn door.

Biff steeled himself and snapped his sore fingers.

The puppy rushed over. Biff grabbed it under the belly. "Don't bite me!"

Madison took the puppy and shoved it through the other door. She put the bar down and sealed them inside.

Biff took Madison's arm. "Go to the boss and stay with her."

"You're coming, too!" Madison held his arm and forced him to stay close. "The boss needs another personal guard."

Agreed.

Stay with her.

Keep an eye on her.

The team hive connection convinced Biff. He walked toward Angela as a line of people came out of the bunkhouse.

Ray got Thelma to the line with her family, then hurried back out into the rain to hunt for Zack. He ran to the garden plot to check there, while calling mentally. He could see the church and the little bunkhouse from here. They were empty, with the doors shut and locked. Ray cursed the weather as water hit him from above and below. “Do you hear something pounding?”

Biff shook his head as he and Madison went by. “Just thunder and rain. Hurry up.”

Madison got in line behind Angela. “I hope the barn is enough shelter.”

“They’ll go up into the loft. Don’t worry about it.” Biff walked next to Madison as they all splashed toward the jungle path.

Madison muttered. “I still hear something pounding.”

It was lost under the noise of the camp as the creek flood reached the town. It quickly covered every walkway and raised the water level by inches in seconds.

A waist-high wall of water rushed toward them, slowed by tunnel hatches that dropped huge amount of liquid into the ground. The rest of it rushed toward the evacuating people.

“Move faster!”

“Let’s roll!”

The camp hurried into the jungle to avoid the water.

In the hidey hole under the bunkhouse, Tim kicked repeatedly, trying to break the lock on the hatch. He had done a great job on it.

Tim shouted with each kick, hoping it would magnify the sound, but this building was lower than the rest of the town. It was like a basement that swallowed the sounds before they could escape. The lifeboat shoved into the escape tunnel mocked him, blocking the other exit.

Tim kicked harder, using both feet.

The hatch refused to break.

Water began streaming through the ground into the small space. It pooled on the top of the dirt; the land couldn't soak up any more liquid. It was full.

Rain came down harder across the island as the storm stalled over them and water filled every space it could find.

4

Zack held his breath as water closed over him. He filtered the water through his shield and drew in a deep breath. His heart pounded as the water rushed harder, pulling him down to the bottom of the pitch-black tunnel. Pieces of his ruined cast broke off and floated around him.

Zack tried to find a hatch, but he couldn't see through the water that had filled the tunnel while he ran through. A rush of it had knocked him off his feet and then smothered him until only his shield allowed him to breathe.

Tile pieces from the floors and walls smacked into his shield, bumping and banging. It was a struggle to concentrate, but it was also keeping him from panicking. His time under the water with Angela had saved his life twice now.

Zack kicked upward and felt along the muddy roof, bobbing in the murky, cold water. He suddenly missed Angela and the others who'd ridden out the hurricane with him. *Why am I down here alone?*

Zack realized he was getting disoriented. *That's from breathing in my own carbon dioxide exhales. Shit!*

Zack kicked against the tunnel floor to reach the ceiling again. More water rushed through and swept him along before he could find the hatch.

I need you, Boss!

5

Ray wiped rain from his face and headed for the church. It was the only place that he hadn't searched for Zack.

Help!

Ray spun around at the weak call. "Zack? Where are you?"

Help!

Above the ground, Ray heard the cry when no one else did. He traced it to a hatch that had water bubbling out of it like an old sewer. Ray blanched. "You're kidding right?"

Help!

The call was getting fainter.

Ray took off running through the flooded town,
following the call as everyone else evacuated.

Chapter Thirty-Three

I Win

1

Ed held onto the ladder as the wind blew harder. It was a slick, dark climb up to the cave above the cove. It had a guard post that wasn't manned right now. All available hands were helping with the evacuation.

Ed saw the cruise ship and the submarine below, along with a long line of drenched people approaching the dock. He'd been on duty here, watching over Grant as he got the ship ready for the camp, but a dim light in the cave had caught his attention. There wasn't supposed to be anyone up here.

"Tim?" Ed had been keeping an eye out for their preacher for hours.

Ed resumed climbing while rain ran down his face and back. The storm was directly over them now. It was calmer here in the eye, but that wouldn't last.

Ed reached the top of the ladder and shoved himself into the cave. He rolled out of the rain path and came up on his feet.

Ed saw boxes and bags all over the cave that was supposed to be empty. He also spotted a crate

of weapons and ammunition. Someone was gathering supplies without permission. *Stealing. They're stealing from us.*

The lantern on the shelf and the open gun cabinet said someone had been here recently.

Ed glanced around, sweeping the corners this time.

He heard a noise to his right and turned.

Ian slammed the butt of his gun into Ed's skull, dropping the man. "Damn, that felt good!"

He and Ed hadn't really been friends as far as Ian was concerned. He'd just wanted another warm body who could do guard duty when they left. He didn't trust Debra to do it.

Ian took Ed's gun, sneering at the unconscious man. "Some Eagle!"

The bottom of the cave was flooded; the smell of dank water was thick. No one had come up here during the search of the island. Ian was grateful for the stormy weather that had kept his stash from being discovered.

A shadow in a red rain slicker flew toward Ian. The rain covered the sound of their steps.

Ian screamed as a knife slid into his back and was yanked out. He dropped the gun.

The scream echoed loud enough to attract attention from the guards who were bringing the camp to the ship. Brawlers and Eagles hurried toward the ladder.

Ian cried out again, hand coming up in defense.
“No!”

The knife plunged into his stomach this time and stayed there. The attacker darted further into the flooding cave and slid into a dark corner as Ian collapsed.

Camp members now arriving at the dock lined up impatiently for Angela to mark off their names while watching the guards hurry toward the cave. All of them were glad they didn't have to climb that dripping, slick ladder. The rain was still pouring and it was dark even with their few lanterns. They wanted to get on the ship and dry off from the wet march down here.

The brawlers reached the cave and hurried inside.

“It's Ian!”

“There's Ed!” Stuart saw only one of the men was bleeding.

“What the hell?”

Stuart hurriedly wrapped his jacket around Ian. “We have to get him to the medics!” Blood ran down his arm and leg.

“We have to stop the bleeding first!”

“I don't know how. Do you?”

“No. You're right. Let's get him to the boss.”

Stuart got Ian over his shoulder. Blood ran down his back this time. It was an awful feeling.

“What do you think happened in here?”

Stuart eyed the boxes and the other unconscious man now being lifted over Raheem's shoulder as he maneuvered his feet onto the ladder. "One of them was caught stealing and they fought."

"Which one?"

Stuart began the descent. "No idea. Kenn will sort it out after the storm passes. Let's get out of here."

The brawlers took the wounded men down the ladder without searching the cave.

2

"We have people missing."

That call sent horror through everyone who heard it. The camp was still crossing the dock to reach the ships. Over half of them were on board now, but Angela had already scanned those who were still in line and come up short. "I need a rescue team."

Brawlers backed away. Even the Eagles hesitated.

Marc sent a message through the hive. *That's our cue.*

Mission men came through the soaked crowd and waited for orders, but their eyes were worried and their hands were on their holsters.

Angela was proud of them. "We have three people missing: Ray, Zack, and Tim."

It bothered all of the mission men that two of their teammates were on the list. They barely cared about Tim.

The dock creaked unhappily at the increased weight as waves rolled in from the ocean at the same time as the camp crossed it.

Kenn watched Stuart and Raheem carry Ian and Ed onto the cruise ship. They were in a rush, telling Kenn at least one of those men was in critical condition. “We’re still missing something.”

“Yeah, three of our people. Let’s go.” Wade was upset that he hadn’t insisted on going to get Zack himself.

Kenn stiffened. “What if it isn’t our people?” He turned to Angela, barely feeling the rain now. “My last scroll dive brought up a dead end, I thought.”

She stiffened. “What did it say?”

“Loose ends can unravel any fabric.”

They got it at the same time.

“There’s someone else on this island.”

Kenn didn’t want to look at the water, but he couldn’t help scanning for a green cloud. “But how? The ocean won’t let strangers get anywhere near us unless you tell it to.”

“Then it can’t be a stranger.”

“I don’t understand.”

Angela wiped wet hair off her face. “Neither do I, but we’ve checked off everyone except those three missing members.”

“Then whoever it is has to still be in town. We went by the other locations on the way here.”

Angela nodded. “Collect our missing men and do another search of every building, but you have to hurry. As soon as the eye passes over, things will get rough again.”

“We’ll hurry.” Greg took Kenn’s right. “Our mystery guest won’t be expecting a rescue party, and with all the flooding, they won’t be able to run and hide anywhere else this time.”

“Happy hunting.” Angela turned back to the line of waiting, drenched people. “Get on the ship.” She resumed marking names off the wet paper.

“My dad’s missing?” Eric shoved through the wet camp members. “My dad is missing!”

Jennifer stepped in front of him. She was glad Timmy and Mike were already on the ship. “She sent a crew to go get him. Calm down.”

“Go get my dad!”

“They’re already going back for him, Eric. Stay here and help with Allison!”

“Fuck that whore!” Eric waved toward Allison, who was being supported by several church women and still moaning about how hard it was to walk through the mud and rain. “She’s just using my dad and everyone else!”

Jennifer sighed. “Yes, but you’re not helping right now. Let the rescue team work.”

“Like you care!” Eric charged forward. “I’m going with them!” Eric shoved Jennifer out of his way, knocking her into people going by. “I want my dad!”

Jennifer recovered her balance. Before she thought about it, power flew from her hands and hit the upset boy.

Eric screamed, falling into the mud.

“Stop it!”

Jennifer kept hitting Eric with the pain spell.

Samantha marched over and slapped Jennifer, rocking her head back. “Stop it!”

Jennifer stopped firing, but she was too stunned to react. *Samantha hit me!*

Neil passed their twins over to Selina and Sadie so he had empty hands if it was needed. Inside, he celebrated. *Thank you, Boss!*

Eric shoved onto his feet and flew toward them with his fist in the air.

Neil put a boot out and tripped him.

Eric landed in the mud again.

Samantha pointed heatedly. “If you zap one more person there will be a riot and I’ll lead it! We have camp rules and Eagle procedures, Jennifer! Use those to keep control!”

Standing nearby with Bernice and Crissy, Gus had a blinding insight moment. *Punishing people makes them hate you, even when they deserve it. That has to be used only when there’s no other option.*

Parker gave Samantha his full support. “The normals will no longer tolerate you doing that, Jennifer. Once more and we’ll all ask the alpha to discipline you.”

Eric scrambled away from the boot Neil tried to put on his back to keep him on the ground. He ran off into the jungle, yelling for his dad.

“Zack’s missing?!” Allison’s delayed shout drew attention and annoyance.

Allison clutched Daisey’s arm, almost dragging them both down. “You have to help him!”

Daisey scowled while prying Allison’s hand off her arm. “The boy’s right. Get yourself together!”

Allison turned to the next church woman for sympathy.

Angela motioned. “Get her on the ship!”

Daisey and Stanley pulled the upset woman across the dock.

Thunder rolled toward them from the ocean as the eye of the storm began to shift.

Samantha delivered a last glare and then marched onto the swaying dock with her chin up. She wasn’t afraid of the water right now. She was furious with Jennifer.

Neil held in a laugh of delight and motioned Selina and Sadie to follow her with the twins and Amy.

Jennifer turned toward Kyle, expecting his support.

Kyle shook his head. “Not until you take this power back.”

“I don’t want you to be a normal!”

“Now we get the truth.” Kyle chuckled. “I’ve never been normal, Jenny. Take it back and the boss will share with me.”

Jennifer was humiliated and furious. “You’re with her all the time! You’re cheating on me!”

Kyle walked away without answering, going to join the rescue crew that was almost out of sight now.

Jennifer fumed. “Fine! You all think you can do this without me, so do it! I’m done.”

She marched off into the jungle, taking a different path.

“Well, that went better than I expected.” Angela kept her eyes away from the cliff cave above them, where a shadow in dark, drenched clothes was descending the ladder at a rapid pace. “Get on the ship, people. We have more rain coming!”

Angela felt the next awful moment arrive and steeled herself. *Here we go.*

“Hey! What is that?”

“It’s a wave!”

“Get off the dock!”

“Run!”

The warnings came too late. A tall wave broke over the dock and knocked a dozen people into the angry ocean.

Kenn took off running toward the ship. “I’m coming this time! I’m coming!” Tonya’s terror was all he could feel.

The rest of the rescue crew kept going at Angela’s curt mental order. They didn’t know exactly what was happening, but they were sure she

had plans based around it. They moved faster so they didn't have to witness the results this time.

3

The Eagles pulled people back onto the dock as fast as they could. They tossed ropes and life preservers that had been stacked nearby, but another wave rushed in, taking some of the people out of their reach.

Lisa held tight to Dace as they sank into the cold, rough water. Compared to their brush with death on Howland Island, Lisa was calm this time. *Bring up your shield!*

Dace struggled to hold his breath. He flapped his arms and cursed his dead legs.

Lisa realized he was panicking. She wrapped her arms around him and kicked, trying to get them both to the surface. Another wave came in, pushing them down.

Lisa's lungs began to burn. She did the only thing she could think of. She sealed their lips and held onto him like she had last time.

Dace's mind stuttered...then it blinked on, lighting up those dark areas. The feel of Lisa and the water was too familiar to fight. Memories flooded in; his gifts unlocked.

Bring up a shield! Jack grabbed Dace's arm, blowing bubbles through his nose. He had dived in after them without a second thought.

The brothers brought up shields at the same time. Water filtered out, letting them all breathe.

Lisa coughed against Dace's chest, shivering.

Jack took a deep breath and then let go of his shield so he could haul them all back toward the shore. It was easy to tell where it was as phosphorescent rocks along the cove lit up under the water to lead the way.

Lisa breathed in deeply. Dace did the same. They stared at each other.

Lisa started crying as Dace kissed her.

Jack fought to get them into the hands that were reaching through the water and dropping ropes. *Let it go now!*

Dace dropped the shield and held tight to Lisa. *I'm never letting go again!*

4

Where is she?! Debra peered harder through the dark water, arms swinging wildly to grab the woman who'd been knocked in with her.

Debra snagged hair. She pulled hard and got a grip on the panicking camp woman. Debra couldn't hear the rushing water, but she did feel the pressure as another wave rolled over them. It was a relief to see the glowing rocks along the shore. She kicked harder, pulling the woman along.

The camp woman realized Debra was helping her. She started kicking as well, trying to power through the angry ocean in the cove.

Debra was glad they hadn't been on the beach. The tide there would have been too strong to fight.
Big push!

Debra shoved the woman above the water.

Hands were there to take the woman's weight.

Debra grabbed the next hand that plunged into the water, lungs hurting. She drew in gulps of air as someone hauled her onto the wet dock.

Eagles scanned the water.

"Is that everyone?"

"Did we get them all?"

"Tonya!" Kenn wanted to dive in, but he didn't know where. The angry waves kept rolling into the cove, blocking his view. "Tonya!"

5

Down here! Tonya clung to the support post of the dock with one hand while clutching the crying baby close with the other. She had a shield up, but she didn't know how to close it around the post. Water flowed in, filling up the shield, but she was terrified to let go and be washed out into the ocean.
Help!

The pressure increased on her arm. It forced her fingers down the pole. Her grip weakened. The shield shifted, filling up faster... *Help!*

A hard body pushed her back against the pole and held her there.

Tonya sobbed in relief.

Rico kept his back to her, squeezing her between him and the pole so the next wave couldn't wash her out.

Ropes fell into the water around them.

Let go, grab a rope.

Tonya didn't want to.

Rico couldn't fight the pressure of the water for much longer. *Trust me.*

Tonya nodded shakily. *I do.*

Let go!

Tonya let go of the pole and grabbed a rope. Water flooded in, closing over her and the baby.

Rico shoved on her legs, lifting her above the water.

Strong hands grabbed her and her son and pulled them to safety.

Tonya twisted around as Kenn took the baby, coughing. "Get Rico!"

Tonya saw Rico's face through the water as the next wave barreled toward them. "Get him out of there!"

Rico stared sadly at her as the wave reached him. *I love you. I'm sorry.*

The force of the wave slammed him into the dock post. His shield went down. Water overwhelmed him, knocking him against the post again. Everyone saw his head make contact. Blood floated up.

"Get him out of there!"

The ocean had different plans. The water snagged Rico's floating body and pulled him out to sea.

"No!" Tonya tried to go in after him.

The Eagles blocked her path.

The last she saw of Rico was a trail of bloody water and then he was gone.

Tonya broke down, sobbing and shouting.

Angela handed Isabel a syringe. "Get her onto the ship!"

Isabel injected Tonya, recognizing the sedative. She didn't ask why Angela had been carrying it in her pocket.

In all the chaos, no one noticed when the wet, muddy camp member from the cave rejoined the line and crossed the creaking dock to board the ship.

6

Do you need me?!

No!

Jennifer was crushed by Angela's sharp answer. Red tears leaked from her eyes as she stopped on the jungle path. She'd turned around at the mental fear from the camp members.

Jennifer didn't feel the rain, the mud, or the growling stomach that she hadn't fed in hours. All she felt was defeat. *They don't need me anymore.*

Nature had been staying close to Jennifer. She materialized next to the girl now. "With my power, they'll always need you."

“They have Angela.”

“Not for long.” Nature made sure she sounded regretful. “My other helper is already on the ship. They’ll weaken her. All you have to do is use the gift I’m giving you. Absorb her power and claim your rightful place as leader of this camp.”

Jennifer tried to resist, but Angela’s angry voice echoed in her mind.

Do the right thing for just once in your life!

It was too much. Jennifer held her hand out. “I accept your deal.”

Nature touched Jennifer’s hand to transfer immense power. “Send it out to give life. Pull it in to take life.”

Jennifer shivered as her entire body turned cold. “Sounds like absorbing a life force.”

“Except this one will give you the gifts of the person you target.”

Jennifer’s body lit up bright green. Her eyes turned green. Green streaks wound through her soaked brown hair.

“Go to the ship now. Get close to Angela.”

Jennifer fought the hypnotic voice. “I’m going to catch our killer first. The camp will have to love me again.”

Nature cursed the reckless nature of humans even as she used it. “The one you’re seeking is hiding in the church that has been giving him sanctuary.”

Jennifer took off running toward town while gathering energy to use her newest gift.

Nature grinned happily. “I win.”

7

“Let go! Now!”

Zack let go of his shield. Water smacked into him, pushing him through the tunnel.

Ray kept his leg wrapped around the ladder and reached out with the rest of his body. He couldn't feel his numb leg, but he held it in place as hard as he could so he didn't miss this time.

Zack clawed onto the man, choking.

Ray pulled hard, breaking Zack out of the current. He shoved the drowning man above the water and out of the hatch.

Zack landed on all fours in the mud, coughing and gasping.

Ray climbed the ladder while his lungs burned wildly and his leg cramped. He'd been holding onto that ladder for a long time, trying to time it as Zack was washed through. He'd missed three times. They were both exhausted.

Zack vomited out nasty water.

Ray put a hand on his friend's shoulder and drew wet air into his scratchy lungs.

Zack tried to say thank you, but his lungs and brain wouldn't breathe and talk at the same time. He leaned against Ray's hip and drew in oxygen to offset the asphyxia. *Water! Hate!*

Ray scanned the flooded, dark town and found lights approaching from the jungle path. He grinned. “They came back for us!”

Zack shuddered. “Shark!” His tired brain wouldn’t give him the right word.

Ray frowned. “No sharks up here, buddy.” He looked where Zack pointed.

Long tails swished longer bodies through the water.

Ray jumped up, pulling on Zack’s arm. “Oh! Land sharks!”

The alligators were moving faster than Ray had ever seen them go. Their tails swung back and forth as they pushed their bodies through the water and over debris that was floating away from the town.

He and Zack staggered toward the porch of the restaurant that was still above the water as the family of alligators swam by. All four reptiles slid into the open hatch and vanished into the tunnels.

Ray assumed that kept them from being lost to the sea whenever there was a flood. It was smart and scary at the same time. If he’d missed Zack once more, he would have been lost.

Zack pulled Ray close and kissed him on the lips.

Ray enjoyed the moment even though he knew it didn’t mean anything.

That’s how the rescue crew found them.

Laughter and whistles split the men up.

Ray kept his grin on.

Zack tried to explain. “Just really happy.”

“It sure looked like it!” Marc slapped Zack on the shoulder with his good hand. “We caught it all through the hive, dude. You’re good.”

Eric ran by them and grabbed Zack’s arm. “Are you okay?!”

Zack hugged his son, slowly recovering. “Thanks to Ray.”

Marc paused. “I hear something.”

The team remembered they still had a missing person to find. They all listened hard.

Thud-thud!

Marc tracked the noise to the bunkhouse of the church. “Thumping.”

Biff backed him up, hand on his gun. “It’s locked.”

“Not for long.” Marc kicked the door at its hinges. The waterlogged wood gave easily.

The team climbed in through the broken door and found it empty.

“There’s no one here.”

Thud-thud-thud!

Everyone jumped as something tried to break through the floor.

Marc used his mental grid. “There’s a person down there!”

“Move the rug!”

The hatch was bent and broken but still holding as they rolled the rug aside. The wood bent upward as someone kicked it again.

Marc flipped the latch and pulled it open.

A boot flew by his head.

Marc automatically grabbed it and hauled the drowning man out of the water.

Lightning lit up the sky in a brilliant display as Tim was pulled from the grave he'd dug for himself.

Water bubbled up out of the hole and ran over the floor, soaking their boots again.

Tim gasped in air and coughed out water.

"How did he get down there?"

"Why is there a hiding hole under the church bunkhouse?"

Marc helped Tim to his feet. "Are you okay?"

"No!" Tim stumbled over to a locker and pulled out his old gun belt. He coughed and spit, trying not to vomit. "She was right."

Marc frowned. "Angela?"

"Jennifer." Tim buckled his belt over his dripping body and then took his gun from the shelf and checked to be sure it was loaded. His wrinkled hand shook. "She said I'd be an Eagle again."

"Wait. What happened here?"

Tim shoved by the team and went to the door, lungs aching and eyes burning. "I have to fix my mistake."

Marc motioned toward Greg. "Get him to the ship and let the medics check him out."

Greg heard the unspoken order to make sure Angela was okay. He fell in with Tim's fast march as the pissed preacher padded toward the path. "Tell me what happened so I can help."

Tim held his sore chest and broke into a run. His lungs were burning under his ribcage. He'd almost drowned. "We'll talk after I catch a killer!"

8

Marc went out onto the porch, scanning the town. The flooding had reached a peak; he didn't believe it was going to get much worse. "I don't think we needed to evacuate."

A huge cracking noise filled the air. The bunkhouse corner split, breaking the wall all the way up to the roof. One corner of the house dropped into the deep water and was washed away.

Marc grunted. "I stand corrected."

Footsteps splashed toward them from the opposite path that Tim and Greg had taken.

Everyone turned. They stilled, going to full alert in an instant.

Jennifer marched toward them. Her green eyes glowed brighter than their lanterns. The green streaks in her hair glowed like neon paint. A green shield lit up around her as she neared them.

Kyle stared, not recognizing the feel of her. "What have you done, Jenny?!"

Biff and Gus stepped forward at the same time.

Eric jumped up, drawing power to defend his dad. "Stay away from us!"

Kyle tried to calm things down. "Go back to the ship. We found Tim. We'll be right behind you."

"Yeah!" Eric glared. "We don't need you!"

Jennifer remembered Eric shoving her. That was all it took to snap her control.

Zack pulled Eric back, but it was too late.

Power flew from Jennifer's hands, blasting into Eric and Zack. Both males were knocked into the muddy water in front of the porch.

Ray couldn't stand to see a teammate hurt now. He fired back, triggering the full fight.

Jennifer began to cry as she unleashed her pent-up rage on her friends and her husband.

"Stop!"

"Jenny, no!"

She fired another powerful blast, hitting Zack as he stood up.

Zack's weak shield fell. He staggered at the hit.

Jennifer fired again, knocking him back into the water in front of the church.

Zack was still dazed from almost drowning in the tunnel. He barely got his head above the water before Jennifer's next hit crashed into him.

Zack collapsed.

"Dad!" Eric pulled Zack above the water and brought up a shield.

Ray fired again, trying to distract the furious woman. His hit bounced off her shield and slammed into the side of the church. Waterlogged wood groaned in protest.

"Over here!"

Jennifer spun around, firing as she turned.

Marc absorbed the hit, but he didn't throw one back at her. He flipped her the finger, angering her

and keeping her attention on him as Kyle tried to come up behind her.

All of them were very aware of her stomach as they tried to defend themselves and not hurt her.

Jennifer fired at Marc again, using the new ability Nature had given her.

Marc had never felt anything like it. His gifts flickered, fading.

Gus fired a weak blast toward Jennifer to draw her attention. He knew Marc was in trouble.

Jennifer turned and fired, while still draining Marc's power.

Gus absorbed her hit, groaning at the pain of mismatched energy. He fired a mild spell back, trying to disorient her.

Kyle kept inching closer. He had an uncapped syringe in his hand and terror in his heart.

Jennifer fired another blast of her new gift, drawing harder on Marc's power. His byzan level was quickly recharging her energy bank with every second that she drew from him.

Biff started to conjure his stone defender and then stopped, realizing Jennifer would be hurt in that attack.

Thud!

Bark!

Biff heard the goats butting against the barn while Duke barked wildly. He chose a new form to conjure.

Jennifer brought up her shield right as the conjured water goat smacked into her leg.

Kyle used the distraction moment to plunge the syringe into her arm.

Furious, Jennifer latched onto his gifts and absorbed them in one huge pull.

Jennifer's good power went back into her so fast that it created a shock to her system. She froze in place, barely breathing.

Kyle grabbed her arm. "Jenny!"

Jennifer didn't even blink.

The rescue team moved closer, staying ready to react if she started firing again. They had played a lot of defense. All of them were glad no one had been seriously hurt.

Bang!

A bullet went through Jennifer's back and shot out of her chest. It hit Kyle in the shoulder, taking both of them to the wet, muddy ground.

Marc and Ray spun the same time, drawing their guns and firing in tandem.

Corey was hit multiple times and blasted against the church. Bullets plunged into the wood, leaving a bloody mess as he slid down the wall.

Jennifer couldn't breathe. She felt death land next to them as she groped out and found Kyle's wrist.

Marc and everyone else watched in astonishment as the couple lit up in a bright green glow that was almost too bright to look at. Blood that had been flowing from both of them slowed and then stopped. The light grew brighter for an instant and then faded into the storm.

Kyle groaned, rolling over. He felt on his chest and found blood, but no injury. The pain faded as he sat up. “Jenny?”

Marc and the others rushed over.

Jennifer shut her eyes. Green tears rolled from underneath her lids as she lost consciousness.

“We need to get her to the boss!” Kyle was stunned that he was still alive. Jennifer’s healing power was amazing. The bloody hole in his clothes was the only clue that he’d been shot. He didn’t feel anything else.

He scooped Jennifer into his arms and hurried toward the jungle. He didn’t spare a glance at the body in front of the church.

Eric and Ray helped Zack to his feet and kept arms around him as they headed for the ship.

Marc and the others followed, leaving the flooding town to fend for itself until morning. The fight with Jennifer hadn’t lasted very long, but it had been enough to remind all of the mission men that chaos could hit them no matter where they were.

None of them spoke. Everyone was stunned by Jennifer’s flip.

Nature observed angrily, but she still had hope. Once Jennifer was on the ship, she was bound by their deal to attack Angela. “Your time is almost up, Safe Haven. I’m now counting down the minutes.”

Chapter Thirty-Four
I Need My Team

1

Theo took a drink of warm beer and swallowed a groan with it. This was the first time he'd drank since getting home.

Rain splattered against the porthole next to his table; the ship swayed in the rough waves.

Theo grimaced and took another drink of the foamy beer. He and a few others had been assigned to escort the cooks to the cafeteria and make sure they were protected, but there was nothing going on.

Several people had been taken to the medical bay, but almost everyone else was in the ballroom. Angela had them hunkering down together to wait out the storm. Theo assumed she would send them here to the mess at some point for a snack to calm them so they would sleep. The cooks were making a batch of cookies and hot chocolate from supplies that had been locked in one of the cabinets. Thelma had told him Angela ordered it put aside months ago.

Theo was drawn to new movement through the window. He spotted the rescue team all hurrying across the dock. Kyle was carrying Jennifer. Theo hoped she was okay, but he was more concerned

with the team. After all they'd been through, it was impressive that they were out in the storm. They'd even found all the missing people. Tim and Greg had come across the dock a minute ago.

Theo slowly lowered his bottle. *I should be trying harder.*

Debra entered the cafeteria, sniffing the chocolate odors and smiling. She needed a few minutes away from the happy camp woman she'd rescued. The woman's gushing gratitude was making her uncomfortable.

Theo looked over. Their eyes met. Sparks flew between the former couple.

Theo read her thoughts of going overboard and helping a camp woman. Adrenaline was still flowing through her body.

Theo recognized the moment. Debra had saved someone and gotten some action. When Eagles faced death, they got aroused. *I could seduce her...*

Theo glanced away. *And it would be wrong. I'm not doing that to her anymore.*

Debra joined Theo at the table. She frowned at the half empty beer bottle.

Theo shrugged, eyeing her drying hair and wet clothes. She hadn't changed yet. She was enjoying the feeling of being a hero while avoiding the people who would be happy to congratulate her. It was an odd mix that Theo understood completely. Some accomplishments you just wanted to savor by yourself instead of sharing them.

You're not supposed to be drinking.

“I know. I’m not perfect.”

Same. Debra decided to let it go. She eyed his big arms and chest and caved to her needs. *Come by my cabin later?*

Theo wanted to, but he was surprised. *I guess she and Ian aren’t exclusive.*

We are. This will break us up.

Why not just tell him you’re done?

Debra didn’t want to admit that Ian’s reckless attitude scared her.

Theo sighed. “As soon as he recovers, you have to tell him. I can’t come to your cabin until then.”

Debra froze.

Theo frowned. “You didn’t know? Damn. I’m sorry. He’s in the medical bay. Morgan and Terry are with him.”

Debra had been in the rear of the camp line when the brawlers brought people down from the cave. She hadn’t been able to see them and she hadn’t heard the conversations about it. She stood up and headed for the exit.

Terry came in. He spotted Debra and pointed. “The boss wants you as her guard right now.”

Debra signed angrily. *Why didn’t anyone let me know?!*

“I’m sorry. I thought someone had already told you. Ian’s wounds weren’t as deep as we first thought. He’ll be okay. Morgan’s staying with him while I’m on break.”

I want to be with him!

Terry denied her. “He’s not allowed to have visitors yet. He’s stable, but stress could change that. You can stop by in the afternoon. Go cover the boss.”

Debra only accepted that because it came from their CMO. *The boss wants me?*

Terry had heard about the action he’d missed while sewing Ian back together. “Great job, Eagle.”

Debra hurried to the exit.

Jayda was at the counter, drying off while chatting with Thelma. She turned toward Terry, drawn by his warm tone.

Terry lifted his chin and went right by her like she wasn’t there.

Jayda’s shoulders dropped. *He still won’t talk to me, Debra gets to guard the boss, and I’m stuck with the cooks again. Great.*

Debra missed it. She hurried through the hallway and headed for the large ballroom where most of the camp had gathered. They’d gotten used to being together now.

She spotted Angela by the main entrance as she arrived. A quick scan revealed hundreds of camp members fighting the rocking motion of the ship while chatting and helping their ill people get settled into the few cots they’d brought along.

Brittani, Candy, and the other ill people had been put along the inner wall where they wouldn’t be disturbed as much by the people all around them. Kenn was also there with Tonya, who was

unconscious from being sedated. He was caring for their kids.

Despite the wave knocking people off the dock, and Rico being lost, the hot topic on everyone's mind was Ian and Ed. Debra listened to their thoughts while scanning the busy room for trouble.

It didn't surprise her that one of them had been stealing. She just hoped it hadn't been Ian. She didn't want to be his girlfriend anymore, but she'd thought he had more honor than that.

"Boss, I have an odd problem." Wade joined Angela. He was soaked, sleepy, and glad they were almost ready to settle in for the night.

Angela smiled at Debra as she spoke to Wade. "What's up?"

Wade held out the laminated list of people she'd checked off as they went across the dock. "I have too many."

"What?"

"You marked off 286 people. We just did a new count and we have 289." Wade assumed the first count had been wrong. "Maybe Shawn forgot some names when he made the list?"

Angela frowned. "Are you sure the rookies counted correctly?"

Wade nodded. "We did it together. We literally counted 289 heads."

Kenn's words replayed in their minds at the same time.

Loose ends can unravel any fabric.

Wade's hand dropped to his gun. "We have three intruders."

A cold wind went through the ship.

They both swept the crowded ballroom, but it was impossible to spot anyone who didn't belong. Almost everyone was wearing a raincoat and many of them still had hoods up.

Angela sighed. "We have to go through them one by one."

Wade frowned. "As soon as we explain what's happening, they'll panic. People could get hurt."

The ballroom doors on the opposite side slammed open, bouncing off the walls as Tim ran in.

"Too late to avoid that." Angela faded into the crowd of surprised guards.

The preacher was completely soaked and wrinkled, with filthy hair and hands. He looked like he'd just returned from the dead.

"Where are you?!" Tim drew his gun and scanned the nervous crowd, eyes blazing. "Come out and face me!"

Greg approached the preacher from behind carefully as shields began appearing throughout the room. "Who are you searching for?"

Greg hadn't been able to get Tim to stop and tell him what had happened on the way to the ship. He still had no idea who'd locked the preacher under the ground to drown.

Tim slung water across the guards as he waved wildly. "I gave them sanctuary. They tried to kill me!"

Tim looked and sounded crazy to everyone. Even the church people stared at him in dismay.

Ralph recognized the signs. “He has the rage illness!”

Daisey’s face went from worried to determined. “We have to help him!”

“I’m not sick! They tried to kill me!”

Greg waved everyone back with his soaked cast, dripping rain water on the dusty floor. “Let me have the gun, Tim. We’ll find them together.”

Tim spotted a man in a red rainslicker inching toward an exit. He pulled the trigger.

The camp shifted away, shouting, as the body fell.

Allison felt something wet and warm running down her arm. “I’m hit!”

Blood dripped onto the floor from the trim.

Erin snatched the gun from Tim’s hand and spun out of the way like she’d been taught.

Greg quickly tackled the preacher, taking him to the floor.

Allison’s defense mode kicked in. She drew her own gun and fired back.

The bullet slammed into the wall right by Erin’s head.

More screams and shouts filled the ballroom.

Neil brought up a shield around his family while other descendants did the same.

Amy stayed directly in front of Samantha. *No one is hurting her this time!*

Angela glared at Allison while Greg handcuffed Tim. “Stop! It’s over now!”

Allison’s aim swung toward Angela. Her eyes turned bright green. Green streaks grew through her damp hair. “It’s all your fault!”

Angela stayed still. “You’re okay. It’s just a trim. Holster that weapon!”

Allison was too far gone. Green tears rolled over her cheeks. “You have to tell me how Harry did it!”

Eagles moved closer to the unstable woman, glancing at each other for ideas. No one wanted to hurt Allison.

Allison’s finger tightened on the trigger. “If they rush me, you’re dead. If you shield yourself, I’ll kill someone else. You have no choice. Tell me!”

Angela tried one more time to defuse the situation. “Allison, please put the gun down. I don’t want to do this.”

“You just want all the power for yourself!” Allison’s finger tightened another notch on the trigger. “You don’t get to live forever!”

Eagles smothered people in layered shields, now understanding why Angela and Jennifer had been adamant about them staying with their assigned group.

Cody stepped in front of Angela. Cate was right next to him.

Allison’s mind had already snapped. She sneered at the children. “He won’t ever be our king!”

“Allison!” Zack was in the doorway now; the rest of the shocked rescue team was behind him. “What are you doing?!”

Allison flinched. Her finger tightened too much. The trigger pulled, firing.

Debra also fired, hitting Allison in the heart. Blood bloomed as she fell. The gun dropped to the floor and skidded into the panicking crowd.

“No!” Zack ran toward her, but he already knew Allison was dead. *That was a kill shot!*

Bret brought up a second shield inside the first one, then let go of the bullet Allison had fired. It clattered to the floor.

Angela put a hand on his thin shoulder. “Thank you.”

Bret leaned against her big stomach. “Can I go home now?”

Adrian frowned at the boy who continued to prove he could handle the action that always came in this camp. “You are home, son.”

“I mean the island. I hate being on the water!”

The mission men bonded with the boy again. He was definitely one of them.

“Not yet. The night is still young.”

Angela’s tone made them start searching for the next problem.

Zack stayed by Allison’s bloody body and cried.

Angela steeled her nerves. “Cate, find our intruders.”

Cate’s eyes lit up bright red. “Group A sit down!”

Cody stayed with Cate, shielding her as she marched toward the cringing camp members.

“Group B sit down!”

People dropped, scared but understanding she was getting them out of the line of fire.

Cate pointed. “There!”

A man in a red rain slicker ran toward the opposite exit. He was thin and scruffy. No one recognized him as one of their former members.

Eagles ran after him while camp people hurried out of the path.

“Group C sit down!”

Another man in a red rain slicker stayed standing. The gun in his hand swung toward Angela.

Marc stepped in front of Angela while firing a pain spell. He didn’t want to use bullets in the crowded room.

A bright green shield lit up around both of the intruders, telling the rescue team they weren’t facing normals.

Marc’s pain spell bounced and slammed into the unshielded mission men who were next to Kyle and Jennifer. They lifted shields even as agony ran along their skin. They were used to fighting through pain.

Kyle put Jennifer down by the door and blocked that exit.

Magic flew toward Angela. Bret absorbed the first hit, but he wasn't prepared for the strength. His shield went down.

Debra caught the second blast, retreating to keep Angela protected with her body.

Marc motioned to Greg and the others. "Like we did on the sub!"

Mission men were flashed to that ugly battle, but there was no time to be upset about it as the man in the red rain slicker fired again. Powerful green magic flew toward the alpha.

Marc and Adrian fired at the same time, merging their hits.

The green shield over the familiar man went down. Curtis had been an Eagle back before the radiation sickness had made him want to leave.

Kyle fired, hitting Curtis in the head with a slug.

Ray tackled the other running intruder. He screamed as pain went through his hands from contact with a shield.

Ray rolled away, still screaming, as Marc and Wade fired together and took down the man's barrier. Blisters popped up all over Ray's hands.

Greg fired a pain spell and then a bullet as he ran over, getting the running man in the chest. He double tapped with a head shot, making sure the man was dead.

Greg barely recognized Amos, Curtis's brother. They'd both been low-level Eagles with little hope of moving up because they couldn't handle physical combat.

Erin stayed on Greg's heels, providing protection.

Isabel grabbed Ray by the upper arm and helped him stand. His hands were still blistering from touching the odd green shield. She got him over to the ill people and then returned to her place near the boss.

Most of the camp members stayed down and still, waiting for an all clear call. A few of them rushed to be comforted by their protectors.

Adrian held onto the shaking woman in surprise. He rubbed her arm and then kissed the top of her head. "You're okay."

People stared in shock. It wasn't Piper in his arms.

Anna held onto Adrian and tried not to cry. "Make it stop!" She hated violence of any kind now.

Piper glared at them. "You dirty bastard."

So did Tobias.

Adrian flushed. "It's not what it seems like."

Anna's hand dropped to her stomach. "You have to keep us safe!"

Adrian shrugged, trying not to smirk. "Okay, it's a little of what it seems like."

"You son of a bitch!" Tobias stood up, furious and humiliated.

Kenn burst out laughing. "You aren't getting Tonya and you lost half of your harem while you were chasing her!"

Nature was lurking one dimension away, waiting for the right moment to strike. She recognized it as it arrived.

Nature whispered in Tobias's mind, "*Kill Angela and you can have every woman on this ship. I'll help you claim them all.*"

Tobias couldn't fight his evil side as mocking laughter echoed all around him. "Deal."

Tobias's eyes turned bright green. His graying hair grew out streaked with neon green. His fingernails extended, showing green nails.

The laughter stopped. Fear took its place.

Tobias fired a community spell that traveled out of his body in a circle, hitting everyone in the wide room.

Shields flickered. Some of them went down. Screams echoed as pain hit defenseless people.

"Toby! Stop!" Anna's plea was ignored.

"Jennifer!"

"Get the enforcer!"

Jennifer's breathing deepened. Her eyelids fluttered.

Kyle hoped she would be on their side as she started waking up to the desperate calls. It was already clear that they needed her help. Kyle only had his gun to rely on and that wasn't nearly enough against this new magic.

Angela lifted layers of shielding, covering their ill people and the kids as the mission men hurried toward the possessed man.

The other descendants brought up layers over themselves and the rest of the camp as Tobias fired again.

The mission men were knocked backward, sliding across the dirty floor. Tobias was too strong for them to handle.

Angela came to the front of the group. There wasn't another choice. She absorbed the next hit and fed it into her shields. *Jenny! I need you!*

Angela was weaker now than she'd been on the sub. The pregnancy was draining her, much like with Brittani. *I can't do this alone!*

Jennifer's eyes opened; they filled with green fury.

Tobias fired again, using all the strength that Nature had given him. He aimed for Angela directly, blaming her for everything that had gone wrong.

Angela staggered.

Marc caught her and got in front, pushing his shield out. It hit Tobias's shield and flickered.

Tobias inhaled deeply, pulling on Marc's immense power.

Greg shoved Marc out of the way, breaking the contact as he fired his hybrid death spell.

Tobias drew it in and blasted it right back.

Terry stepped in front of Angela and was hit with the death spell. He dropped to his knees, gasping.

Furious Eagles opened fire on Tobias.

Cody put a hand on the medic and sent in healing power. Because it had been a ricochet, the death spell hadn't killed Terry instantly.

Angela struggled to keep her shield over the panicking camp that was pushing toward the walls and doors to avoid being hit with magic or bullets.

Shawn and Daryl fired together, but neither man was strong enough to penetrate the glowing shield around Tobias.

Gus! We need you! Daryl stayed next to Brittani and cursed the choice to assign Gus to their captain as soon as they'd arrived.

"Stay with the captain!" Thomas fired his ice gift and froze Tobias's shield. "We've got this!"

Tobias melted it in one hit and fired the ice right back, hitting Thomas in the stomach.

Thomas fought the pain, firing again. "Is that all you got?! The shark did more damage!"

The mission men were trying to keep Tobias off balance now, like they had with Nature on the submarine.

Thomas fired again. His energy level dropped to nothing.

Tobias absorbed the hit and fired in a different direction.

Selina pushed Shawn aside as magic flew toward them. It missed him by inches and hit Molly's shield.

Molly groaned at the pain, but managed to keep her defense up over Madison and the rest of their group.

Biff conjured the goats again and sent them against Tobias's shield. His stone warrior was too heavy for the cruise ship.

Hits landed on his shield from a dozen different people; Tobias laughed evilly as he absorbed their power to fire at Angela.

Angela and her group were knocked to their knees. Their shields went out.

Jenny! Angela smothered herself in a thick shield, but it wasn't going to be enough. *He'll kill your kids and your mate, Jenny! Help us!*

Jennifer stood up as power electrified her hair and her body. A dense shield popped up over her as she took a step forward.

Kenn wanted to help them, but he kept his shield tight over his family while Neil did the same nearby. "Look out!"

Shawn fired a fire spell while pushing Selina behind him.

Tobias absorbed it. He didn't need Nature to tell him he'd almost won this fight. He gathered a massive spell and fired again, still aiming for Angela.

Kyle's honor wouldn't let him stay out of the magic battle. He dove in front of Angela, taking the full hit.

"Kyle!" Jennifer felt his pain like it was her own. She also felt his death coming.

Kyle hit the floor with a low gasp. He couldn't move.

Death held out a hand to take him away.

Jennifer exploded. Green light flooded the ballroom, coating everyone.

Tobias tried to fight it, but he didn't know how. He drew on his reserve energy.

Jennifer flew toward him while unleashing her enforcer power. It latched onto Tobias's shield and absorbed it instantly.

Jennifer drew harder, using the new gift. She snapped Tobias's feeble protective wall and jerked his gifts free. She swallowed them in a huge gulp and then belched out a powerful death spell.

Tobias had nowhere to go. The spell hit him full on and lit him up bright green. His body aged rapidly, turning him into an old man in seconds. He fell to his knees, heart squeezing, stuttering.

"Help Kyle!" Angela pushed through her defenders. "He's dying, Jenny!"

Jennifer fought with the new power inside. Her good half turned her toward Kyle. Her evil side whispered that she could have it all with just one hit. Angela was almost defenseless.

Angela stared into Jennifer's glowing green eyes. "I believe in you. I always have."

A warm golden light settled over Jennifer. The green glow began to fade. "Thank you."

"It's my honor, Jennifer. I'm proud of you. We all are."

Jennifer blinked. Real tears ran down her face as Nature's evil was pushed to the rear and her good side took over. Jennifer fired at Kyle, using the regeneration power.

Kyle knew he'd been saved from death as his lungs filled with air and his heart started beating again. His pain faded as Jennifer's love washed over him.

During the happy chaos, Martin stood up. He'd been smart enough to cower with the camp members when the kid had ordered them to all sit down. He lifted his stolen gun now, filled with joy. This was the real reason he'd returned. He'd never cared about being allowed back in like the others. "Angela!"

He fired right as she turned.

Isabel opened her arms as she took a single step. The bullet plunged into her chest. Blood sprayed Angela and the others as Isabel fell.

Angela caught her, lowering her to the floor.

Stanley shot Martin in the head.

Isabel struggled to talk as blood bubbled up in her throat. "Deserve it. I deserve it!"

Angela held the woman's head up so she could draw in a breath while Stanley ran toward Jennifer.

"So sorry! For everything!"

Angela ran a soft hand over Isabel's bloody cheek. "I forgive you."

Isabel cried thick tears as blood ran out of her nose and mouth. "Love you all!"

Angela kissed the woman's hand, now crying with her. "You'll always be with us."

Isabel's eyes shut. Her head rolled to the side.

"Help her!" Stanley grabbed Jennifer's arm and dragged her over. "Please!"

Jennifer grimaced. “I can’t stop death.”

“Try!” Stanley was also crying now. “I’ll give you anything!”

Jennifer knelt by the woman. “No more dangerous deals.”

She put a hand on Isabel’s chest, covering the wound that was still pouring blood. Her hand lit up bright green. It traveled over Isabel’s body, glowing so brightly that people looked away.

The wound healed in seconds, pushing out the warped slug. Isabel gasped in air and rolled over, coughing.

Jennifer felt fate flying toward her. She stood up and then stopped as pain ran through her mind. There was a steep price for betraying the deal and it was already coming due.

Angela stood up, letting Isabel’s blood drip down her fingers. “I need my team.”

Mission men turned toward her with reluctant movements.

“Boss?”

Angela pointed toward Jennifer.

Jennifer was surrounded by a vivid green shield now. “I can’t get through it!”

“What’s happening?”

“Is she one of them, too?!”

“Help her!”

“Look out!”

Nature appeared in full. She rushed toward the girl, furious steps shaking the ship. Her huge teeth

came out, gnashing together. “You broke our deal!
You’re mine now!”

People fled toward the exits; mission men
advanced, subtly surrounding the enemy.

Angela stood firm. “As the alpha, I invoke the
magic laws...against Nature!”

Chapter Thirty-Five
Don't Look

1

Nature turned toward Angela, growling.

Everyone who'd been on the submarine for their last encounter flinched, winced, groaned, or began gathering energy for another vicious battle.

Before anyone could fire, Angela covered Nature with her thickest shield. "Pile on!"

The Eagles and mission men locked Nature in place with their shields and then brought up layer after layer to keep her there. Those who'd gone to the Weigh Station and fought the Messenger were suddenly confident in their ability to win. Their confidence lent strength to their barriers.

Nature couldn't leave or fight. She also couldn't keep holding Jennifer in place. She let go to use that energy against the shields preventing her from firing at Angela.

Nature was as beautiful as the men remembered, but there were also gray stripes in her green plumage that told them she was low on energy this time.

Angela also saw it and celebrated silently.

"Let me go!"

"Not until we settle our business."

Nature had no choice but to listen. She glared insanely at all of them, but mostly at Jennifer. She showed her long, jagged teeth. *I'm going to make you pay!*

Jennifer shuddered.

Angela drew the attention back to herself. "First, I'd like to thank you. You've cleared another group of evil from my camp."

"Let me go!" Nature roared, shaking the ship.

Angela wasn't intimidated like some of her fighters were. "You broke our deal! You are not allowed to hurt the normals!"

Nature melted a layer of the shields over her. She hissed in frustration as it was replaced on the outside by two more descendants joining them in the center of the ballroom. "You can't judge me! I'm above you!"

"But you aren't above the laws that govern all of us." Angela reminded Nature of a mistake she'd made. "You said *all* lifeforms have rules. That also means you."

"Let me out!" Nature melted another layer as she tried to bargain. "I'll take the girl and go."

"No, you won't. My deal came first. You have no claim to Jennifer."

"She isn't a normal!"

"Her unborn child is."

Gasps went through the cowering crowd of camp members.

Jennifer let out a loud sound of relief. "That explains it!" She'd been so scared that she'd

invented a dozen excuses, but she hadn't believed any of it.

Nature realized she was trapped and backtracked. "I didn't know!"

Angela shrugged. "I don't believe that." She gestured at Samantha. "Maybe a good lawyer can help us find the truth."

Neil and Wade both protested.

Samantha gave them the babies she'd been protecting, mind spinning. She knew what Angela needed here. She found the courage to do it for one reason. *I'm more scared of Angela than I am of Nature.* "It will come down to two questions, but we need the enforcer to make sure we get the truth."

"No!" Nature melted three layers at the same time.

New descendants added their barriers, trying to help even though they didn't know how to fight this way yet.

Jennifer used her enforcer power to connect to Nature through the shields. Then she connected to their hive so everyone could listen.

"You'll pay!" Nature's shout was ruthless. "I'll eat you limb by limb while you're still alive!"

Jennifer didn't react to Nature's threat this time. *I have faith in Samantha to get me out of this. She's the best lawyer on the planet now.*

The mission men were all upset to be facing Nature again so soon, but Ray was breathing hard and trying not to panic at his worst fear suddenly

standing in front of them. “How did she get on the ship?! She can’t be here without permission!”

Guilt lit up in their minds through the hive connection. People turned toward the person in shock.

“It was me.” Candy fought back tears as remorse filled her heart. “I gave her permission.”

Conner was stunned. “What?!”

“She said she would save Brittani and her babies!”

“She’s not a normal!” Nature leered at the ill woman. “Candy belongs to me now!”

“Why would you do that?” Jennifer had skipped linking Candy into the hive sooner because the woman’s misery and pain had been too ugly to inflict on everyone.

“Because she’s dying!” Candy glared at Nature, surprising everyone with her anger. “You don’t own me yet. You haven’t healed Brittani!”

Samantha clarified that. “You didn’t ask for yourself?”

“No! I had faith that God would heal me if I helped someone else.”

“There is no God!” Nature’s fury broke through another layer of the shields holding her in place. “Normals killed the Creator!”

Angela wasn’t sure she believed that and at the same time, she already did. Angela motioned at their lawyer. “Start the trial.”

Samantha focused on the intimidating entity and tried to act like it was anyone else. “Did you know Jennifer’s baby was going to be normal?”

Nature tried to lie. Pain sank into her head and brought a scream of rage. “Yes!”

Samantha didn’t have any sympathy. “And did you believe Jennifer and the unborn normal baby would die in the fight with Angela?”

Nature shrieked again, shattering half of the shields around her, but her thoughts were being ripped open by the magic users. There was no way to hide it. “Yes!”

“You tricked a normal child’s mother into a dangerous deal while knowing she was under the effects of the rage illness, and knowing they would both die.” Samantha stepped back. “You are guilty. I can’t help you.”

A magical chain snapped around Nature’s branch-like ankle.

Angela began handing out the judgement. “You broke our deal. You stirred up Martin and the others. It caused the murders of four normals.”

“I didn’t do that! I only targeted descendants!”

No one believed her because Samantha had already proven her a liar.

“You took over the spirit of nature when you came down to earth, breaking another rule.” Angela motioned to Cody. “But we can fix that.”

Nature panicked. She sent out a call for help that none of her converts were able to refuse.

Adrian ran toward them.

Jennifer hit him with her enforcer snare. He was locked in place, unable to call for help, though he could see and hear everything.

“Look out!”

“Candy! No!”

A dozen camp members rushed forward with dead green eyes. They ran toward Nature to protect her. Candy was in the rear of that group.

“Hold the shields!” Angela added hers to it. “Don’t let her escape!”

Nature shattered another layer of the barriers. “Kill her!”

The camp members all targeted Angela.

Candy tried to resist, but the green infection spread through her mind. She lifted her hand and fired.

The weak hit didn’t do much, but it wasn’t the only one that landed. Angela was pounded with rage and magic, driving her backward again.

“Candy! Stop!” Conner ran over and grabbed her arms. He shook her violently, but the woman fired at Angela again, not hearing him.

“Do something!” Conner pushed Candy away from the other possessed camp members while she drew more energy for another spell.

They fired together, hitting the shields around Angela in menacing blasts that rattled everyone trying to shield their pregnant alpha.

Conner’s panic erupted in a violent spell that slammed into the shield around Nature. It shattered a layer.

The descendants let go of their hold on Nature as Conner prepared to fire again, clearing him a path.

“Kill him!” Nature redirected her small army as she began to fade. She had to leave this dimension to recharge her energy naturally.

All twelve camp members turned toward Conner with glowing green eyes.

Candy lifted her hand. Her heart stopped the blast; she screamed as Nature sent pain through her mind for refusing.

Conner barely got a shield up in time. The combined hits from the possessed members plowed through it and hit him, knocking him to the ground. The camp people fired again, sending Nature’s power out to steal his magic.

Conner! Adrian’s terror broke Jennifer’s snare. He lifted a shield over his son as the possessed people fired, taking most of the hit. He slid to his knees next to the boy. “Take them out!”

Conner and Adrian fired at the same time, sending out Mitchel magic. It hit three of the men in front and killed them instantly.

The others brought up shields on Nature’s command.

“Mitchel madness!”

Conner concentrated and vanished behind his shield.

Adrian did the same.

The possessed camp members weren't able to think for themselves. When Conner disappeared, they all turned back toward Angela and fired.

Marc held the shield over his wife while absorbing some of the magic to refuel his dropping energy bank.

Bret vanished behind his shield, automatically falling into the Mitchel method of fighting without being trained in it. He fired a blast at a possessed man, penetrating his shield.

Conner used a death spell to kill him.

Adrian dropped the shield of a camp woman firing on Angela.

Conner killed her and absorbed her lifeforce to refuel himself.

Bret took out the next camp member's shield, letting Adrian have the kill shot.

“Get him! Kill the Mitchel!”

Nature's command was impossible to resist this time. Candy pinpointed Conner through their bond and fired.

Conner groaned at the pain, but he refused to fire back.

Bret did it. He used a weak version of his shatter spell and took out her shield.

Adrian slammed her with a sleep charm, using the rest of his energy.

Conner ran over to shield Candy as she fell to the filthy floor.

Bret covered Adrian, who was now on his knees and starting to wither.

Daryl surrounded the remaining possessed fighters, holding them in place with his weak shield. He absorbed their hits to power the barrier and keep them away from his family.

Brittani cowered behind him, wishing she could help, but her stomach was already tight. One blast from her would restart her labor and Adrian was too weak to knock her out this time.

Nature realized she was going to lose this fight, too. She slowed time so she could escape.

“Now, Sam!”

Samantha pushed against the time slow like she had while searching the ocean for her sons. The practice they’d held in the pool had taught her how to do it, but she didn’t have enough energy this time. “Neil!”

Neil added his power to hers, feeding her energy as she pushed time back toward Nature, the origin point.

Nature hadn’t expected them to know how to fight this way. Her concentration slipped. Time resumed, snapping into place with an energy wave that hit her in the stomach. Green blood dripped from her gut.

“Now!” Angela kept directing the fight even though she couldn’t join in.

Cate and Cody fired together, using their twin power. The destruction spell hit Nature and blew her hand across the room.

Green blood gushed from the wound as Nature shrieked. Left with no other option but to fight for

her life, she began to spin, spraying green blood onto people and the walls.

Nature spun faster, turning into a natural twister that had a shield of swirling debris. She kept rotating faster, growing in size.

“Ah, shit.” Jennifer gathered energy for round two, but she was low now. She only had a few good hits left in her and then she would have to draw power from someone.

Fear ran through the room from everyone as the twister grew wider. They fired spells that bounced off; other fighters protected the weaker people from the rebounds as more descendants tried to get through Nature’s defense.

Nature zeroed in on the weakest human, the one the others had all tried to save.

Brittani groaned as a contraction rippled over her stomach. Her fear had triggered her labor to start. “Daryl!”

Daryl couldn’t hold the shield over the possessed people and Brittani. He let go of them and shielded his wife as leaves and twigs shot out of the spinning entity.

Biff conjured snakes with the last of his energy and fired them like arrows, trying to penetrate the swirling dervish. They hit her and bounced into the fighters.

Jennifer fired her new gift at Nature, hoping to pull her power.

Nature laughed cruelly as she spun it away, still dripping green blood from her stomach and missing hand.

“They belong to me!” Nature spun faster, sending out razor-like sticks that hit the possessed people who were firing at Angela again.

They were impaled in hundreds of places, dying before they hit the floor.

Nature consumed their lifeforces in one huge swallow. Her injuries began to heal.

Gus finally reached the ballroom and stopped in horror. Like Ray, Nature was his biggest fear now. It only took seconds for him to determine who Nature was aiming for. His fear became fury.

Grant was right behind him. The captain put his hand on Gus’s big shoulder. “Use my energy. Take as much as you need.”

The remaining fighters coming from all over the ship made it to the ballroom at the same time. All of them but one stared at the unnatural twister in shock and fear. They didn’t know how to fight that.

Morgan fired his ice gift, using all of his energy in one gigantic blast.

It hit the twister and forced it to slow because of the temperature change.

Gus fired his electricity gift, crashing into Nature and lighting her up like a live wire.

She screamed, rotating away. Debris fell to the floor as the twister started to break up.

Marc and several Eagles fired their guns this time, hitting her in the chest, stomach, and shoulder.

For one instant, they all celebrated as Nature staggered and fell to her knees.

Angela brought her shield up over the bleeding entity, preventing any more hits. “Die now or face the punishment you’ve earned!”

Nature was too hurt to keep fighting. She hissed weakly. “Let me go!”

“I will. In exchange, you have to give up Jennifer and Candy.”

Nature didn’t have a choice. “Deal.”

Silence slowly fell through the room, other than injured people groaning and terrified people crying. The camp had been blocked from the exits during the fight. They’d witnessed all of it this time.

Candy’s green hair faded to her normal brown. Her green nails receded and faded back to pink.

Jennifer didn’t feel any different. She assumed her deal with Nature wasn’t the same.

“Boss!”

Daryl’s shout reminded them they had another problem.

Jennifer fired her regen gift at Brittani.

Green warmth ran over the woman, easing her pain and slowing the contraction.

“You stole that from me! We made a deal!” Nature tried to stem the flow of blood with pieces from her plumage. “Betrayer!”

“Speaking of betraying a deal...” Angela stepped in front of Nature with three dozen furious descendants shielding her from a sneak attack. “You

have been found guilty. You will now be sentenced.”

“Get on with it!” Nature needed to flee before she bled out and couldn’t regenerate herself at all. She couldn’t do it in this dimension and she didn’t have the energy left to take a lifeforce because she would have to fight again to reach someone.

Angela studied her enemy calmly. “I can tell how tired you are. You need to rest...and this is the only island where you can do that, isn’t it?”

Nature refused to answer.

Angela shrugged. “I already know. This is where the first angels came down to earth. This is a gateway between all realms. It’s the only one *you* can use because you’re not really Nature.”

“You can’t save her!” Nature shrieked at the pain and the fear as rage ate through another portion of her mind.

“Yes, I can and I will. I figured out how shortly after you dream walked with my son.” Angela gestured at the teen who’d stayed with his group to protect the babies like he’d been told to. “Charlie didn’t know about your teeth. I realized you were seducing people with power. I planned around it.”

Nature was stunned and trapped. “You predicted my actions!”

Angela nodded. “I looked ahead, and behind, to figure out why you’re still here haunting us. You could have gone anywhere else and tormented my kind, but you stayed here.”

“It’s my island! You don’t belong here!”

“And yet I’m about to own it.” Angela’s voice was stone cold now. “I told you I’d been to the Weigh Station and to Hell. You should have listened.”

Angela now delivered a carefully worded punishment. “For the deaths of the normals you were sworn to protect, I banish you from this island. You will never again be at full strength.”

Dense magic chains went around Nature’s wrists; she tried to fade out of them, but the chains tightened, not letting her leave.

Angela let go of the shield and fired a single blow of her hatred, blasting a hole in Nature’s antlers. Wooden shards flew out in every direction. “Get off my ship and don’t ever come back.”

Nature faded, taking the chains along. “This isn’t over! I’ll kill you all! You’re all dead!”

The boat rocked violently as she ran, still screaming threats. “I’ll open every gate between dimensions. You won’t be safe anywhere but here! Every monster in your mind will be waiting!”

Angela snorted. “You can’t match what we’ve already done to ourselves. Go away. We’ve had enough of you.”

Silence fell through most of the destroyed ballroom.

“Why not split her from Nature now? We could have done it right then.” It was the first time Marc had questioned Angela at all since they got home.

“We don’t know how. Great bluff, right?” Cody glanced around, smiling. “Anyone know how to perform an exorcism?”

Angela frowned. “I’m working on it. Don’t rush me.”

A few of their people snickered. Some of them realized that was why Angela had allowed religion to take hold in Safe Haven.

Jennifer hit Brittani with another blast of her regen power, trying to be sure the woman’s labor had stopped.

Brittani’s eyes shut; her face relaxed.

“Jennifer tricked Nature into giving her that power. Candy tried to do that, too, but Jennifer was successful.” Parker was impressed. “Now I get why Jennifer was being so mean. It was all an act!”

People came over to Jennifer to hug her or shake her hand even though she was bloody and still glowing with green power.

Jennifer started to tell them the truth. She didn’t want credit she hadn’t earned.

Angela shook her head. “You have more work to do.”

Jennifer immediately obeyed. “If you need to be healed, line up.”

People all over the ballroom moved her way or helped a loved one to reach her, including Ray. The blisters were still crawling up his arm, preventing him from fighting.

“It’s not quite over.”

Angela's words sent fury and fear through the bloody room. Eagles drew guns while descendants gathered power and lifted flickering shields over themselves and their weakest people.

"We won't need that." Angela moved forward, still covered in Isabel's blood. "The murderer was also given permission to be here. Two people in this room hid them, fed them, and lied to us every single day."

People glanced around in dismay.

Angela's hard eyes went over them all, seeing how many people were showing signs of rage. She'd figured out that stressful moments like this often triggered it to advance another level. "Don't make me call your name. If I do that, you'll be banished...or worse."

"We're not letting traitors stay here!"

"Kill them all!"

"We've had enough!"

Every one of those shouts came from normals.

Ralph stood up, but he was too scared to go over to Angela. "Please. I didn't know they were killing people!"

Daisey stared at him in awful disappointment. "Oh, Ralph."

Ralph began to cry.

Eagles came over to handcuff him.

Ralph was horrified by everything that had happened, but mostly by himself. "I caused this. I'm the problem."

“Yes.” Greg snapped the cuffs and took Ralph’s arm.

Angela motioned at Shawn to go along. “Take him to the brig.”

Shawn didn’t have sympathy for the man’s tears either. He led Ralph out of the trashed ballroom with fast steps.

“Take him, too.” Angela pointed at Tim, who was staring around in shock. He hadn’t moved during the entire fight. He also hadn’t tried to help them. “He’s being charged with treason, aiding and abetting the enemy, theft, and accessory to multiple murders.”

Gasps went through the camp. They were loudest from the church members.

Angela went over to the withered man who still had green hair and a heartbeat. Tobias was on death’s stoop, but he could recover in time, though he would be powerless. That wasn’t good enough for Angela. “This camp has two sets of laws. One covers the normals. That’s why Tim and Ralph are being jailed. The other covers our kind. You’re not being given mercy, Tobias. For your crimes, I sentence you to death. The enforcer will handle it, as is her job in these matters.”

Jennifer hesitated. “Do I have to?”

It was a surprise to most of them that she didn’t want to do it. Everyone knew she disliked Tobias and she enjoyed hurting people who broke the rules.

Angela was sympathetic. “No. That’s why we have Eagles to handle these things, too. You don’t have to carry it all.”

Several men came through the crowd. They waited for Angela’s call.

“No!” Daniella got between them and Tobias. “Nature took over his mind. He couldn’t help it!”

Angela motioned. “His charm is weak now. Free her.”

Jennifer sent a strong spell over both of Tobias’s wives.

Tobias tried to scream in protest. Only a low moan came out.

Old magic snapped, making people flinch.

Daniella’s eyes filled with relief. “Finally!”

Tobias lifted his head and found Tonya and Kenn still in the corner. Evil blazed across his face. “She killed Gabe. It wasn’t an accident!”

Kenn flinched.

Jennifer glared. “Even when faced with death, you still can’t stop stalking her. You’re like an old world wife beater who killed the woman instead of letting her escape your abuse. Liar!”

No one believed him after that. Jennifer’s word was law.

“Carry out the sentence.”

Adrian drew his gun at Angela’s order. He flipped it around and held it out.

Daniella took it and neatly knelt. “One for each decade you held us against our will!” She fired two fast shots into Tobias’s brain.

Angela walked away from the mess, smiling at her people. “Justice will always be this way. I’ll always punish my kind more than yours. We love you; we *need* you. Together, we’ll create a future that’s good for all of us.”

Parker was the first one to cheer. The rest of the camp echoed him.

Angela lifted a brow at Gus as she neared the exit.

Gus grinned. “I didn’t leave the captain alone.”

Angela chuckled. “Fair enough.”

Grant walked over to check on Ray while Gus went over to help Daryl with Brittani. She needed to be moved to the medical bay now.

Still crouched with the other ill people, Hannah stood up, smiling and crying. She took Brittani’s hand. “Jennifer saved us. We can’t die now!”

Neil used his hand to turn Amy’s face away. *Don’t look, Sam.*

Samantha shut her eyes.

“We can’t die now!” Hannah let go of Brittani and spun around with joyous tears flowing down her cheeks. “We’ll live forever!”

A huge wave broke against the ship, hitting it hard. The vibration knocked a ballroom mirror loose, cracking it in half. The loose piece flew through the ballroom and hit Hannah.

It decapitated her.

Blood coated those closest; fresh screams filled the room.

“Hannah!” Morgan flew toward her falling body while camp members cringed from her rolling, bleeding head.

People turned toward Jennifer, expecting her to fix it.

Jennifer didn't waste what little energy she had left. “I'm sorry. Even Nature's power can't heal that. Hannah's gone.”

Chapter Thirty-Six
All In Good Time

1

Angela thought again of fate as an entity like Nature. *One day, we'll meet. You have a lot to answer for.* “It’s all over now. Stay calm and we’ll get you taken care of.”

Adrian went over to help move their ill people. He was certain Angela wanted them in the medical bay for observation even though it seemed like Jennifer’s new gift had healed most of them.

“We’ll need some volunteers for cleaning.” Angela scanned the blood and bodies. “The brawlers will deal with the dead.”

She could feel Morgan’s anguish over Hannah, but she couldn’t fix that. They still didn’t know why anyone named Hannah or Megan was doomed.

“The storm won’t be over for a few more hours. We’re staying here until it stops raining and we can go check on the town.” Angela didn’t tell them the bunkhouse had suffered damage from the flooding. They would handle that later. “Use the cabins you had before, please. Eagles will be in the guard posts shortly if you need something.”

People began moving toward the exits while trying not to step in the green or red blood.

Angela tried to lift the mood for those who hadn't suffered a loss. "We'll end the evening in the cafeteria with quiet to soothe our nerves."

People loved the sound of that.

So did Angela. She walked by Hannah's body while swallowing angry tears. *I know what you did, you evil green bitch.*

Angela wiped drying blood from her face onto the gory sleeve of her shirt. "Go get cleaned up. Sleep if you can. If not, the cafeteria has hot chocolate." Angela sniffed. "And cookies!"

It was odd how fast the mood shifted to the next physical comfort. The camp immediately headed for the exits, chatting and even smiling despite all of the bodies.

"They're tougher now."

Angela nodded at Wade's comment. "And more indifferent." People were going by the few crying friends and loved ones without much sympathy. "We've gone through this too many times."

"Is it something we need to fix?"

Angela shrugged. "It might fix itself, if we get a real break from moments like this."

"Will we?"

"On the island, yes. It's really ours now. We won't be attacked again there by Nature." Angela looked over at Jennifer, who was already finished healing people. The new gift was amazing. "Jennifer and I are on rounds."

Jennifer stared in surprise. She had been expecting to be relieved of duty now and charged with treason.

Angela waved at Kyle. “You, too. Everyone else is on cleanup or a break.”

Cate and Cody grabbed Bret’s arms and pulled him toward the main entrance. “Cookies!”

Adults laughed.

Marc lifted a brow.

Angela shook her head, but she smiled.

Marc followed the kids, relieved. He didn’t want to be part of the aftermath. He already knew most of what had happened. He didn’t think about it as he left.

“You have point here, XO.”

Wade grinned. Then he got to work.

Jennifer swallowed her jealousy and followed Angela out of the ballroom. She didn’t have the right to complain after what she’d done.

Angela took an employee hallway to give them a little privacy. As soon as they were inside, Angela laid down the law. “We have a new rule now that enforcers cannot share gifts because of how this went. Do not share with Kyle again or anyone else, ever.”

“I’m sorry.”

“I believe you.”

“What about Kyle?” That had been what Jennifer was the most upset about all along. “He died twice tonight!”

“We’ll line up someone to share with him.”

“Not you?”

Angela laughed. “No, but we played a good part didn’t we?” Most of the camp also thought they were having an affair. “Kyle would never do that to you.”

Jennifer couldn’t let it go so easily. “But you would.”

Angela nodded. “I’d do anything to save us. If that meant stealing your mate, then yes.”

Jennifer huffed.

Angela hid a smile. “Kyle’s hybrid state has protected him for months. It started with the radiation sickness. I’ll pick a donor for him shortly. I don’t want him to be without that protection either.”

The employee door opened behind them. Samantha stopped as she spotted them. Fear filled the passage.

Jennifer stared at her. “I would never tell anyone, Samantha.”

Angela encouraged the good moment. “Why?”

Jennifer admitted the truth. “I feel bad that she was hurt on my watch.”

Kyle was relieved as he understood. “That’s why you pushed her so hard.”

“Yes. Angela said Samantha had to get angry to recover. Unlike Neil, I tried to speed it along so she would feel better and my guilt would ease.”

Neil was right behind Samantha. He finished clearing the air. Samantha needed to hear it. “So, you don’t think our boys are unsafe around her?”

“No. I never did. I’m sorry.”

Samantha smiled at the girl, but she still went back out into the main hall to reach the cabins.

Jennifer stared at the dusty floor. “I need to make amends to everyone.”

Angela overruled her. “Let’s put a hold on that for now.”

“Why? I screwed up.”

“I don’t want them to know, Jenny. I prefer they think it was all part of my plan.”

Kyle had to ask. “Was it?”

Angela waddled down the hallway without answering.

Jennifer followed the boss. “That’s it? I’m not banished?”

Angela laughed. “It would be hard to explain to the camp.”

“I don’t understand.”

Kyle did. “She can be punished by Eagle rules, after the birth.” Kyle didn’t want to think about how hard it would be to watch someone beat on his wife.

“No. Jennifer is not going to be punished.”

“But I made a deal with Nature to kill you!”

Kyle stared in fresh shock. He hadn’t known how badly Jennifer messed up.

“I know.” Angela shrugged. “You kept your honor in the end. That’s what counts.”

Jennifer’s eyes narrowed. “You did plan it all.”

“I planned around it and now our ill people will all survive. I’m not going to punish you for reacting exactly like I needed you to.”

Jennifer was grateful. She was also feeling guilty. *I'll find a way to make amends with people off the radar of the camp. And I know where to start.* “Will Samantha be punished?”

“She already has been.”

“You mean Chad.” Jennifer stared. “You let that happen!”

“If I hadn’t, she would have gotten away with two murders. Becky might have deserved it, but Seth didn’t.”

Kyle kept up with the women and the conversation. “What about Neil? Was he punished enough through Samantha being hurt?”

Angela’s voice was cold “No. He fooled me and I promised a payment for that. I just haven’t sent him the bill yet.”

Kyle felt bad for Neil.

Jennifer didn’t. “Why did you all let me go so far without trying to stop it?”

“I needed you to be pissed for real or Nature never would have fallen into the trap.” Angela shrugged. “Everyone else expected you to pull out of it on your own because you’re my heir.”

“And I didn’t.”

“No. You’re not ready for leadership on your own yet. You don’t have to be. We’ll work hard on it for the next two years.”

Kyle didn’t mind how it felt to be a normal again, but he was already missing being able to read their thoughts. He asked something important to their future since he couldn’t scan her mind now.

“Do you want that, Jennifer? We can leave if it will make you happier.”

Angela shook her head. “No, you can’t, Kyle. You have to stay here so I can make sure your wife isn’t a threat to humanity.”

Jennifer smiled, surprising Kyle. “Thank you!”

“It’s my honor. And my greed. I don’t want you to leave. We need both of you here, working toward the future. Now you can stay and be loved like you secretly wanted. In time, the camp won’t be able to pick between us.”

“Promise me that!”

Angela held out a hand.

Jennifer took it without hesitating.

Angela shared a vision of that future with the girl.

Kyle scanned the halls while he waited. There was a feeling of something else about to go wrong.

Jennifer fought back tears. “That’s beautiful.”

“Yes. We’ll build it together—all of us.” Angela regarded Kyle. “Ian’s body is about to be found.”

Kyle’s hand dropped to his gun. “Are there more intruders?”

“No. Ian was lost during the fight.” Angela walked toward the employee door. “Let’s go talk to our prisoners while the medics call Debra and Kenn. We don’t need to be there for that ugliness.” Angela sighed. *I’ll make myself pay for it later.* “Kyle will do a count of our Eagles and get a guard shift posted everywhere we need one.”

Angela felt Jennifer about to protest. “Thomas will stay with him.”

Thomas lowered his shield.

Kyle jumped, laughing. “I didn’t hear you at all!”

“Good, right?” Thomas was still on his crutches. His cast was now stained red in places.

Jennifer stepped toward him. “Let me take care of that for you.”

Thomas retreated. “No, thank you.”

Angela held up a hand when Thomas would have explained. “Without reading his thoughts, tell me why he doesn’t want you to heal him.”

Jennifer frowned. “Because he’s a stubborn man.”

Angela waited.

“A stubborn male who wants everyone to know how special he is. Not just anyone could have survived what he did.” Jennifer respected him for that. “He’s proving he’s tough enough to be one of us.”

Thomas chuckled. “I’m also working on a member of the opposite sex.”

Jennifer’s frown grew. “Pick someone else. The camp member you were...getting to know isn’t good enough for you.”

“I know.” Thomas grinned. “I was just practicing on her so word of my mouth would get around.”

“To who?”

“Molly.”

Kyle frowned this time. “Isn’t she a lesbian?”
“Actually, she’s bisexual. Why do you think I was practicing?”
Laughter filled the hallway.

2

Missy left the employee hall near the camp cabins and merged into the crowd of bloody, smiling people who hugged her and welcomed her; she was covered in blood, too.

Missy smiled back and returned their affection. She slipped into her old cabin with shy waves at people who had hated her a week ago.

She shut the door and leaned against it, savoring the darkness.

Selina turned on the lamp.

Missy jumped. Guilt went across her face and mind before she could hide it.

Selina pointed toward the bathroom. “Go strip so I can throw those clothes in the incinerator.”

Missy stared.

Selina smiled. “You’re my daughter now. I’ll always protect you.”

Missy ran to the bloody woman and hugged her tightly.

Selina rubbed the girl’s thin back, then gently pushed her toward the bathroom. “I’ll lock the door. You get in the shower.”

Missy obeyed, heart thumping in happiness. *I have a real mom now!*

As Missy took off the bloody clothes, Selina put them into a garbage bag. She eyed the girl's body. "Good. You don't have any wounds for the boss to heal this time."

Missy realized Selina had known the truth all along. She got into the shower.

Selina put her own bloody clothes into the bag and washed at the sink so she could go gather their clean duds. "Are you allowed to tell me why?"

Missy adjusted the water temperature. "The alpha wanted the church group weakened."

"Well, they definitely are now." Selina dried her hands. "What will the Eagles find when they search the church tunnels?"

"Parts of the boat Corey and Martin arrived in. The ocean left them alone because they were with us when Angela made the deal."

Selina paused. "What about the one you just handled?"

Missy didn't blink or flinch. Enjoyment came into her tone. "I dropped the knife and Ian's watch in the ballroom next to Martin's body after I came back from the medical bay. No one missed me in the chaos."

Selina stared. *Safe Haven is just another lab without walls.* "Are you evil?"

"No. I'm an Eagle following orders."

In the employee hallway nearby, Jennifer stared at Angela. “You’re the one who’s evil.”

“I’m a shepherd thinning her herd.”

“I think you like it.”

“It’s okay to like something bad as long as you only use it for good.”

Jennifer considered that. “How much good came from this?”

“A lot. All of our dying people will live now. More evil was removed from the camp. It also proved to some people that they really can’t be bought. And it weakened a future enemy even more. Nature won’t be at full strength if we face her again.”

“And how much bad?”

Angela eyed the dim, dusty passageway in regret. “A little. It will mostly fall on Tim and Ralph.”

“Ralph has the rage illness.”

“Yes. Tim doesn’t have that excuse.”

Jennifer listened to the happy people going by in the main hall, but her mind stayed on their conversation. “I thought Tim was one of your favorites before you went to rescue the mission men.”

Anger came into Angela’s voice. “Tim lost my sympathy as soon as he outed himself as my spy and refused to do the job. He broke our deal and now he’ll face his punishment alone.”

“What about Allison?”

“I had you unlock her and connect her so she would be influenced by the good voices, but she only listened to the bad side, like you.”

Jennifer winced. “Why didn’t you try to save her?”

“You know why. Tell me.”

“Because she wasn’t going to stop hunting for power.”

“And she would have pulled Zack and Eric in with her.”

Jennifer had to ask. “Why can’t we all have that skill?”

Angela decided to be honest. “Harry didn’t have that gift for three months and he was already threatening to challenge the other medics. Imagine a camp full of power-hungry descendants who only care about being the last one standing.”

Jennifer grimaced. “Safe Haven would be ripped apart.”

“Exactly. I hate sacrificing the few for the good of the many, but I do it when I have to.”

“Like with Tonya.”

Angela didn’t answer, waiting to see how much Jennifer had picked up about that on her own.

Jennifer knew the redhead’s secret; she just hadn’t decided what to do about it. “You’ve been protecting Tonya. You removed people who knew she killed Gabe.”

Angela shrugged, tone perfectly even. “I’ve settled some issues. It actually had very little to do with Tonya directly.”

“Was Gabe really going to be a mass shooter like Darren?”

“Yes. He wasn’t going to be able to handle Tonya’s constant rejections.”

“So she didn’t lose control over a new gift?”

“Not that I know of.”

Jennifer frowned at Angela’s perfectly even tone. A faint bell in her mind was ringing. Tobias’s gift of being able to tell when someone was lying was new. Jennifer wasn’t sure how to use it yet. “Are you telling me the truth?”

“There’s no reason to lie to you.”

Jennifer let that go for now. She still wasn’t sure why Angela had done some of this. She kept digging for answers while the boss was willing to give them. “I understand Megan and Dari, mostly. Dari was a whore who would have restarted STD outbreaks because she was so nasty. And Megan was a heartless thief who hated kids, animals, and work, but why Pam?”

Angela’s anger broke free. “Pam left me and her mate alone with a deranged lunatic! After everything I’ve sacrificed for her and this camp, she left me in there!”

Jennifer winced.

Angela controlled her emotions and delivered a warning. “Never break a deal with me. Never betray me.”

Jennifer was surprised to feel fear at the cold words. After all the power Jennifer had amassed, Angela still scared her. “I won’t.”

“I believe that or I would have let Nature take you.”

Jennifer swallowed a shiver and hurried after Angela. *I thought I could handle leadership, but she's right. I have a lot to learn to be as good, and as bad, as the alpha.*

“After we get back to town, let Tonya know she can burn all of the samples and evidence from these cases.”

Jennifer wasn't surprised by that order. “I assume the glasses were used to create doubt?”

“Yes. Missy put them on the bar before Pam came in. Then she hid behind the bar until Pam was drunk.”

“Why Missy?”

“Someone had to do it.”

“But why her? She's just a little girl!”

Angela stopped again. She scanned Jennifer and decided she was ready for another ugly truth. “She needed to do it.”

“For revenge?” Jennifer scoffed. “Revenge for both of you!”

“Missy has the rage illness.”

“So give her a shot.” Angela's expression told Jennifer it wasn't that simple. “You can't.”

Angela shared something almost no one else knew. “Adrian found an area in that lab with just kids.”

“I would only be surprised if that bastard hadn't experimented on kids.”

“These subjects were different. Reicher was trying to reverse the rage effects.”

Jennifer stared in horror. “It doesn’t work on them.”

“No. Their bodies are changing too rapidly through normal aging. The vaccine makes them worse.”

Jennifer thought about how Angela had let their kids kill all along. “We can’t help them.” Jennifer already knew Nature’s power wouldn’t cover it or she wouldn’t still feel so angry while waiting on the vaccine to cure her.

Angela rubbed her sore spine. “I’ve been giving them releases. It seems to slow the effects. I’m hoping to hold it off in them until their bodies slow down.”

“But they’re all sick! Even the little kids!”

Angela nodded. “There are a lot of bad guys in the world now.”

“We can’t let them turn into mad dogs. We have to find a way to help them!”

“Rico may have given us an answer.”

“His other lab idea.” Jennifer considered that. “Another lab run. Your team will love that.”

“My team isn’t going this time.” Angela sighed as she felt fate turn toward her once again. “As far as I know, they’re all staying. I admit I’m not totally sure on a couple of them.”

“Like Marc?”

Angela smiled happily. “He’s staying. Tonya isn’t the only one who now loves Rico.”

“And he’s dead.”

Angela shrugged. “Some people are only meant to be loved when they’re gone.”

“That’s awful!”

“Yes.” Angela eyed Jennifer’s stomach, comparing it to her own giant mound. Despite Jennifer getting pregnant first, they would deliver around the same time. Gestation was different for descendants and for descendants carrying normal babies. It would all go into the books Neil was still writing about their kind. “It’s time to put aside your issues. We have people who need our full attention. They deserve nothing less than all we can give them.”

Jenny felt how deeply Angela cared about her people. “I don’t love them. That’s why it went wrong for me.”

“Yes.”

“I still don’t.”

Angela used the moment for teaching, like she often did. “Do you remember how upset I was after the riot on the ship?”

“Yeah, you wanted the normals gone. You even made a plan to put us in charge of the world.” Jennifer didn’t ask if Angela was still working on that. Her challenge to Nature had been done under magic laws.

“After that happened, I felt bad. I’d only viewed them as sheep before then. Once I got over the bitterness, I saw them as equal humans who are also totally damaged by the world we live in.”

Jennifer got the point. “So my disgust over their weaknesses will go away?”

“Never. But it will fade to a tolerable level that lets you care for them more than you did. Over time, it will become fondness and then love.”

Jennifer didn’t believe that would happen, but she knew better than to say so. “Can I ask you something private?”

Angela headed for their next stop. “Yes. It’s the most amazing job in the world. I would kill to keep it. I already have.”

“Marc has been thinking about challenging you for control.”

“I know.”

Jennifer stared. “Aren’t you upset?”

“Not any more. I decided to take Rico’s advice.”

Jennifer groaned. “Uh-oh.”

Angela smiled again. “I’m just going to change it a little. I don’t want Marc to regret taking control. I want him to accept that he needs to share and then things will be perfect.”

“How are you going to do that?”

“By giving him what he wants, just like Rico said.”

“I don’t understand.”

“I know. You don’t have to.”

“Just follow your lead and keep learning?”

“Exactly. You’re doing an amazing job at that, by the way.”

Jennifer couldn’t stop her jealousy. “What about Wade? And Cody?”

Angela grunted. “Let’s save that conversation for a different day.”

Jennifer caught a hot flash from Angela’s mind and shivered. “Whatever you say...Boss.”

Angela’s happiness hit Jennifer in a thick wave that reminded her how much she liked pleasing the woman. “Thank you for not giving up on me.”

“It’s my honor. Can I ask you a private question?”

Jennifer swallowed. “Shoot.”

“Are you going to tell Morgan to go away or move in?”

Jennifer’s face turned bright red. “What?”

Angela paused with her hand on the handle of the employee door. People moved by them in the main hallway without knowing they were there. “You heard me.”

Jennifer didn’t want to have this conversation, but she owed Angela everything. “I don’t know.”

“Because you want him around. You like how he makes you feel.”

“Yes.”

“And you also hate him because you know you’ll never want his touch.” Angela regarded her knowingly. “Unless Kyle dies.”

“Does he? Tell me!” Jennifer gritted her teeth and tensed. “I’m sorry.”

Angela finally understood that drama. “Morgan is as close to Kyle as you can get. You knew I would make you take the power back. You’re afraid Kyle will die now and leave you alone.”

“Everyone dies!” Jennifer swallowed a sob. “He’s a killer. You can’t have those in Safe Haven.”

“You became a killer, too, so you’d be thrown out with him.” Angela reached out and wiped away a tear from Jennifer’s cheek. “I can’t promise you anything. The future changes with every choice.”

“If we stay here forever?”

“He’d live, but that won’t happen. You can’t trap him here.”

Jennifer shuddered. “If women took over the world, the men could be enslaved...for their own protection.”

Angela stared, smiling a little.

“What?” Jennifer expected a scold at the very least. When Angela didn’t answer, her low patience broke again. “Say something!”

“I love you like a daughter.” Angela hugged the bloody girl, rubbing her stiff arms. “We’ll also save that conversation for a different day.”

Jennifer savored the affection and buried that terrible thread.

Angela stepped back. “We have a lot of stops to make. When we reach the cafeteria, stay there and let them see you’re okay now.”

“They’ll never trust me again.”

“Nonsense. They trust you right now.”

“What?”

“You’re the hero, Jenny. And you’re going to stand there and let them treat you like one.”

“But it was really you.”

“I don’t view it that way and neither does anyone else.” Angela opened the door and smiled at the surprised people who jumped. “Who’s ready for hot chocolate and cookies?!”

4

The medical area was busy. Their pregnant women and cancer patients were all here getting a checkup to determine how much Jennifer’s new power had healed. Stretchers were being hauled in and supplies were being unpacked as the medical rooms began to fill up.

Angela walked by the front rooms, offering comfort. She paused at Ed’s room. “You ready for a vacation yet?”

Ed laughed. He’d heard her light steps. “I’m good for a bit longer, Boss.”

“I thought he was leaving with Ian and...” Jennifer scowled as she got it. “You were never leaving.”

Ed shrugged, touching the bandage on his skull. “I just follow orders.”

Angela waited as Jennifer went in and used her gift. “Ed was feeding me information on the church group. His entire quitting and leaving act was so he would be trusted by them. I didn’t blow his cover sooner because the people involved wouldn’t have been removed and they needed to be or good people would have started being killed next. Ed will testify at the trials.”

Ed grinned as the pain subsided. “Dace isn’t the only one who wanted to be 007.”

Angela laughed as she headed for the next doorway.

Lisa was in the chair by Dace’s bed, beaming at him.

Dace was glaring at his dead legs, cursing them.

Jack was staring at Lisa, wanting her.

Angela moved on. “That’s another drama we’ll save for later.”

“If you knew Dace was going to remember Lisa, why did you let Jack fall for her?” Jennifer had been aware of that budding romance for days now.

Angela lowered her voice. “Because he’s paralyzed. That’s permanent.”

Jennifer yawned. “I’ll try later after I’ve rested.”

Angela shrugged. “And so will I after the birth, but every vision of the future says it won’t work. She’ll need a whole man from time to time and Jack won’t ever try to take her from Dace or hurt her when she comes to him in those weak moments.”

Jennifer wished they could do more. “This is sad.”

“This is life. People have needs.”

Jennifer didn’t like it. “Jack’s getting screwed.”

“That’s also life.”

“Hell of a way to reward someone.”

“Or to punish them.” Angela didn’t give her time to ask the next logical question. “Morgan?”

Morgan came over with his clipboard and moist eyes from mourning Hannah. “Boss.”

“Kyle and Jennifer were both shot. They need a checkup before the end of the day.”

“I’ll get Terry on it.”

“I want *you* to do it.”

Morgan nodded stiffly. “Okay.”

“Update me on our ill people.”

“They’re all okay now.” Morgan was astounded. “The tumors are shrinking. I’ll be suggesting weekly treatments with Jennifer’s new gift, but it looks like it worked.”

“And Brittani?”

Daryl stuck his head out of their medical room. “Better than she has been since before this all started.” Daryl smiled at Jennifer. “If you ever need anything, let me know.”

Jennifer didn’t like being given credit for Angela’s plan. “Will she need more treatments?”

Morgan nodded. “As the pregnancy progresses, her issues will return, we assume. It’s also possible that the genetic defect was healed. We won’t know for a while.”

Morgan wiped his sore eyes again and waited miserably in case Angela had more questions.

Angela gestured at Jennifer. “Make your choice or I’ll match him up with someone worthy of him.”

Jennifer flushed.

Morgan glared. “Don’t put her on the spot!” He’d chosen not to talk to her because he hadn’t wanted to force her into making a choice that would hurt him forever.

Jennifer concentrated. Power flowed out and healed his injuries. “Move in with us after your shift. You need to be with people who love you.”

Morgan was more than surprised. “Is Kyle okay with it?”

“It was his idea, remember?”

Morgan was too sad to think about right versus wrong. “Have Kyle tell me that and I’ll be there.”

“I will.”

Angela switched topics. “As soon as we talk to Tim and make sure it’s all covered, the bodies can be disposed of. No more autopsies.”

Morgan sighed in relief. “Good.”

“How’s Tonya?”

Morgan gestured toward the rear rooms. “Awake now and pissed at you.”

“Perfect.” Angela waddled that way.

Jennifer followed with a regretful glance at Morgan.

Morgan grunted. He understood she was sorry. So was he, but the thought of living with her and Kyle was already easing the pain in his heart. “I forgive you.”

He turned away before she could reply. There was a lot of work waiting.

Angela entered Tonya’s room, but she didn’t sit. This wasn’t going to take long.

Tonya glared over her happily nursing infant. “You did this. All of it.”

“Yes.”

“Why?!”

Angela studied the beautiful woman. “Have you seen what happens when a cat goes into heat?”

Tonya snorted. “Yes.”

“Have you seen what happens when there are multiple males and only one female?”

She frowned. “No.”

“They fight, of course, but not all the time. They’ll chase that female continuously, hounding her until she finally submits to the biggest one just so the others will leave her alone. They’ll kill her chosen mate, her kittens, and anyone who gets in the way.” Angela’s voice grew colder. “And if she doesn’t submit, they’ll kill her, too, through starvation, neglect, and constant attempts to mate her while she eats, bathes, and even while she shits. Nature is vicious.”

Tonya glared. “You think you protected me.”

“I did. You’re much more valuable than a rapist.”

“He didn’t do that!”

“Yes, he did. He was provoked, but he still did it.”

“So you killed him.”

“I gave him what he asked for.”

“What? Death?!”

“Your love. He was never going to get it any other way.” Angela left while Tonya was speechless.

She stopped in the hall and waited for the next ugly moment that had to be handled.

Debra came out of Ian's room. They'd covered his body and let her say goodbye. Tears rolled over her cheeks.

"Add his name to the memorial."

Jennifer scowled at Angela. "Ed caught him red handed. He was a thief!"

Angela stayed focused on Debra. "Ian made a bad choice. We've all made mistakes. Add his name."

Debra marched off with her fists clenched.

"She's going to have something to say about this."

Angela agreed with Jennifer's observation.

"Morgan!" Tonya's angry voice echoed from her room. "Check me out! I'm going to add Rico's name to the memorial!"

Angela nodded when Morgan looked at her.

Jennifer made another connection. "You did it for Marc so he would have proof that not all Reichers are evil."

"Rico wasn't." Angela wanted that clear to everyone. "He even reported Nature's recruiting attempts like so many of the others did. He saw this camp as his second chance for one awful past decision."

Jennifer didn't buy that public line for a minute; she also didn't argue. Angela trusted her. Jennifer didn't want that to ever change.

"It won't. You and I will always be shoulder to shoulder to face any enemies who would harm our people." Angela pointed Jennifer toward the lobby,

where more patients were coming in. “Make sure you’ve gotten them all and then we’ll go to the brig and interrogate two traitors.”

Jennifer went, wondering if the two men would be executed or banished. There was no way they would be allowed to stay.

Angela walked around the rear area and stopped.

Terry saw her. He assumed she wanted a private word and opened the door to an empty room.

Angela used an angry tone. “I only have one thing to say to you!”

Terry braced while people moving through the busy medical area paused to listen. He wasn’t sure what he’d done.

Angela smiled. “Whenever you’re ready to be one of us, let me know and we’ll schedule it. You’ve more than earned it.”

Terry’s happiness broke through the mental lock. His demon popped into place in a fiery shield that covered him in dense protection.

How may I serve you, Master?

Angela grinned. “You’ve always been one of us. You just needed a little push to see it.”

Terry tried not to cry in front of everyone and failed. “Thank you, Boss!”

“You did the work. All I did was shove you into the light.” She connected him to their hive and left him standing there listening to the congratulations and welcome from his new family.

On the way out, Angela stopped in the hallway. Her stomach was hurting again. “Sadie and I have the same problem.”

Jennifer came up behind Angela and put a hand on her shoulder. Green magic flowed between them, healing the hole in her stomach in seconds.

Angela sighed in relief. “Awesome.”

Jennifer snorted. “Ulcers are easy. Give me something harder.”

Angela headed toward the brig while sending calm vibes toward everyone around them. “All in good time.”

Chapter Thirty-Seven
It's Her Job

1

“Kenn’s already in there.”

Angela nodded as she and Jennifer neared the brig entrance. “We’ll listen and let him work.”

The women paused outside as people moved by them in the hallway.

Kenn’s voice was emotionless. “Start from the beginning now that I have the tape recorder on. Tell me your name, what you do in this camp, and go from there.”

Tim’s voice was low and full of regret. “My name is Tim. I used to be the preacher, but I’m sure that life is over for me now.”

He’s right about that. Jennifer didn’t know what Angela had planned for the church group, but Tim definitely wouldn’t be leading them.

“Corey and Martin were friends of mine. I barely knew Curtis and Amos, or the other one. I think his name was Dave. They were refugees who jumped ship before we arrived. Everyone thought they were dead.”

“And you hid them.”

“They begged for sanctuary!” Tim stopped yelling at Kenn’s scowl. “They were terrified that Angela would banish them.”

“How did you keep the church members from finding out?”

“All I had to do was put them off about living in the little bunkhouse. I told them Jennifer said no.”

“Did she?”

“I never asked her.”

Kenn grunted. “Go on.”

“At first, we were just waiting for you guys to get home so I could talk to Angela about it. I knew better than to mention it to Jennifer.”

“She would have fried you on the spot.”

“Yes. I hoped Angela would be more forgiving.”

“So how did that turn into murder?”

“I really don’t know! They were talking about doing something Angela would like, something that would get her to let them back in, but they never told me what it was. I assumed they would help the camp.”

“How?”

Tim’s voice dropped to a mutter. “We have too much action. I was hoping they would save a life, not take one.”

“They took four.”

“Four?”

“Pam, Dari, Megan, and Ian.”

“Ian’s dead?”

“Yes.” Kenn knew why Ian had really been killed; he wasn’t allowed to say it. *Ian knew I*

planned Peter's death. Angela removed him so no one else would find out. I owe her more than I can ever repay.

“Oh, my God. I'm so sorry!”

“Yes, you are.” Kenn didn't mention the blood smears that had led from Ian's medical room to the ballroom. Everyone assumed Martin had finished him off and then joined the fight against Angela because he'd realized she was weak enough to challenge for control of the camp. “Go on.”

“I don't know what else to say. I hid them under the little bunkhouse or in the rear room of the church when the congregation was around.”

Kenn wrote it in his book and then continued. “The tunnel we found you in connects to the church?”

“Yes, to my private room. The hatches are under the rugs.”

Kenn didn't ask why the preacher had felt the need to have an escape plan. After his time in Reicher's lab, he didn't need to. “Why did they target women until the end?”

Tim was horrified that it had come to this. “I think it's because Ed and I were complaining about those people being drunks, cruel, or easy. I don't know why they killed Ian.”

“We found Ian's watch with Martin's body. We believe they were going to steal the supplies Ian had stashed.”

“I'm sorry.”

“Yep.” Kenn regarded the other prisoner. “What did you know about all of this?”

Ralph began begging for mercy.

Tim tried to cover for him. “Ralph shouldn’t be here. I don’t know why he confessed.”

“Yes, I should! I knew they were there. I helped hide them and I stole supplies to feed them!”

“Thank you for being honest, Ralph. Tim, you’re in deep shit.”

Angela moved away from the door as Kenn berated Tim for lying during an interrogation.

Jennifer followed. “It’s sad that so many of us gave in to Nature.”

Angela nodded. “I agree, though Tobias didn’t really need to be pushed. He cracked a long time ago. He just covered it well.”

“I think he was really trying to change.”

“Why?” Angela was curious if she’d missed something.

“Anna went in for a medical appointment, alone.” Jennifer had read the reports. “I think the charm he put on his wives was weak because he was trying to go good here and he knew he had to free them for it to work. His obsession with Tonya just messed him up.”

“He really was able to capture them.” Angela frowned. “That means we can use magic to control each other.”

“Yes.” It wasn’t something they’d known until recently. Jennifer scanned the passageway as they traversed it, watching for new problems. “I don’t

understand why he did it at all. Or why they allowed it. We didn't find any memories of him kidnapping them."

"I pulled some of that answer from his mind after you yanked his power. Tobias's wives were being hunted when they met. He offered to be their owner so they would have protection, but he refused to free them later when they wanted it. I assume Adrian broke the spell over Anna, but Daniella was too afraid of men to let him get close enough to do that."

"I have a surprise for you." Jennifer gestured back toward the medical bay. "When Anna came in, it was for a pregnancy test."

Angela's eyes flamed at the reminder that Adrian had broken the rules yet again.

Jennifer quickly shook her head. "Adrian isn't the father. Harry is."

Angela blinked. "That is a surprise."

"I thought so, too. Harry actually unlocked her. When she found out Harry died, she asked Adrian for protection from Tobias."

Angela chuckled. "Piper can stop making plans to kill them both." *So can I.*

Jennifer wasn't so sure about that. "Adrian means to keep caring for both of Tobias's wives. He feels bad that he didn't see it sooner and help them."

"Piper will understand, I think."

"Will you be apologizing for having Tonya punch him in the mouth?"

Angela's lips thinned. "Absolutely not."

Jennifer chuckled. “Another small payment on his debt?”

“Yes, but I will change my plans a little. He doesn’t deserve that much pain.”

“Good. We almost have the jealousy issues sorted out in this camp. We need to keep it that way.”

“Start with yourself and work your way up.”

Jennifer grunted. “I’ll try.” She was still concerned about Angela making moves on Kyle.

Angela let the girl believe she had something to worry about. *Absence doesn’t make the heart grow fonder. It’s the thought of losing it all that brings us to that. We have to be smart enough not to push ourselves over the edge.*

Jennifer thought about the stories of Angela letting Cody push her off a cliff and burst out laughing.

2

Loud cheers echoed as Angela and Jennifer entered the cafeteria. People came over to shake their hands, hug them, and express their gratitude.

Jennifer was surprised to be included. It made her feel even worse for not being nicer.

Angela made it to her center table and sat, groaning in relief as her ankles stopped aching. Even magic couldn’t stop the normal pains of pregnancy.

Camp members formed a line in front of her table, eager to get something they wanted or needed.

Piper was first in line. She grinned at Angela. “Ready?”

Angela laughed. “No, but ask anyway.”

“Please clear Adrian fully. The Eagles have lifted his conditional banishment.”

“I assumed Adrian already told you he isn’t having an affair with Anna.”

“I figured it out on my own.” Piper was proud of herself for that. “I saw Anna and Harry having a private conversation before he left on that run. She was scared. And Sadie was all over Adrian then. He didn’t have time for an affair.”

“Very good.”

Piper loved how that felt. “Please? He deserves a second chance.”

“He’s had that and failed.”

“We all make mistakes, Boss.”

Angela denied that. “I wish I could, really. But a few days of helping the camp isn’t enough.”

Several people in line protested. Most of the camp wanted him cleared now.

Angela shook her head. “No.”

Piper tried another idea. “What will it take?”

Angela had been waiting for that question. “If he can go two months without breaking a single rule, I’ll consider it.”

“Normals rules or magic rules?”

“Both.” Angela carefully turned her notebook to let Piper read a small part of the page.

Report to the next law council meeting. You'll be notified of the time and place. Think of something else right now!

Piper's happiness shut off abruptly and turned to disappointment to mask her joy.

Angela waved the woman off. "Let me work."

Piper rose. "He can do it. I know he can."

Angela didn't answer. "Next?"

Parker sat down across from Angela.

Angela smiled at him. "What can I do for you today?"

"Nothing."

"What?"

"I don't want a reward for telling you about Ralph and Tim. I just wanted to say thank you for recognizing my worth. If you need me again, call me and I'm yours."

That was a nice change. Angela was encouraged. "When you're ready for more, Parker, you have a favor to call in."

"I won't need it."

"Never assume that in this camp. Next?"

Parker got up, frowning.

People crowded forward.

"Can I ask for something from the enforcer?"

"Yeah, me, too."

Jennifer was surprised again.

Angela waved at the girl to join her. "We'll both cover it. How's that?"

Another cheer echoed.

"Can you get Biff to stay? We need him here."

“Hey! I was going to ask for that.”

Over in the corner, Marc and Adrian both recognized the difference this time. There weren't as many people asking for greedy things. Angela was slowly getting them to use these moments for the greater good.

Adrian studied Marc. “You're calmer now, more at peace.”

Marc yawned. “I figured out what makes me happy.”

“What's that?”

“I stayed busy this time and didn't have a single issue.”

“You also avoided her.”

“True, but it's still progress.”

“Explain that.”

“She did all of this. She arranged it in that scary brain of hers.” Marc's voice lowered. “It's another glaring example of how different she is from the girl I grew up with.”

“If it had been a man, would you still be upset?”

“I'm not upset because I kept busy with a special project.”

Adrian guessed. “Charlie's baby?”

“Along with helping Jayda prep for her trip.”

Marc shrugged. “I had some other things, too.”

Adrian stared at Marc, using the team hive to see what he meant. After a minute, he grinned. “You knew about all of it.”

Marc nodded. “And still managed to stay out of her way and let her work.”

Adrian was surprised that Marc wasn’t upset about Rico.

“I am, a little.” Marc lifted his mug of chocolate to Adrian. “But I have you to fill the void. I’m good.”

Adrian beamed. “Yes, you are.”

Good vibes were filling their camp once again. Both men enjoyed it.

So did Somchai as he came over to their table. He was almost ready to join in the real Safe Haven now that he’d gotten to observe Angela in action a few times. “She did a masterful job of handling so many issues at once.”

Marc nodded. “She got used to it all hitting at the same time. If it ever hits singularly, we’re all screwed.”

Somchai laughed.

Marc gestured toward the empty chair with his damaged cast. “Join us if you like. We’re only a little dangerous.”

Somchai snorted. “I’d be a fool to believe that and I’m not a fool.”

“Good. We have enough of those already.” Adrian stood up. “I have some work to do. Excuse me.”

Marc watched him go, then turned to Somchai. “Problems between you two?”

Somchai shrugged. “He’s a Mitchel. They have issues with everyone.”

“Fair enough.” Marc didn’t ask again. He was certain he would find out in time.

Adrian went to the counter and stepped in front of Stanley, who was holding a tray of mugs while talking to Isabel. Isabel was sitting on a stool and basking in being alive and here. People were talking to her and welcoming her like a hero now. It was nice.

“Let me take that for you.” The boy had been standing there so long that the hot chocolate wasn’t going to be hot anymore.

Stanley glared at him. “I’ve got it!” He jerked his arm and sent the entire tray flying.

Mugs and chocolate flew toward the center table, hitting Angela in the back and splashing Jennifer.

“Oh!”

“What the hell?!”

Stanley flushed. “Sorry!”

Isabel chuckled. “Oi. Now, I get it.”

Angela stood up, turning around.

Stanley prepared to flee. “Sorry! I’m sorry!”

Angela marched toward him. She stopped a foot away and held up a hand. “You will not be a hot head or a klutz anymore or so help me the next time this happens I will have Morgan spank you like a child!”

Stanley’s mouth opened and shut as he tried to think of something to say.

Angela headed for the exit. “Therapy session in one hour for everyone on both teams. Meet me in the pool room.”

Stanley hurried after her. “I’m sorry!”

Angela waved him off angrily, splattering hot chocolate on the floor. “No more, Stanley. Control yourself!”

Stanley wouldn’t have taken the correction from anyone else. From Angela it hurt. He lowered his voice. “I’ll do better.”

“Good. Start with apologizing to our enforcer for being an asshole.”

Stanley bristled. “I’m not an asshole!”

“Then why are you acting like one?”

Stanley didn’t know what to say. A tear rolled from his eye.

Angela didn’t have any sympathy.

Jennifer did, surprising people. “It’s okay. Just don’t do it again, okay?”

Stanley nodded quickly. “I won’t. I’m sorry.”

Jennifer motioned toward Isabel. “Stick close to her and she’ll finish your upbringing.”

People burst out laughing, including Isabel.

Stanley smiled. “Deal.”

Angela left.

Adrian followed her.

Marc nodded in satisfaction.

He wasn’t jealous right now; he was recognizing a future here that he could tolerate and it had come from his uncle. *But I’m glad you’re gone, Rico. At some point, you would have shown*

your true colors and crushed us all. This way, I'm allowed to love you and accept that family bond.

Marc swept the cleaned up, content people now waiting for the rain to stop so they could return to town. He spotted one person sitting alone with a pensive expression. Marc narrowed in, wondering why Greg felt anxious, but he didn't use the team hive connection. He didn't want the one-eyed man to know he was snooping. He observed subtly as Erin entered the cafeteria carrying that same feeling of nervousness.

3

Erin joined Greg at the table by the counter. She'd felt his need as she did rounds to make sure Eagles were now covering all of the guard posts. Ian's death was bothering the medics and the guards. *It was a mistake to leave the medical bay unguarded.*

Greg eyed her bruised face and hands. *I'm not sure it was a mistake.*

She stared at Greg. *You know.*

Greg nodded. *I want to talk to you about the future.*

Erin had been expecting this. *I'm all ears.*

You may not be safe here. Everyone else from the jail talk is dead or gone.

Erin had already noticed it. She and Greg were the last ones who knew Tonya's secret. She delivered her prepared speech, very aware of

powerful people listening to them even though Greg wasn't. "I'm not the least bit worried. Angela knows I'm one of the good guys. Plus, she wants you to be happy. She knows I'll love you with all my heart and carry myself with honor in all that I do."

Greg gave the expected grin. "Stop boasting."

Erin's mirth stalled. She glared toward the exit. "All she has to do is stay away from you. I'm very jealous. That's my dark side."

Greg still followed through. "The trip to go get Jayda's family will be rescheduled. I'm thinking it should be in about a month. Do you want to go with me?"

Erin wasn't a fool either. The need to get away from this island and these people was strong. "I'd love to!"

Marc was satisfied with that. All of the possible rivals for Angela's affection would be gone by the time she recovered from the birth, except for the man now trailing her to provide protection.

Out of all the males who had shown an interest, she'd only responded to Adrian. Marc had noted that when he'd created the plan to get rid of Ivan. *I can't share her when I'm here, but what she does when I'm out and about will be her business. This way, we both get to be happy.*

Marc's demon was shocked. *What's happened to you? The Marc I know would never have accepted defeat.*

It isn't defeat. Marc's eyes darkened as his time in the lab flashed in brutal, relentless waves. *It's survival.*

4

Angela entered her cabin and found Debra standing there. She shut the door and turned on the light.

Adrian opened the door back up and stood there. It was clear that Debra was upset.

Why?!

Angela didn't hold anything back. "Because he was going to take you away, deaf and pregnant, and leave you out there. Ian never finished anything he started! You and your child would have died out in the wilderness and there was only one way I could stop it."

Debra was shocked but also drawn. *I'm pregnant?*

"Your child will be normal, in every way."

Debra wasn't okay with that trade off. *You killed him!*

"Yes. Name your price."

Debra glanced toward the hallway, where Theo was coming out of his cabin. *I was happy then.*

Angela sighed. "Can I recommend someone more suited to you?"

No. I want him!

"I'll see what I can do."

Debra made a guttural noise that blended perfectly with her sneer. *Don't give me that shit. You make everything happen now. You're a master chess player who could beat any of the angels from the Weigh Station. You're beyond byzan, so just give me what I want!*

“It may not be what’s best for you.”

Debra didn’t care. *I took a bullet for you in the mountain. You owe me!*

“Fine.”

Debra stomped out, pushing Adrian aside.

Angela smirked.

Adrian stared. “That’s who you wanted her with all along.”

“Of course. Now they both get to be parents, Ian’s DNA is still alive, and Debra will stay here where she’s safe and loved. It all worked out for the best.”

Adrian frowned. “Not for Ian.”

“We can’t all win.” Angela motioned. “Kenn’s had enough time to get the information now. Go tell Samantha all the charges against her current client have been dropped. Then tell her she has two repeat clients in the brig.”

Adrian went to do what she wanted.

Conner came from his cabin and fell in step with his dad. He could feel Adrian’s mind lingering on Angela. “Will you ever let her go?”

“No. But I can control my behavior and have another shot in the future.”

Conner blew out a sound of disappointment. “You never learn. I wish Alexa was here. She always brought out the best in you.”

“You’ll get your wish in two and a half years.”

Conner looked back. Angela was in the doorway, staring at them.

Conner stopped as Adrian kept going.

Have you made the choice?

Conner immediately nodded. *I love her more than my magic. Lock me down so I can’t ever hurt her. I don’t want to be like my dad.*

Angela smiled. “You just passed the final test. As soon as she recovers, you can get married.”

Conner didn’t celebrate. “Will she recover?” Jennifer’s power was amazing, but that didn’t mean it would heal everything.

“She will now.”

Conner heard the pointed note in her voice. “You did all of this for me and Candy.”

“Of course not.”

Conner grinned. “Welcome home, Boss. Please don’t ever leave again.”

Angela shuddered. “The next time I step foot off this island, Nature will try to kill me herself with a direct attack. She isn’t going to wait for the final battle. Bret was absolutely right about that. But I’ll take her down with me if that happens.”

Conner froze. “Is that our future?” He couldn’t imagine being without Angela now.

Angela went into her cabin and shut the door without answering.

Conner hurried after Adrian to fill him in. *If anyone can save her, it's my dad.*

5

“Why is it okay for her to do those things, but we have to be punished for it?”

“She’s the alpha. It’s her job.” Neil snuggled closer to Samantha. They were in their old bed on the ship, enjoying a few minutes alone on top of the dusty blankets while Wade and the den mothers cared for the kids.

Samantha was feeling more like herself now. She raised up on one elbow to stare at him.

Neil kissed her softly, then put his head back down. “What’s on your mind?”

“Does she know how much we see now?”

Neil nodded. “I’m almost sure.”

Samantha drew on her growing courage. “Maybe we should leave for a while.”

Neil’s eyes opened. “Is that what you want?”

“No.” Samantha shuddered. “I don’t ever want to leave our island.”

“Then we won’t. But my punishment will come. She’s not going to let it go.”

“Maybe if you work hard and do everything she wants...”

Neil shook his head. “Those things won’t hurt, but it won’t stop it.”

“I could make myself leave.”

“We’re staying. I’ll face what I’ve earned and hope she lets me live.” Neil kissed her again.

Samantha felt fear, but she controlled it this time and kissed him back.

Neil groaned. *I’ve missed you!*

Samantha hugged him tightly. *I’m scared for you!*

After what she’d gone through, Neil had no doubt his payment would be twice as bad. “We’ll deal with it when it happens. For now, we’re here together and you’re recovering finally. It’s enough.”

“I’m sorry.”

“I’m scared of her, too.” Neil knew Samantha needed to hear that so she didn’t feel alone. “A lot of people are. We aren’t the only ones.”

Samantha nodded. “Jennifer has no idea how close she came to death.”

“She’ll figure it out and start making amends. Everyone does.”

“Why do we tolerate this feeling?”

Neil sighed deeply. “Because we’re going to rule the world at her side. Our kids will be loved and protected. The normals will support us in everything we want to do and change. We allow it because she’s the alpha and she loves us enough to punish us when we screw up.”

Samantha rested her cheek on his chest. “I don’t like this feeling, this fear.”

“Same, but we should have thought about that before we did it.”

Samantha chuckled. “Yeah.” She ran her hand up his chest, trying to find more of the courage that had reappeared with the boss. “Love me?”

Neil’s body hardened instantly. He reluctantly denied her. “We don’t have time. And I want to take my time!”

Samantha laughed. Neil had been more than patient with her while she recovered.

Neil kissed her head. “You’re still recovering, Samantha. A few moments of courage don’t mean it’s over for you. Don’t get upset when it hits you again and again. We’ll work through it.”

“How do you know it will return?”

“I’ve been watching the mission men. Just when I think one of them is fine, they prove me wrong with a breakdown or a nightmare. Recovery takes time.”

They both paused, catching thoughts of the guards.

Samantha got out of the bed. “They’re on the way to get me. Tim and Ralph need a lawyer.”

Neil watched her smooth her hair and clothes. “You don’t have to be the camp lawyer if you don’t like it.”

Samantha’s eyes lit up. “I love it! I just wish the people I got to defend were innocent.”

Neil put that on his mental list of things to talk to Angela about. “Do you want me to come with you?”

“Yes!” Samantha was better now, but she still hated being alone. “Can we get Wade, too? And

Amy? And the boys? You guys can hang at the park around the corner while I handle their cases and then we'll spend the day together after Wade's therapy session."

Neil rose from the bed, grinning. "Your wish is my command."

Samantha scoffed. "He's already on the way with them, right?"

Neil opened the cabin door right as Wade lifted a hand to knock. "You could say that."

Amy ran in and hugged Samantha. The boys in the stroller gurgled at her.

Samantha wiped away tears. "I know I'm not supposed to be happy about our life after war, but I am. I hope it never changes."

Wade kissed her cheek and kept his thoughts to himself as they all walked toward the brig. *Everything changes. That's the only thing that doesn't.*

Chapter Thirty-Eight

Close

1

“**Y**ou’re late.” Bret was surprised.

“I have a few more things to handle before I go in.” Angela was standing just down the hallway from the pool room, where the mission men, the rescue team, and a few other chosen souls were gathered for the therapy session. The sounds of their chatter and chuckles floated out, soothing her.

Kenn came down the hall with Tonya under his arm. They weren’t talking or smiling. Tonya’s puffy face told Angela what she’d been doing.

Angela pointed at the door. “Go in and pick a seat.”

Tonya glared, but she did it. She didn’t know why Angela was insisting on her attending this session. *Rico was just a friend. I don’t think I’m that upset.*

Angela waited until Tonya was inside. Then she regarded Kenn. He was tired and still wearing bloody clothes. He hadn’t had time to get cleaned up yet. Several people in the pool room were in the same state.

Kenn’s blackened eyes lit up. “Name it and it’s yours.”

“I didn’t do it for you.”

“I don’t care. Anything you want, you’ll get.”

Angela grunted. “Just remember what I told you before you left. You’ve seen it now and you know she liked it. Treat her the same way, but be patient. When she’s ready to talk about him, be calm and act like jealousy isn’t eating you up.”

Kenn asked something he was terrified of. “What happens when I have to leave on another run?”

“She’ll go with you. Stay close to her and keep earning the life you need.”

Kenn slowly leaned in and kissed Angela’s cheek. Then he went into the pool room.

Angela controlled her rage at him being so close. She turned to face the woman hurrying toward her from an opposite hallway. “Hello, Samantha.”

Dressed in her normal slacks and sweater, she finally looked like the Samantha they all knew and loved.

Samantha didn’t waste time. “Is there anything I can do or say?”

Angela knew what she meant. “No.”

“He’s not the same person now!”

Angela sighed. “I’ll give Neil the same deal I gave to Adrian. If he can go two months without screwing up, I’ll consider it.”

Samantha had to be happy with that. “He can do it. I believe in him.”

“I don’t.” Angela pointed. “Go on in and sit with Wade.”

Samantha frowned. “Why me?”

“Because recovery takes time.”

Samantha sighed. “Whatever.” She went into the pool room.

An ugly vibe came down the hallway.

Bret brought up his shield over all four of them. Cate and Cody did the same.

Zack appeared at the end of the passage. His face was red from crying; his walk was painful to watch. His broken wrist was swollen and purple, but he hadn’t gone to the medics for it yet. He was carrying a burn box in hands still stained with Allison’s blood.

Bret lowered the shield and stepped aside with Cate and Cody.

Angela took Allison’s burn box when he held it out. “Add her name to the memorial.”

Zack shook his head, voice breaking. He was stunned by what Allison had done. “Only heroes go on there.”

“No, our loved ones do. We all loved Allison. She just panicked and made a bad choice. We’ve all done that before. Add her name. She belongs there.”

Zack’s eyes filled with more tears.

Angela motioned toward the pool room. “Let your team help you through this.”

Zack didn’t shout at her or demand to know why she’d let Allison die. He stared at her in misery.

“Yes, it’s wrong for us to be relieved that she’s gone.” Angela smiled sadly. “We’re human, Zack. It’s also natural for us to be glad when problems are removed. We’ll try hard to remember the woman she used to be and not who she became.”

Zack walked sadly into the pool room without saying anything else.

Angela waited a moment, listening to everyone in there try to offer Zack comfort. Then she opened Allison’s burn box.

“A picture.” Angela lifted it, recognizing the moment. It was a picture of Allison and Zack at Jennifer’s wedding. They hadn’t been dating then. They’d been chicken dancing at the reception when Shawn snapped the picture.

Angela dumped the box into the garbage can and handed the picture to Cate. “We’re making a new memorial. Collect pictures and create a wall of photos. Make sure that one goes right in the center.”

Cate carefully tucked the image into her Eagle jacket pocket.

“We’ll laminate them, too, so we don’t lose them if there’s another flood.” Angela handed Bret a sheet of paper from her notebook. “I want both memorials moved into the church. Parker will figure out the best place and way to do it. Go talk to him.”

Bret was happy to be given another job. He smiled at Cate, also glad that they would get to work together on the project.

Angela gave the thin boy a stern warning. “Don’t lie. Never ever lie.”

Bret flushed. *She knows!*

“I know everything, Bret. Lying about your sexuality won’t help you.”

“Daddy likes Bret.”

Angela nodded at Cate. “For now. When you two are older, that might change. Teach Bret to be like us and not like Adrian if you want to keep him.”

Cate took Bret’s hand. “Come on. We have to work a lot. That earns respect in this camp more than anything else.”

Cody stared after them.

Angela tugged the boy close and gave him the hug he needed. “Don’t think about it. That’s years away.”

Cody swallowed the pain of knowing the future. He hugged Angela and pretended the war had never happened.

Angela couldn’t do that. She still preferred this life to that one. She turned her ears toward the pool room and listened contentedly.

2

“I can’t believe she picked the pool room to have a therapy session.” Jayda wasn’t in a good mood. “It’s just cruel.” She could feel how the mission men hated the water. Even a swimming pool was an ugly reminder for most of them.

“And she isn’t even here. She’s late!” Biff was tired of all the death and violence. He was still

wearing his stained clothes, though he wasn't sure if the blood had come from Hannah or Allison.

"It doesn't matter. All we do is go around the room and talk about how we're feeling anyway. It doesn't change anything." Trent tried not to think about the last nightmare he'd had where he'd been underwater and in the fog at the same time. "Some of us are scared to ever leave here again and the rest of us can't wait to go."

"Not me. I'm staying right here with my son and my fiancé." Kenn leaned back in the deck chair, groaning. He'd been on his feet for a long time and he still hadn't recovered from the beating he'd taken during the matchups. "When she wants a vacation from me, then I'll take a new run." *Or ask her to come along.*

"Same." Marc grinned at the surprised people. "What? I'm gonna be a daddy!"

Laughter flowed through the room. Marc's attitude change was a welcome surprise.

"We're taking the next run. We'll be back before the births, though." Greg put an arm around Erin. "I want to conquer my fear so I don't have to resign." The action hadn't cleared things up for him. He needed more of it to make a final choice.

Marc knew why Greg was really choosing to leave, but he didn't call the man on it. He was almost sure Angela would before it was time for them to leave. "We're all clear of the rage illness, but half of the camp isn't. I believe that's going to be a priority." Marc regarded Jayda. "Your run

might have to wait or she might combine the trips. It's hard to say."

"It doesn't matter." Jayda had stayed with the cooks and missed all of the action. It was disappointing and confusing. After the sub run, she should have been happy to get a break.

"You're an Eagle."

Jayda frowned at Marc. "What does that mean?"

"You need the thrill, and the rewards, to feel alive."

"Then why am I so scared?" Jayda shrugged tiredly. "It might be for the best if we wait. I don't feel strong enough to lead that trip."

"If you're ill, Jennifer might be able to help." Trent still cared about Jayda's happiness and health.

"I'm just tired and a little down." Jayda fought a sob. "Biff and I broke up. I miss Ivan, too, and I'm scared of another trip out of here. I need some more time to adjust."

Everyone understood.

"I'm glad you said that, because I'm not going either." Gus smiled. "Bernice wants me!"

More laughs and teasing flowed over the clean water.

"You stole my woman!" Theo grinned to show he was joking. He was ready to get back to work now, but the lonely part of his heart hoped Bernice and Gus didn't work out so he would get another chance with her.

"I'm staying, too." Biff shrugged at the questioning glances. "We're able to do what we love

now and we're not hurting anyone. Once the rain stops, I'll probably be happy here. As long as it never storms again."

Angela had sent the brawlers to town to check on the buildings and let the animals out. Biff hoped the flood waters had gone down by the time the camp went back. He was sick of the rain. Just smelling the pool water was making his stomach turn.

"Well, I'm leaving!" Molly's shout echoed. She lowered her voice. "I have to."

Wade pinned her with a sharp glance. "Because you tried to kill Monica."

Molly froze. Her mind tried to find an excuse that everyone would believe.

Wade shook his head. "We were there, remember? We saw it as it happened."

Molly swallowed her terror. "Jennifer's going to punish me for it. She found out!"

"You've forgotten something important." Wade let her off the hook. "Those matches have no rules. You've been scared for nothing."

"But you are off the council." Jennifer stepped by Angela and entered the pool room without letting anyone know the boss was listening. "You didn't come clean and you tried to hide it. You'd rather leave than face a punishment. Council members don't act like that."

Molly hung her head, disappointed in herself. "I'm sorry."

Jennifer shrugged. “So am I. I plan to ask the boss to let you have another chance. Monica cheated on you, with the boss’s son. I’d say the odds are in your favor.”

Molly realized she had blown team lead, too.

Jennifer lifted a brow. “Would you rather run?”

Molly refused to lie. “It would almost be easier to start over somewhere else.”

“You have that option, but I’ll be disappointed if you take it.” Jennifer shrugged in shared embarrassment that everyone felt through the hive connection. “I screwed up, too, a lot. I thought we could get through it together.”

Molly smiled through the sudden tears. “That would be great.”

Jennifer sat next to Kyle, frowning at the filthy cast he was still wearing. There was no need for it now. Broken bones were no longer a limit. “The boss told me to join these sessions from now on so I can determine where I went wrong in handling people.”

Kyle smiled at her. “Awesome.”

Jennifer didn’t understand. “Why is that awesome?”

“Because I don’t have gifts now and I think someone peed in the pool. I want to know who it was!”

More laughter rolled out the door and hit the woman listening to them. It was a great feeling.

Jennifer didn’t send apologies through the hive for attacking the team, but she noted the thoughts of

all the people around her so she could help them later. *Especially Zack.* Jennifer felt awful that she hadn't woken in time to save Allison.

Kyle felt her sadness. He put an arm around her and tried to be happy that she wasn't in trouble. *But I am starting to miss the power a little.*

Jennifer hugged him, but she didn't even consider breaking the new rule. The thought of crossing Angela was horrifying. *I won't ever do that again. She's the alpha.*

3

Angela held the door open for the next patients coming down the hall.

Dog padded in and went straight to Marc. *I can't take it anymore!*

The Retriever and the cats followed him in, meowing and sniffing.

Marc rubbed the wolf's soft fur. "I assume you mean the cats."

They never shut up!

The Retriever cringed as a cat leapt onto his back as soon as he stopped. *No more poking!*

Duke shook the cat off before it got a hold on his fur. *It hurts! Do you like it?!*

Duke began licking and pawing the bunker cat. *Must clean! Must clean!*

The cat hissed. *Stop!*

Duke licked harder, slobbering all over the feline. *Must clean!*

Buster darted away. *The slime! Oh, the slime!*
Duke chased the cat around the pool. *See how it feels!*

The cat hissed again, arching up.
Duke bumped into it, knocking it into the pool.
The wet monster! Help!

Laughter burst out of the mission men.
Dog ran to the pool. *I'll save you!*

He dove in and came up under the cat.

Buster clung to the wolf, still arched and spitting. *We kill! Damn the dogs!*

Duke hurried over to Adrian and crouched by his boots. *Hide me!*

Adrian chuckled. "Sorry, Duke. Those are Tonya's babies. We don't mess with them."

Tonya snickered. "Buster needed a bath."

Dog jumped out of the pool and carried the cat over to Tonya.

Tonya grabbed it by the neck scruff and held it up. Water ran from the angry feline in small streams. "Be nicer to the other animals. No more poking."

Buster meowed innocently.

Tonya snorted. "Sure you were." She put the cat on the chair by her leg. "Take a nap. You can get even later."

Duke whimpered.

Dog came over to Marc and put a paw on his knee. *When do we leave?*

Marc laughed. "It's just a cat."

Dog whined. *It's a demon trapped in a cat's body.* He licked Marc's hand. *More are coming!*

Marc grinned. "You're outnumbered."

The kitten leapt onto Dog's wet back and began rubbing on him, trying to dry him off.

Dog laid down and grunted as the cat began to purr. *It's worth the pain.*

Marc nodded. "I feel the same way."

Adrian had been observing Marc again. "You know what's coming next."

"Some of it."

"Can you tell me?"

"No."

Adrian rubbed Duke's matted fur. All the animals were dirty from being in the barn. He was sure Madison would handle it. "How about a hint?"

Marc shrugged. "I find it odd that she gave you and Neil both a two-month window to screw up. Don't you?"

People turned toward them, listening intently.

"What's odd about it?"

"What else will happen within two months?"

Adrian's eyes widened. "All the births!"

Marc stared coldly. "You're on the verge of getting what you want the most, after my wife. All you have to do is walk the line."

Adrian smothered his joy. He knew Marc didn't want to feel that. "I can do it."

"You couldn't before."

"It's different now."

Marc shrugged. "Either way, I'll be here to watch you pass or fail. I wouldn't miss this for anything."

Adrian scowled. “You believe I’ll fail.”

“Actually, I hope you can do it.”

Adrian wasn’t sure if Marc meant that. “What happens if I do?”

“I’ll vote for your banishment to be lifted.”

Marc’s voice hardened. “But I don’t think I’ll have to. You’ll screw it up.”

Adrian sighed. “Neil won’t.”

Marc gestured with his broken cast. “I believe that. He’s not a Mitchel.”

“What’s going to happen to Tim and Ralph?”

Samantha’s quiet question brought silence for a minute as people considered that and refused to answer. It also broke the tension between Marc and Adrian before it could really get going.

Jennifer gave her the truth. “Ralph will probably be banished. Tim’s going to be executed publicly as an example to everyone else.”

Men winced.

Women nodded in approval.

It was a huge change from the past. Samantha noticed it. “What’s happening to us?”

“We’re changing.” Wade rubbed Samantha’s hand. “The war triggered evolutions and advancements that no one could have foreseen.”

“I don’t understand why Corey and Martin didn’t just ask to join us again.” Ray was disappointed in them in several ways. “Angela would have made them pay a price, but she wouldn’t have turned them away.”

Kenn shook his head. “They went bad while they were gone. Tim believes they killed the other refugees in the lifeboat with them because they were running out of supplies.”

“Then why did he help them?!” Jayda was furious about that.

Kenn grunted. “He said sanctuary has to be given to anyone who asks for it, no matter their crime.”

“The law council will make them change that.” Gus was sure several changes would be demanded of the church group.

Isabel had been picking at her filthy cast while stewing on the intruders. She enjoyed being a hero again, but the mental games in this camp were hard to keep up with. “Did they really believe Angela would let them in because they killed for her?”

Snorts echoed throughout the pool room.

Isabel was aware that killing for the boss was what almost everyone here did as a career. “I mean without permission.”

“They had the rage illness.” Tonya had already tested that. “If we don’t figure out how to copy the vaccine, we can expect a lot more of it.”

“Angela has plans in place.” Marc didn’t tell Tonya she would be at the center of those plans. The redhead would figure it out soon enough. For now, Marc smiled at her. It was the first time he’d ever felt a bond with Tonya. “Did you add his name?”

Tonya nodded, now remembering Rico had family here. “I’m sorry for your loss.”

“And I, yours.”

“He was fond of you.”

Marc grinned. “I think fond is an understatement when it comes to you.”

Tonya scowled. “He was obsessed with me, like Tobias. I couldn’t shake them!”

“So you don’t miss him?”

Tonya shuddered. “So much it feels like I may vomit.”

Marc chuckled. “We finally have something in common.”

Tonya groaned. “She’s so mean!”

“Yep.”

Molly frowned. “This is an odd therapy session.”

Biff puffed out his chest. “Not the way we do it.”

Molly snickered despite her heavy heart. “Fair enough.”

Thomas was sitting on the edge of the pool, letting his scarred legs rest in the water while keeping his dirty cast dry. “We’re doing self-therapy.”

Molly got his point as she stared at his scars. “How the hell did you survive?”

Thomas had been asked that so many times now that it didn’t bother him as much anymore. “I could tell you about it sometime.”

Molly felt his interest and respected him for not pushing. *But I’m free now. All my secrets are gone and I have extra time.* “Over dinner?”

Thomas lit up. His green eyes twinkled in the fluorescent light. “Tonight?”

Molly nodded, blushing. “You come highly recommended.”

Thomas leered.

Wade gestured. “And that’s how it’s done, gentlemen.”

Men clapped for Thomas.

“I don’t like this.”

Everyone looked over at Charlie.

Charlie held the bottle for his son so the newborn could eat. “I’m scared again. He’s just a baby. How will he grow up without a mom? I don’t know enough. What if he gets hurt?! I don’t know what I’m doing!”

Charlie drew in a deep breath, trying to calm himself. Now that he had his son, he couldn’t imagine being anywhere else in the world but here. His mom’s deals would keep his son safe while he figured out how to be a parent. “This feeling sucks!”

Trent smiled. “Welcome to being a parent.”

“If I’d known this is what it would feel like...”

“You’d have plugged that hole anyway.”

Charlie laughed. “Yeah. It was amazing!”

“We get it.”

The men nodded while the women smiled or rolled their eyes.

Ray nudged Zack. “Your turn. Say something sweet and uplifting for yourself.”

People tensed, frowning. Ray was pushing Zack already, but the man hadn’t had time to grieve.

Zack smothered the need to lash out. He tried to get past the horror in his heart. "It's been 546 days since the war destroyed the world and we're all still alive."

"Holy shit. Is it really the middle of June?" Gus grinned. "I have a birthday coming up."

"So do I."

"Me, too!"

People regarded Jennifer, but they hesitated to ask. She wasn't Angela; she didn't give them things just to make them happy.

"Get me a list and we'll set something up around the same time as the weddings for a group event." Jennifer had been thinking about that since Angela got home and reversed her order. "We can do a mass party twice a year to celebrate our birthdays and special moments."

Approval hit her from all sides.

Jennifer absorbed it greedily. *I'll be doing that again.* Now she understood why Angela allowed them to take advantage of her.

"That's not the only reason." Adrian wanted the girl to be clear on it. "She loves making them happy just because it makes them happy."

Jennifer forced herself to accept his words and his presence. "Two months, Mr. Mitchel. We have a truce until then."

"And after?"

Jennifer sighed. "If you make it, I want private lessons like you gave Angela. I can't be as good as her unless I have the same teacher."

“You have a deal.”

Kyle was thrilled. *Things will be better now for all of us.*

His mind lit up with a new voice.

How may I serve you, Master?

Everyone turned toward Kyle as they caught the feel of a new descendant joining the hive.

Kyle laughed in delight. “I’m one of you!”

Marc grunted in understanding. “Sharing power kept his gifts from popping on their own. Interesting.”

Kyle immediately tested the strength of his gift. *Morgan! Get your shit packed and move into our cabin!*

Morgan’s astonished voice came right back in Kyle’s mind. *You got it.*

Jennifer hugged Kyle, swallowing tears. Now he wouldn’t be unprotected while she gave birth.

Kyle tensed. “Is there something I should know?”

Jennifer nodded. “But we’ll save that conversation for another time.”

Kyle laughed. “You sound like the boss.”

Jennifer grinned. “Thank you. That’s the nicest thing anyone’s said to me since you guys came home.”

4

Angela stepped into the employee hall next to the pool room. She studied the small family coming

her way. They were neat, clean, and putting off happy vibes that would enforce innocence to the camp. *We're all great liars here.*

Shawn wasn't scared of her this time; he was grateful. "Whatever you want or need."

Selina was a bit leery. "What's happening?" Shawn hadn't told her anything except they had to talk to the boss.

Missy clasped Selina's hand. "The alpha will take some of our memories now so no one pulls it from our thoughts."

Selina panicked. "Don't take my family away! I'll be good!"

Shawn hugged her. "She won't."

"I promise." Angela used her gift to erase their knowledge of Missy's actions, but she didn't take anything else, including the trauma the adults had suffered. They needed those moments to keep pushing them into being better people. She'd already done the same to Cate and Cody, who'd escorted Missy to the cave before boarding the ship without her.

Angela held the employee door open. "You're late for the therapy session."

"Sorry!" Shawn hurried his family into the pool room.

Angela listened to them get greeted warmly and included in the fast-moving conversation, but she didn't enter yet. She took a minute for herself to breathe deeply and be glad that this part of their future was over.

This had been easy compared to some of the adventures they'd had, but it had produced one amazing result that might just give them a win if they faced Nature again. As of right now, Angela had no plans for that chaotic event. "I don't want to go back at all. I want to stay here with my people and be truly happy for the first time in my life."

Angela sighed. "But life rarely gives us what we want. We have to fight for every moment of progress, for every day we have together. It's exhausting."

Angela smiled. "It's also an amazing rush when we succeed despite the odds being stacked so high against us. It makes us strive for goals we normally wouldn't have even considered."

Like taking over the world.

Angela nodded at the voice inside. *And I'm going to do it. The people in that room are the strongest fighters on the planet. Together, we can do anything.*

"Where's the boss? It doesn't feel right without her."

Angela entered the pool room at Adrian's call. She waved toward the exit. "You can all go now."

People stared in surprise. Some of them gawked at her stomach. It was bigger now and totally out of proportion to the rest of her body.

Biff frowned. "What about the therapy session?"

"You just had one."

"That doesn't count. We were just talking."

Angela realized Biff wanted a real therapy moment. She gave him a gentle one that applied to all of them. “You joined the Eagles because you wanted to live the life you couldn’t, or wouldn’t, before the war. You’ve had amazing moments and awful losses. You’re living life to its fullest now. Even if you resign, you’ve already had that experience and nothing can take it away from you.”

“Are we on a real break now?”

Angela knew Biff meant her, too. She shrugged. “Life is a constant struggle. When we take breaks, it hurts us. We get lazy, tired, scared, resentful. It’s best if we stay busy. We’re different than other people. We’re dangerous beings who have to use our skills for the light side as much as we can.”

“So, no.”

Angela laughed. “We’ll have a few weeks before the next adventure. Enjoy it. You’ve earned it.”

Gus repeated Adrian’s question. “Do you know what’s going to happen next?”

“Yes.”

“Can we prepare for it this time so it doesn’t go wrong?”

“Absolutely.” Angela’s eyes lit up bright red. “Get used to the heat. Our next survival moments are going to be like visiting Hell.”

She rubbed her stomach and smiled at the now nervous men and women who she loved more than the others in their camp. “We’ll get through it

together, like we always do. Nothing can keep us apart. I simply won't allow it."

"Are you sure we should do this?" Tonya wasn't afraid to ask questions. If Angela wanted her gone, she already would be.

Angela beamed. "I absolutely am. We're going to rule the world together. What could be better than that?"

Tonya leaned against Kenn's big arm and wiped tears onto his shirt. "How about finding a way to bring back the dead?"

People laughed or sent sympathy.

Determination swept over Angela's face. "It's been on my to-do list since I lost a child in the mountain. If it's possible, I will attain that skill."

"Rule the world and live forever. You've covered the basics." Adrian didn't like how open she was being about it. He also hated how fast his Australian relative had fallen in with the plan. Adrian had no doubt that Gordon was pushing this agenda as well. "At some point, you're going to go too far and lose it all."

"Maybe." She gestured at Jennifer and then Wade. "That's part of why I chose bad-asses as my right and left hand, and killers for everything else. If I need to be put down, you'll handle it. You've seen how I deal with Nature. Use that."

Everyone realized she'd just given them clues on how to kill her if she snapped. They didn't know what to say.

Angela did. “There’s work waiting for all of us. Get off your asses right now and pick a project. This world isn’t going to conquer itself.”

The End of Book 21

What would you like to do now?



[See the next book in this series.](#)

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Deleted Scenes

1

“Do we really have to do this now?”

People moved by the barn, gathering and carrying supplies while laughing and joking. Everyone was in a great mood and looking forward to the matchups tonight. It was a small slap in the face to Marc, who felt exactly the opposite.

Angela shrugged. “It seems like a good time.” She leaned back in the folding chair and tried to find a comfortable position.

Marc frowned. “I know you have something planned.”

“I always have plans, and you don’t usually want to be part of them, so I don’t share.” Angela got the session started before he could find an excuse that would restart the fighting. “You don’t really want to be a part of anything that’s going on here, including staying.”

This was why Marc didn’t want to have a therapy session. He didn’t know what to say except the truth. “I can’t. My family did this!”

Angela had suspected that was the majority of his problem now, but hearing it still made her feel guilty. She pushed on anyway. “You’ve been told repeatedly that it’s unfair to blame yourself for what other people have done.”

“It wasn’t other people!” Marc grunted unhappily. “I agreed to your plan. I led them in there. Finding out my family was running that lab for a century changed everything.”

“We can’t pick our family, Marc.” She gave him a pointed look. “If we could, I certainly wouldn’t have chosen the ones I had and neither would you. All we can do is try to love the ones we can tolerate and stay away from the others.”

“That’s not good enough.” Marc didn’t know how to get rid of his guilt.

“What if I can get you to accept that not all Reichers are evil?”

Marc snorted bitterly. “Then I might be able to stay here without hating myself.”

“I believe I can accomplish that if you give me enough time.”

Marc tried to fight through the darkness in his heart. “I’m not doubting that you could eventually do it, but I don’t think I can stay that long. Every time I look at Rico, I’m reminded that our family is responsible for the torture and death of thousands of people, if not more. I won’t be able to handle that much longer without cracking.”

“Can you tolerate it for another week?”

Marc’s eyes flew to hers. “A week?”

Angela nodded. “I’ve had a plan in the works for months now. It will come to fruition in a few days.”

Marc frowned. “Then why do you need a full week?”

“Because you’re a very stubborn man who will need time to run it through that magnificent brain of yours before coming to the conclusion that I’m right.”

Marc chuckled. “You have a deal.”

Deleted Scene #2

Tim quickly shut the door to the rear room of the church and locked it. He turned around and frowned at the five men who were squeezed into the small space.

“Did you bring food?”

“We need raincoats, too, so we can go out without people knowing who we are.”

Corey shushed Amos and Curtis. “Give the man a chance to talk.”

Tim gave him a small smile. Out of the five refugees he had given sanctuary to, Martin was really the only one he liked. He tolerated Corey. “We’ll be getting supplies from the barn tonight while everyone is at the matchups. Hang on a few more hours.”

A couple of the refugees protested waiting. They were very thin from their time on the ocean away from Safe Haven. They were always hungry now.

Corey shushed them again, trying to show Tim they could be reasonable. “We’ll wait. Is there going to be a service tonight?”

Tim shook his head. “Some of the congregation are staying in the bunkhouse and others are going to the matches.” Tim didn’t like it that any of the members of his church were willing to go to such a violent party, but he didn’t have the right to tell them not to. At least, not yet. *As I gain more power*

in the camp, it will give me more authority and then I can stop them from doing things like that.

Corey wasn't a descendant, but it was easy to pick up on Tim's discontentment. "Is someone giving you problems?"

Tim frowned. "I'm just a little fed up with humanity. We have thieves and loose women, but I'm not allowed to counsel them on their behavior. Angela made it clear a while back that if I wanted to have the church I'm not allowed to convert people. They have to come in out of the darkness on their own."

Martin lifted a brow. "There are loose women in Safe Haven now?"

Tim nodded. "Dari has gotten quite the reputation among the rookies." Tim refused to tell them the nickname the camp men had given to the girl who had joined them from the atoll battles. "She's good friends with Megan, who can't stop stealing. Both of them need a good talking to."

Martin and Corey exchanged glances.

Tim headed for the door. "Make sure you keep the lights out once it gets dark. We can't let anyone know you're here until I figure out how to convince Angela to let you all back in."

Martin nodded easily. "We'll do exactly what you say. Thank you for helping us."

"It's my honor." Tim hurried out into the church and shut the door. *And it's my head if I get caught. Angela won't be satisfied with banishing me over*

this. She'll cut my head off and pike it on the church steps.

Deleted Scene #3

“He’s waking up.”

Ivan hurried over from tending the fire. He drew his gun and held it alongside his leg in case he needed it.

Tracy retreated back to the safety of the small den they’d built into the hillside.

Rico slowly opened his eyes. The sight of someone standing over him with a gun wasn’t as much of a surprise as the fact that he was alive at all. He didn’t move yet, taking stock of his body and his situation first.

Ivan waited, giving the man time to adjust. He had a lot of questions. The most important one was whether or not saving the man’s life had been a good choice. “We found you tied to debris that looked like it was part of a dock. We assume the tide washed it, and you, up on the beach here.”

“Where is here?” Rico didn’t move yet. He didn’t want to trigger an unnecessary shooting.

“You’re on Henderson Island.” Ivan felt the man’s magic reach out to scan them and stayed ready to react. He and Tracy had decided to come back to their den on this island until the storm passed. Finding a stranger on the beach the next morning had frightened Tracy, but Ivan had recognized one of those rare moments of impeccable timing that he had never experienced until he joined Safe Haven.

Tracy had insisted that they leave the man to die and flee the island in the RIB. Ivan had convinced her it was better to wait and see. He was aware that he owed a big debt for kidnapping Tracy and abandoning the camp. He was afraid if they left the stranger here that it would trigger Angela's anger.

"I'm going to sit up now."

Ivan stepped back, scanning the stranger as he sat up on the gray blanket. He and Tracy had wrapped a bandage around the man's head and covered him with one of their spare jackets, but that was all they had been able to do for him.

"Is he one of them?" That was what Tracy was the most afraid of. Now that she didn't have the baby to protect her, she was terrified that Angela was going to take revenge.

Ivan shrugged instead of telling her the truth. "I'm not sure yet." He wanted to get the man's story before Tracy had a panic attack.

Rico stared at Tracy in bitter understanding. "I was wrong. She did all of this. She knew what was coming and steered it to her advantage."

Ivan recognized a kindred soul. When he'd first joined Safe Haven, he had also doubted that Angela was as smart as everyone had been giving her credit for. A reluctant bond formed between the two men. "What happened to you?"

"I was washed off the dock during the storm. I used my belt to tie myself to some debris. I don't know what happened after that. Everyone thinks I'm dead, I would guess." Rico glanced around,

trying to ignore the pain in his brain. He felt the bandage around his head. “Thank you.”

“Yep.”

The small den the couple had obviously built themselves had been dug out from the hillside. A wooden door that exactly matched the hues of the island blocked Rico’s view inside. It was genius to blend in so that some debris could be piled over the doorway and no one would ever know they were there. It also made Rico suspicious. “Who are you guys?”

Tracy relaxed a little. She assumed because the man was asking that question, he wasn’t able to read their minds. “Nobody. We just got stranded here.”

Ivan shook his head when the man would have set Tracy straight. “Do you need a ride back to Pitcairn?”

Rico pulled more of Ivan’s thoughts. He understood who they were as images of Marc and Charlie flashed through the woman’s thoughts. Rico’s time around Angela had been more than effective. He wanted to be back with Tonya more than anything, but he already knew that wasn’t what was best for her. She already had a life and it didn’t include him. “No. You can drop me off anywhere else.”

Tracy frowned. “How does he know we have a boat?!”

Ivan sent a calming spell toward Tracy, letting out a sigh. “She’s absolutely terrified of magic

users. She gets panicky. Don't take it personally. She's just a little damaged."

Rico grunted as he slowly stood up. "That's true of everyone now."

"Why don't you go back?" Ivan wanted to, more than anything.

"I want something that I can't have, but I care more about it being safe than I do about attaining it."

Another bond flew between the deadly men. Ivan slowly holstered his weapon. "We're heading to California in the morning."

Rico had never been to the United States. A small smile curved his lips. "Surely there will be another brilliant, sexy, wild redhead there somewhere, right?"

Ivan immediately knew who Rico's obsession was. He nodded. "Probably about the same odds as there are being another genius, ruthless brunette."

Rico grunted. "Those Safe Haven women sure are different."

Ivan sighed in longing. "Too right you are."

Tracy opened the door to the small den and stepped inside where it was cooler. She wasn't happy about Ivan's offer to let the man travel with them, but she agreed that if they left the man here to die, they were making themselves a target for Angela's anger. *I can deal with them until we get back. Once we're there, both men can go their separate ways and I'll finally feel safe again.*

Rico lifted a brow at Ivan.

Ivan shrugged. “Like I said, she doesn’t trust magic users at all.”

“It looks like you’ve taken good care of her. Doesn’t she understand Angela wants you to protect her because she’s a normal?”

Tracy tensed at the name. She slammed the door shut, rattling dirt and leaves on to the ground around it.

Ivan shook his head. “Tracy doesn’t think she needs to be protected anymore. She thinks if she gets away from all the magic users, the world will go back to the way it was and her mind will stop splitting.”

Another awful realization settled into Rico’s pounding brain. “I’m supposed to help you keep her alive.” Rico stared at Ivan in horror. “Angela wants me to atone. That’s why she let me live.”

Ivan laid back down on his blanket and shut his eyes. “It sounds like we’re living the same life.”

Place a Review

Reviews are one of the biggest ways that readers can help their favorite authors, or warn their fellow readers! Reviews do not have to be long. Just let the world know how the book made you feel while you were reading it, and maybe who you think would enjoy that type of story. To place one on this book, [take this link to my website page](#) and pick the store of your choice. Thank you, really. Reviews mean a lot.

Marc And Dog

Instead of a gritty fire team or squad of angry Marines, Marc's backup is a lethal wolf that likes to attack when his back is turned. If Marc can't make friends with the fugative animal, it may cost both of their lives.

Marc And Dog

Book 22



Visiting Hell

1

“**M**atch goes to Tonya!” Kenn let out a cheer as the crowd around the cage congratulated her on winning her third challenge in a row.

Tonya used her musclebound arm and helped Molly to her feet. She walked her over to the cage door so the medics could determine if her nose was broken. It was dripping blood down her chest.

Angela carefully stood up and rubbed her aching back as she smiled at the victorious woman.

Then she looked around. “Do we have another challenge for team leader?!”

Tonya lifted her chin, proud of herself for getting in such good shape that Angela thought she was capable of handling this.

Kenn scowled at the boss. “The Eagles never go through this many challenges to pick a team leader!”

Angela ignored his displeasure. “Team lead, going once! Going twice!”

“I’ll take a piece of that action!”

Tonya tensed.

The crowd went quiet as Erin removed Angela’s jacket and stepped toward the cage. Erin had been doing a very aggressive workout for weeks now and she had already been in good physical shape before that. The match that everyone had expected when this test started was about to take place.

Angela didn’t reveal her displeasure that Erin had waited until Tonya faced three challengers and was likely getting tired. It revealed a large weakness.

Tonya retreated to her side of the cage as Erin entered. Several thoughts crossed her mind, along with plans of action. She could feel Erin mentally doing the same.

Erin didn’t offer insults the way Molly had. Her smirk did it for her.

Tonya realized what the woman had done. She glared. “Team leaders are supposed to have honor.”

Erin gave her a knowing look. “Yes, they are.”

Tonya flushed at the implication that her honor was in question. She settled into her fighting stance and waited for it to start.

Erin had hoped to get a rise out of the redhead so she would waste this betting time instead of using it for planning. She took her place on the other side of the bar that had been installed in the middle of the cage and waited for the call.

“Get those bets down, people!”

Angela’s reminder triggered a small rush of camp people toward the betting tables. They were still enjoying being able to witness a moment like this without worrying about magic use. They loved the rule that magic wasn’t allowed to be used in this test.

Erin didn’t love that rule. She understood it, however. The leader of Angela’s team would need to be able to take care of business the normal way, as well as handling things like a descendant.

“Match starts in one minute!” Kenn shoved the mike into Neil’s hand and stomped over to Angela.

Angela waited patiently for his tirade, but her patience level quickly went down as her back continued to hurt and bugs continued to bug her. Some people weren’t being bothered by any of the insects that were drawn to their smells and the trash. Others, like herself, were being eaten alive.

“It’s not fair to have her face so many people in a row!” Kenn kept plenty of distance between his big body and the boss. He didn’t want anyone to think he was a physical threat to her even though he

was furious. His mind always reminded him to walk that line now.

“Are you saying this never happens in the Eagles?”

Kenn waved his hand angrily. “It’s different with the Eagles. A lot of them used to be military! They’ve been fighting for a year now! Tonya’s only been on your team for a few months.”

People liked it that Kenn was defending his mate, but they didn’t like him challenging the boss openly. Frowns and scowls went through the crowd.

“Turn around and watch the match.”

Kenn heard the stone tone and understood Angela wasn’t going to change her mind. He crossed his arms over his chest and turned around to watch the match, but inside, some of his hatred for her returned.

“Match starts in 30 seconds!” Neil took over the MCing. “Hurry up and finish those bets!”

Neil scanned the excited crowd, looking for trouble, but there wasn’t any. The normals and the descendants were mixed together in the seats, on the ground, and standing in small groups all around the runway and the cage. Despite not liking Jennifer’s order that they had to take their meals together while Angela was gone, it had worked out well.

It was a relief to him every time he spotted something that Jennifer had done right. He made a mental note to mention it later to the gossipy church group so everyone else would see it, too. Angela wanted Jennifer to be completely exonerated for

everything that had happened, so Neil had made it his business to accomplish that while everyone else worked on other projects for the boss. He wasn't sure what Samantha was working on right now, but he was confident that it would also give Angela something she wanted or needed. Neither of them had forgotten how much Angela had over their heads right now.

Passing by on a patrol of the island, Adrian and Marc both stopped and looked at Neil.

Neil quickly shook his head before either of them could ask the question. *That's not the only reason we're doing it.*

Marc gave Neil's mind a quick scan and then moved on. He didn't see any clouds or spiders. It didn't feel like Neil was lying this time.

Adrian was tempted to dig deeper. Neil had made deals with him before and covered his lies so well that Adrian hadn't known until the trap was sprung. He loved Neil like a brother, but it was the brother that would always have to be at arm's length because he wasn't as reliable as he appeared to be. Marc was biased in Neil's favor because they had been such good friends before everything went to hell. Adrian didn't have that weakness. Neil turning his back on him had changed everything even though the trooper had forgiven him. Adrian hadn't been able to do the same.

"The betting is now closed!" Neil's angry voice quickly settled into happy excitement as he realized he was giving himself away. The last thing he

needed was for anyone to start digging into his mental state. “She’s faced three in a row, folks. Will Tonya come out on top in her fourth match or will Erin steal the prize from under her already bloodied nose? Let’s find out!”

2

Marc and Adrian kept going, but both men were connected to someone who was watching the fight so they would know what happened even as they got out of sight.

As they stepped onto the jungle path, Adrian patted his holster. “My rebuilt 9mm says Tonya wins.”

Marc chuckled. “No one on this island should ever take that bet.”

Adrian laughed as he realized Marc also thought Tonya would win. The redhead had done nothing but work and train for months now. When she took over Angela’s team, all of the other women were going to be sorry that they had slacked off.

“Angela will love it.”

Adrian nodded. “I think that’s why she’s having them face Tonya one at a time. She wants everyone to see what a badass Tonya has become.”

Marc knew there was another reason for it, but he didn’t share that with Adrian. He was already sharing too much.

Adrian felt the mood dip and frowned. “It’s been two weeks and we haven’t had a single problem. I thought things were going well.”

“They are.” Marc didn’t finish the sentence, not wanting to start a fight.

Adrian decided to let it go. It was a beautiful day and it looked like clouds were finally moving in from the west. It hadn’t rained a single drop since the night of the flood. The jungle around them was turning yellow and leaves were starting to fall off. It was so dry that the tops of the palm trees were wilting. No one was looking forward to a storm, but they absolutely did need at least one day of rain or parts of the jungle were going to die off.

They were also going through the water supplies too quickly. The submarine and the cruise ship would allow them to constantly refill their stocks, but it had to be transported to town from the ships, taking a lot of time and manual labor. The water barrels that had been set up to collect the rain were a much easier way to replenish their supplies.

“What’s next on our list?”

Adrian consulted his notebook. “We have to check on the prisoners and make sure someone dropped off food and water to them. Angela also wants them taken to town for showers and a medical checkup over the next couple of days.”

Marc thought she was being overly generous with their prisoners, but he didn’t complain. It also showed that she had compassion and everyone needed to see that from a leader. “What else?”

Adrian gestured toward the cove. “We need to check the radar and the radio and then we can go by the cabin on our way to Cliff Road.”

“We’ll leave the jailhouse for later and go check the radar.” Marc was positive that the sight of clouds in the sky would cause anxiety for all of the mission men, but also for Angela. She didn’t need that kind of stress now that she was so close to her due date.

The two men headed toward the path that would take them to the cove without having to go down the ladder from the cliff top.

A loud cheer split the air behind them, telling them the fight was under way. Both men reconnected to a hive member to watch the match while they did their rounds. It was a daily routine that they hadn’t missed in three weeks.

Adrian enjoyed it.

So did Marc. He just refused to say so.

3

Tonya ducked Erin’s swing and jumped back to avoid the kick that followed it. She stayed on defense as Erin lunged at her, punching again.

The crowd around the cage groaned as Erin missed. People in the chairs cheered.

Angela watched the match with half an eye, more concerned with the pain now spreading from her back to her hips. She hadn’t been this miserable in a long time.

Brittani was in a lounging chair next to her, looking better than she had in a while. Jennifer's weekly treatments were helping her and everyone else. Jennifer was on the other side of the heavily pregnant woman just in case the trip up here had been too much. Jennifer's large stomach also stuck out, creating a line of females in the last stages of gestation.

Angela heard Erin's fist connect, but she scanned the crowd instead, seeing happy people who were glad of the break they'd gotten from action and from the weather. The new setups were working well. Angela was unhappy that it couldn't always be this way.

Another pain rippled through her back and down her legs.

Jennifer looked over.

Angela shook her head and focused on the fight.

Tonya was still on defense. She ducked and spun, evading Erin's hold.

Erin figured out the redhead was trying to wear her out, turning it back on her. She charged forward, trapping Tonya in the corner.

Tonya grinned. Then she fired back.

Erin was unprepared for the strength in Tonya's arm as the punch landed on her arm. She was driven backward.

Tonya swung again and again, not pausing between the blows. She hit Erin in the mouth, the jaw, the shoulder, and then the stomach, drilling her upper body in multiple areas to cause the most pain.

Erin tried to hit her back, but the targeted blows had taken her breath away.

Tonya punched Erin in the forehead this time, following it up with a fast kick to the knee that dropped Erin down onto one leg.

Erin's hand came up, but it was too late.

Tonya punched her in the mouth as hard as she could.

Blood sprayed the cage; Erin's tooth flew out and was lost in the dirt.

Tonya hit her again and then again, using her new muscles to make her point clear.

“Match to Tonya!”

Tonya kept swinging.

Kenn rushed in and pulled her off of the moaning woman.

Tonya jerked out of his grasp and delivered a last hit that almost knocked Erin out.

“Stop now!”

“She tried to cheat!” Tonya was furious. “She's a cheater!”

That new reputation went through the crowd and stuck even though Erin wasn't alert enough to hear it.

Kenn pushed her toward the cage door. “Here's your winner!”

The crowd cheered for Tonya, patting her on the back while the medics hurried into the cage to check on Erin.

“There’s your team leader!” Angela shouted, celebrating Tonya’s win even though she felt rough. “Let’s hear it for Tonya!”

The camp cheered loudly.

Tonya made her way over to the betting tables and grabbed her spoils. Then she smiled at Angela with bruises and blood as her crown and jewels.

“Now you get to pick an XO.” Angela hadn’t planned on doing this yet, but the pain in her back said it wasn’t wise to wait.

Tonya scanned the hopeful females who were now coming closer in hopes that they would be chosen. “Jayda.”

The crowd murmured while the other women muttered.

Jayda glanced around. “Me?”

Tonya smiled through the pain of her minor injuries. “I made the choice a week ago.”

Jayda frowned. “But I’m leaving on the next run.”

Tonya nodded. “So am I. The boss gave me control of your mission. We’re going together.”

Jayda grinned. “Awesome!”

Kenn groaned. “No!”

Angela headed toward the bathroom, letting the crowd get Kenn in line this time. She didn’t have the patience for his whining.

Kenn was staying here this time and caring for their kids while Tonya headed out on her first solo mission. He wasn’t pleased, but she was and so was every female in camp who’d been waiting for this

moment. Other than Angela's runs, there hadn't been a mission yet where a woman was in charge the entire time.

Disappointed females came over to congratulate Jayda while everyone else headed for the betting tables to claim their prizes.

Greg went into the cage to help Morgan get Erin on her feet. He put an arm around her waist. "I think she learned some new tricks." Greg had recognized Tonya's ending strategy. He'd been on the receiving end of something similar during the last matchups.

"Who taught her that?" Morgan was impressed. "Rico."

Tonya heard the name. Her eyes turned bright red. A cold breeze flew through the crowd, bringing silence as it was felt.

Jennifer glared. "Get control of yourself!"

Tonya shut her eyes and forced the awful pain back down into her mental crypt. When she opened her eyes, they were sparkling green again. "Time to get drunk!"

Another loud cheer ran over the cliff top and drowned the tension.

She looked at Kenn.

Kenn stopped protesting. He just wanted her to be happy and she hadn't been since Rico's death. "Whatever you want."

Tonya took the bottle Jayda handed her and tilted it up, but she only took a big drink and then passed it. It was a huge honor to lead a run and she

wasn't going to blow it by getting drunk and crying over a spilled stalker.

But I want to. Tonya hadn't felt pain like this before. She put a smile on her face and forced out words that she hoped were convincing. "Who wants to go with us? I need more hands."

Eagles began signaling, getting her attention, and coming forward. Many of them were women, but there were enough men in the group to give Kenn a little peace of mind. He knew firsthand how wild women could be on runs, but he still wanted them to have someone along who had enough experience to help Tonya if she needed it.

"I'm going." Greg let go of Erin so Morgan could finish checking her over.

Tonya scanned him, his one eye, and then nodded. "Third in command."

Greg grinned. "I'm your guy."

Lightning flashed in the distance.

Tonya scanned again, using the moment to her advantage. "I need a medic and a captain. Who wants it?"

Two hands went up in the resulting quiet. Both of them were a shock.

Tonya nodded, secretly relieved to have so many volunteers. "XO, add Morgan and Grant to the list. We're leaving in one week. Our destination is South America, and then Florida."

"How long will we be gone?" Jayda already had her notebook out and was working.

Tonya locked eyes with Kenn. “As long as it takes to find your family and more vials of the rage vaccine. We aren’t coming back without both of those goals met.”

The camp cheered again.

Still in the bathroom, Angela held onto her contracting stomach and fought back a low moan of pain. She didn’t call Marc or a medic yet. *Let them have a few more hours of fun and peace.*

She let out a deep breath as the pain subsided. *Then we’ll all visit hell together.*



[Visiting Hell](#)

Book 22