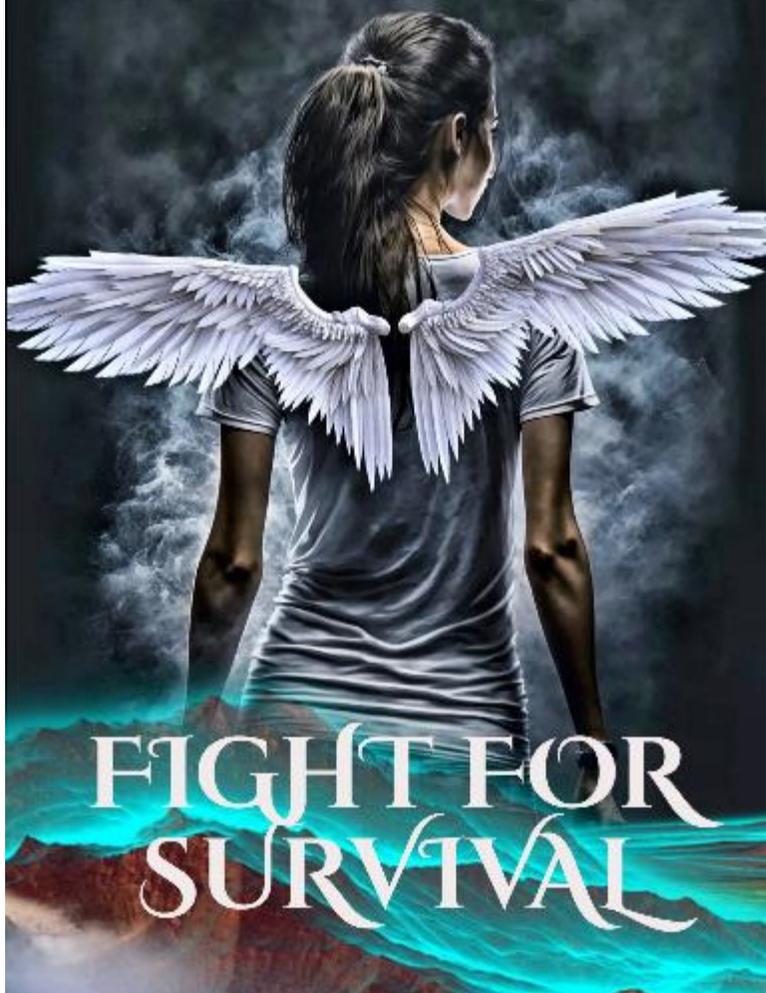


ANGELA WHITE

LIFE AFTER WAR BOOK #5



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Fight for Survival
by
Angela White

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Low Lead & Thin Walls

When it's all on the line,
When instinct says its time,
Do you run, hide, or fight?
Do you pray? Support? Provide sight?

Never an easy choice,
Others always figure in.
Women and children go first;
Laws from an age of bigger men.

Backs to thin walls,
Lead running low...
Do you step out front?
Or disgrace yourself down low?

Can you give it all up?
Can you truly say goodbye?
Can you stumble over their bodies?
And not see yourself cry?

And to our enemy, would you hand us over?
We used to be your neighbors!
Our children played together,
Where we refused to allow these bad behaviors.

How many of you will betray us?
How many of us will you kill?

It's a question of numbers,
And who pays the final bill.

What will be the cost?
What will be the price we pay?
“Any win, is a win,” people quote,
Uncaring as their souls decay.

Why does our existence terrify you?
How can you respect life so little?
Our freedoms have been your hidden vices,
Even as you lie and cast *us* evil.

We used to be one nation,
Under our own god.
United, not divided.
Kind, not blind.
More considerate, than hypocrite!

To terror, from near bliss.
From the Promised Land, to cursed.
When did it come to this?
While we were busy conquering the earth.

Chapter One
Is Anyone Listening?
Safe Haven Refuge
September 1st



1

As sunrise began to lighten the giant mountain peaks around Safe Haven, large envelopes were delivered to nearly every member of camp and then to the camps alongside theirs. The warmly dressed people here now numbered nearly one thousand, roughly the same as the force coming for them, though the young and elderly had been included in Angela's count. The soldiers wouldn't have those weaker people in their ranks.

Normally there might have been jokes about plain brown envelopes being quietly delivered, but

not now. In those packages was life for some and death for others. No one wanted to receive them; it was fitting that they were being handed out during a chilly predawn drizzle.

These packages were Angela's plan in a hundred small pieces. The Eagles delivered each one carefully into the hands it was intended for. The directive was to wait until the date and time written on the front of the envelope, then open it and follow the orders inside. Nearly every package was dated for Labor Day. The missions had been chosen and delivered, the people were prepared as much as they could be, and now, war would roll their way once more.

2

“This is Safe Haven Refugee Camp. Is anyone there?” Kevin paused to let answers come, but there was silence in the chilly morning air. He tugged his scarf closer to his cheeks and tried again. “Hello? This is Safe Haven. We are at Lookout Mountain. Can anyone hear me?”

The radio crackled emptily in response.

Kevin hung up the mike, worrying. “Been that way since midnight. Not a word.”

Marc reached in and flipped the channel to one that they hadn't used since Little Rock. He concentrated on the humming static, aware of the rest of the large camp behind him that was already awake and preparing. Knives clanked, guns fired,

men and women grunted. It was soothing to the former Marine.

Safe Haven had lost dozens of men and the same was true of the camps around theirs. Their ratio had been 4 to 1, but the toll was the same. Many of their best fighters were gone now. Second string was about to win or lose the game. Training on this rough terrain for the last couple of weeks had been genius on Angela's part. "They're probably jamming us on long range."

Kevin didn't relax. "Are we ready for it?"

"No one ever is." Marc's tone was grim. "Unless you're doing the attacking. It's different from that side."

The planes had stopped bringing soldiers to the base, but there was a large force there now, waiting for what? Only Angela knew for sure, but Marc thought it was for orders. They hadn't had a man at the base who could handle Safe Haven. The envelopes being delivered and the radio going cold at the same time wasn't a coincidence.

"Will we win?" Kevin dropped his head. He hadn't wanted to let that question out. Too many people were already asking it.

Marc zipped up his leather coat and left without responding. It was a lie that he hadn't been able to say yet, not even to Angela. Right now, he still didn't think so. They were outnumbered and piecing together a secondary army of tailors, typists, and traders with treasure hunted weapons. The odds certainly *weren't* in their favor.

Marc snickered tiredly at his mental joke and allowed himself to be drawn to the firing range despite promising not to interfere with how much Angela was doing. Living here was an adjustment. She was doing well.

Marc observed from behind the barrels of gunpowder as Angela roughly shoved a rookie.

“You don’t touch the guns yet. This is the second time I’ve said it. Do it a third and you’re out!”

Marc winced at the shrill snap, but the men around her nodded their agreement. She had a different style of working with people. She was hands-on, in their face as much as any drill sergeant he’d ever known, but she had the power to enforce every threat she made. It was something people knew even without her Eagle detail.

That group of guards on her was excessive, but Marc had refused to cave to her pouting when he’d doubled it. She wasn’t just his light. She was the light of this camp and she would be safe above everything else. If they lost her, Safe Haven would be deserted in a few hours.

“We won’t.” Adrian answered the thought from behind Marc, keeping his distance. It had only been a few days since Marc’s return. Adrian’s bruises were still bright, condemning. He had been released from the medical tent last night, wrapped in a blanket and wearing paper slippers. As he’d gone to his own canvas, alone, Adrian had vowed to

survive. Angela had given him work and he would do it. He hadn't expected her plans to include him.

Neither had Marc. "What do you need?!" He hated it that Adrian's heart attack had interrupted his plans for their former leader. The need to punish this man hadn't faded after hitting him a few times. In fact, it was stronger.

Adrian's lips thinned into a hard line as he waited for Marc to look at him. When he finally did, Adrian grinned happily through the healing wounds on his mouth. "I'm supposed to distract you for a minute."

Marc scowled, fists clenching. "From what?"

Behind him, a loud cheer and clapping echoed.

"From that." Adrian waited calmly for Marc's reaction. He would push the wolfman now, while he could, and enjoy every second of it.

Marc turned around to see a line of rookies clumsily rolling and firing. None of them did it through the entire course, but the trainer clearly had. "Did she ask you to do it?"

"It was on my list." Adrian chuckled bitterly. "And it wasn't a request."

Soothed on that front, Marc shrugged. "Tell her you were successful. I missed it."

"She meant in a way that you wouldn't ride her ass about it later."

"Then you didn't do so well."

"Yeah." Adrian smirked, lifting the collar of his Eagle jacket. "Sorry about that." He moved away with a satisfied step.

Marc let him go. Whatever plans their former leader had, he was ready for it. Marc pretended he hadn't noticed the loud cheer as he studied his mate.

“Wait. Do a press check.” Angela pulled her own weapon and demonstrated to a different rookie, Kip, in the group she was instructing. “Pull it back a little and make sure there's a round chambered. You'll stop popping shells all over the place.”

Marc appeared to be concentrating on their perimeter, but he was narrowed in on Angela's graying hair and her flushed, scarred skin. He wanted some alone time.

Will you waste it scolding her?

Marc smiled at his demon's query. “Maybe. She's reckless.”

The witch has her under control.

Marc actually laughed aloud and drew attention from those closest. He waved them on as he went back to his mental conversation. *No one has my Angie under control.*

Sounds like you approve. That didn't used to be the case.

Marc's good humor faded instantly. *I understand why now. How can any of us hold all this inside and not be wild? I had my time in the Corps. She's having hers here.*

Dangerous for your child.

Marc stopped responding.

The demon faded. Marc hadn't asked yet about Adrian's words on Angela's health, but he would. The demon could feel it coming.

Marc continued his rounds, pointing his mind toward the bigger picture. He didn't have time to stress over the baby. He had hundreds of souls that needed care. All the groups he'd fought with had come and then more. Their families and friends were pouring in.

"Until yesterday, anyway." Marc frowned, thinking about the silent radio. They'd assumed the government would shut down communications, but he hadn't expected it so soon.

One of the Eagles is a Ham man. He'll be able to verify it, the demon offered.

Marc allowed his thoughts to flow as he moved by the mess. It was full, like usual. When people weren't eating, they gathered to draw strength and compare new feats. If he could get them to show that type of bonding during training, they might have a chance, but these men and women all had their own ways of doing things. Getting them to cooperate or compromise was beyond hard. The number of fights kept growing.

They're scared, the demon said.

"So am I."

Good. You'll survive.

Angela's snarl floated over the camp, drawing his attention for a moment. The sound was enough to speed up his heart. "So will she. So will this camp. I'll find a way."

The demon didn't argue. He hadn't found a way and neither had Angela's witch, but that didn't mean there wasn't one. He was spending a lot of

time searching for anything that might help. He wouldn't give up until the last second, but then he and the witch had their own plans to follow. Marc and Angela might be willing to give their lives in this freedom fight, but both the witch and the demon had agreed that even an existence in captivity was better than being forced out. Searching the world for another compatible person might take decades now, if it happened at all. Their current hosts had to live.

3

“Here’s your schedule for today.” Kenn handed the paper to Kendle as she stood in line for the bathroom.

Kendle read it with a scowl. She hadn’t expected one of those all-important envelopes, and one hadn’t been delivered. “I’m not a cook.”

“You’re an eater, right?” Kenn was low on patience. “Pull your weight.”

“Fuck you!”

Kenn shrugged, eyeing Tonya, who was in line nearby at the showers. “If you think that’ll help your attitude.”

Kendle didn’t want to laugh and managed not to. “Tell her I’m not doing it.”

“You tell her!” Kenn shouted, losing his patience. “Where the hell did Marc find you?!”

“Standing on her husband’s grave.” Marc came up behind them. He’d just left the bathroom that

Kendle was in line for. “Have some sympathy. She survived being eaten alive. Could you?”

Kenn blanched. He thought to offer compassion, but Kendle was already storming away. Kenn trailed her, thinking he should probably apologize or Angela might make him pay for it later. Kenn followed the castaway around the rear of the bathrooms and into the main camp. *What is she doing?*

It took Kenn a minute to figure out that she was stalking someone. When he saw who it was, the Marine quickly caught up.

“Not a good idea.” Kenn slowed Kendle down with a firm hand on her arm. Angela was out here, with her gun in hand!

Too late, Marc warned from ahead of them. He didn’t return for the fight that Kenn was sure was coming. Marc knew better. Kendle wasn’t stupid, just obsessed.

Kenn let go of her arm as he realized the two women were now face-to-face. Angela had answered the challenge in Kendle’s thoughts.

“Be careful,” Kenn warned.

Angela was staring with crimson orbs, promising silently that she was capable of everything Kendle had already suffered and more.

“Fine!” Kendle snapped, detouring for the mess instead of tracking Marc.

Kenn gave Angela an exasperated glower before heading after Kendle. Angela knew Kendle had to be babysat and so far, that’s all Kenn had

been given to do. His envelope was full of other papers, though. He had no doubt that Angie would endanger his life as soon as she could. Before, he would have resented this first chore, but with Angela set to send everyone into flames, he would accept any easy duty she wanted to hand him. Her level of chaos was beyond normal, even for the military. He'd been talking with the surviving men who'd fought alongside Marc and the consensus was that their Ghost was invincible, lethal. These same awed men, upon meeting Angela, had immediately given her the name Wendigo. Atolius had later told Kenn it meant The Evil that Devours.

Her inside voice must be absolute evil, Kenn thought. His days of crossing her were certainly over. Anyone who tried had better watch their six.

4

“There’s too many of *them* here.”

“What do you mean?”

“You know.”

“Yeah, I guess I do.”

The conversation between two non-Eagles had gained attention, but neither man noticed. They were leaning against the rear of a semi instead of unloading the supplies from it.

“It doesn’t feel as if we’re fighting for America. It’s like those freaks are the new government.”

“I think so, too, but most of the camp feels we won’t win without them.”

“Probably won’t win either way.”

The Eagles on sentry duty nearby listened to the words with anger. There wasn’t anyone else on this chore. The bitter camp men, who thought they were alone, weren’t censoring their words.

“Some are leaving again.”

“Normal. People get scared. They’ll return if we win.”

“So, you are staying?”

“Yes. Freaks aside, the government has to go and I’m not so stupid that I think we can win without magic.”

“And if we do win?”

“I’d say we’ll have a private meeting and then the freaks won’t be in charge here anymore.”

The Eagles had heard enough. They left their posts, drawing the attention of the snipers, who covered it as soon as they realized the threat was inside their gates.

Aware of the conversation—he’d been tracking it—Marc didn’t stop the beating, nor did he interfere with the violent ejections through Safe Haven’s front gate with just the clothes on their backs. Traitors and assassins weren’t welcome here.

Marc did understand why the descendants were considered so strange, how it was making the camp members uncomfortable and a bit jealous. He sympathized. He had been on that end of it before facing who he really was. They would eventually come to the same realizations. Magic was in every

soul. It was finding the door to access it that was a bitch.

“She won’t like that. She says they have a right to question their leaders.”

“Make sure she knows that I disagree.” Marc looked over at Kyle with cool detachment. “You are her spy now, right?”

Disheartened, Kyle finished pulling on his gloves and turned for the target area, for Angela. “I’m not your enemy, Marc.”

“You’re not my friend, either! If you were, Adrian would be dead!”

Shocked, Kyle rotated to protest, but Marc had vanished.

Kyle snorted angrily and continued on to Angela. He reported the loss of two more men quickly and left, not waiting to witness another part of what Adrian wanted. Their former leader hoped to keep Marc and Angie at each other’s throats. That would distract Marc and get him killed, and then Adrian could gradually bring her back. It was the secret plan of every man with a serious rival, but thanks to the apocalypse, Adrian was now able to live it. *Marc was right. Killing him is the only solution.*

Nearby, Angela’s anger lashed out in a sharp blast.

Kyle screamed as pain flared brightly along his spine. His knees crumbled; he hit the dirt with a gasp as the fire increased.

“Angie!” Marc grabbed her by a scarred shoulder. Her eyes were roiling flames.

“Adrian is *not* to be killed.”

The tone was without compromise, chilling in its rabid need.

“I’m trying not to plan it,” Marc gave in slowly. “I really am.”

The radio cracked, interrupting the tense moment. “Friendlies at the front gate.”

Angela jerked away, ignoring Kyle’s flinch as she stormed by. He was slowly recovering, but the mental pain hadn’t faded completely.

Marc helped Kyle to his feet. “I’m sorry.”

“So am I.” Kyle took a deep breath as Angela got out of sight and the fire subsided from his spine. “The clear shot was there more than once.”

“Why didn’t you?” Marc asked curiously.

“Because she loves him and we need her.”

It was something Marc had already faced. “We can’t plot against her. She gets cranky.”

Kyle wasn’t amused. “She shouldn’t have done it so openly. The herd is already spooked.”

“Yes.” Marc’s tone dropped into low warning. “The enemy is coming. She’s trying to spook you. She wants everyone angry, ready to fight.”

Kyle considered his own feelings now and gave a curt nod. “That’ll do it.”

Marc didn’t think anger would matter in the end. The levels of manipulations going on here were well above anything Adrian had been doing, but it

wouldn't be enough. "One face for the world; one for yourself."

Marc went to check the rear gate. During any chaos, members would now be able to get to whatever exit was the nearest to them, instead of crushing each other to get through a single funnel. The sirens wailing were Angela's deadline for backing out of the chores she'd assigned in those dreaded envelopes, and Marc thought it was more than fair. She was giving them every chance to escape the coming bloodbath. He respected her for it, even as he mourned losing the men and women who were choosing not to fight or stay.

"Nothing's the same now," was the most common reason. Marc understood. They'd delayed the monthly meetings, camp meetings, daily schedules, level tests, adoptions, underage couple interviews, and runs out of camp for gathering supplies. It was time to hunker down and finish this job before nature unleashed her winter fury on them. If snow came before the battle, they would definitely lose.

Marc noted the newest group coming in to visit and detoured that way, though he wasn't worried over having problems. He simply wanted to see how Angela was doing with their Indian guests. She hadn't protested their presence here, but he thought maybe she didn't like it, just the same. He was still looking for clues as to why.

“Please tell him I’m not mad.”

Red Stone shrugged. “Our ways are clear. He must make amends for the curse to be lifted.”

The Indian leaders of the camps around them were coming here daily to visit Marc, with many of the braves walking through Safe Haven’s gates as if they were members. It was easy to see they weren’t, though. The natives were still nearly naked and enjoying the brisk wind, while Safe Haven had made the switch to heavier coats and gloves. A change of season was on the way. When the wind ran down the cliffs, it felt like a cold spell might be coming. Angela was counting on it holding until her plan was done, but even if it buried them all in feet of early powder, the war couldn’t be halted now.

Angela stared at Atolius with a calm expression, but inside, she was annoyed. The Indian had let it slip about Marc and Kendle, and now thought she had cursed him. *Like he’d be standing there, only sweating, if I’d cursed him.*

The witch inside cackled at Angela’s quip.

Red Stone extended the small pouch again.

Angela impatiently reached out for it this time, bumping his hand.

The peace offering flew into the air and hit Stanley, their clumsy medic who was taking a shift on gate duty.

Stanley, completely unaware, fumbled the pouch and tripped backwards, arms flailing. He

landed against the gun rack, knocking it over to send firearms scattering.

The clumsy medic immediately scrambled to grab the weapons, fingers carelessly curling around triggers.

“Get down!”

“Those are Glocks! No safeties!”

Too late to avoid it, a recoil from one of the guns firing knocked Stanley over. He rolled down the small cliff, losing the entire armload.

Stray rounds slammed into the ground, the gate, and the tree above them, but didn't injure anyone.

It was the brittle tree branch snapping that caused damage as it dropped to the ground in front of Atolius. A shower of splinters and dirt swept the shocked Indian.

“What is wrong with you?!” Atolius shouted at Angela in angry fear. “You didn't even consider my gift!”

A second branch creaked above him in warning as it let go. Atolius fled Safe Haven's gates.

Red Stone, unable to keep his stoic façade, burst into laughter, joining everyone else. Even Angela's laugh was genuine; for one second, all was right with the world again.

Watching from a short distance away, Marc waved Shawn to cover Stanley's post and then continued on his rounds, shaking his head. They kept the guns by the gate ready to go in case of attack. He would now consider changing that or

banning Stanley from being near them. He wasn't sure which would be harder.

Marc spotted Dog sitting behind the shower camper that was out of rotation for refilling and joined the guard on the area with a frown. "Again?"

Daryl shrugged, straight faced. "He's washing her hair, boss."

Marc caught flashes of what Daryl had seen through the window and groaned. "That's, uh...some hair."

"Yeah." Daryl laughed. "I thought so. When he gets to the next area, I'll notify you."

Marc thought when Charlie went beyond staring at Tracy's body, the entire camp would know. Teenagers weren't good at hiding things like that.

Marc waited as Daryl went to the camper door and jerked it open, as he was prone to do with any of the underage couples. It would appear as though he'd ordered it and was making sure that even his own son was following the rules.

Daryl came out with a blank face and a *no problems* motion, but Marc caught the images and sighed. He should go in and scold them, but this was the last day that everyone would all be together and he agreed with Daryl's thoughts of let them have the good moment while there was still time for it.

Marc kept walking toward the rear gate. Charlie was sure about what he wanted and Tracy wasn't going to protest. Time would test their feelings soon enough.

Before Marc got to the rear gate, Cynthia and Jennifer fell in on either side of him. Marc didn't say anything. He was fairly sure he knew what they wanted and why, but going against Angie wasn't something he was prepared to do over their roles in her plan. The females had agreed. He wouldn't provide a pass.

Jennifer gave Cynthia a nod, telling her to start.

Suddenly terrified of being the one to ruin it all, Cynthia lost her nerve.

Marc continued toward the sentry on the rear gate. "Keep working on that nerve, Ladies. You'll need it."

Cynthia and Jennifer exchanged a worried glance as they waited for him to do his check in.

"Things are quiet." Jeff surveyed a small shadow in the distance. He'd seen it move once, but that was enough to have him on edge. "Not still, though."

Marc narrowed in on the spot and almost immediately began scowling. "Have more dust put down around the perimeter and get your crew on standby with rifles. We're going to have company on the ground."

Jeff scowled as he hit his radio. "Snakes again. Perimeter team two, report to the rear gate."

A slight flurry of activity ran through the camp as members were moved away from the danger and fighters lined up to handle the reptiles by hand if it became necessary.

Marc hung back, watching Jeff lead the team to the top of the wall. The ladders weren't always a good idea, but they worked well for keeping vermin away from the holes in the gate. The shooter stood on the top and had a clear advantage.

Pop! Pop! Pop!

The small team fired in steady blasts that sent tension over the camp and clouds of dust into the chilly breeze.

The minor threat was quickly taken care of.

Marc waited for Jeff to climb down. "We're being jammed, right?"

"Yep. But she's got it covered."

Realizing Jeff knew that part of the plan, Marc got an update. "It's all buried and ready?"

"Yeah. She got it going as soon as she chose this location. A couple of the cords were ripped apart during the camp set up, but we fixed it after the sheep went to sleep." Jeff glanced at a lumpy spot in the dirt near them. "Everything we need to roll it out is under there. Got those all over the place."

"How long from the second she calls it?"

"Five minutes, maybe a little more or less, depending on the chaos." That was the best they could do for communications.

Marc gave Jeff a pointed look. "What else does she have you on?"

The Eagle grinned. "Just the stuff I've waited my entire life to play with."

"Yeah, she likes to give us toys. More than Adrian did."

Jeff's face clouded over, but he didn't lower his voice. "I'll handle that for you. In a permanent way."

Marc was a little surprised and more than pleased. He'd thought Jeff would need to be converted. "I might want that at some point."

"I certainly would." Jeff shrugged, turning back to his post. "You say the word and I'll go off for a while."

For Jeff, the thought of being alone in the woods was a good one. Being in camp, around Crista and the other pregnant women, was making him uncomfortable. He wasn't sure why exactly, and a mission from Marc would give him some time to think. So far, all he'd done was stare at the ground while avoiding everyone, including Crista. She'd moved into the community tent yesterday, unable to take his silence. Jeff wasn't sure if that was good or bad. He also hadn't heard that voice in his mind again and was glad. He had liked his new life the way it was and there were too many changes taking place at once for him to adjust.

Marc fought to keep Jeff's offer from his thoughts as he turned and found Angela walking across the camp. Near to where he was, he had little doubt that she could have heard. He had to hope she'd been distracted. Dog was walking near her ankle. The way she was glancing down told him they were having a conversation. Marc was only a little relieved. At some point, she would have to face the fact that Adrian was not a good man. Once that

happened, she might kill him herself. If she didn't, that's when Marc would worry, though the Eagles might do the job anyway. Marc was still being surprised by men who were quietly declaring their loyalty to him, like Jeff. The change in leadership had gone as smoothly as Angie had predicted.

Jennifer had used the time to gather her nerve. She stepped in front of Marc and leaned close, whispering.

When she finished, she took Cynthia by the arm and left him standing there with waves of anger radiating from his stiff frame.

“You told him?”

Jennifer nodded, steering Cynthia toward the workout tent. Kevin had gone in there half an hour ago. “Yes, but only what we agreed on.”

“Okay.” Cynthia sighed. “I hope he can help her. She'll follow through. He has to know that.”

“Yes. He also knows we all fall if she dies. Marc will handle it.”

Jennifer joined Millie at the center table, cooing at her baby. The humiliated medic-in-training, Stanley, was now helping Peggy look after little Autumn while Jennifer worked this guard shift with Kyle. He'd sent her on a break and she wanted to spend it with her daughter. In a few days, she and her baby would be parted, maybe forever. The thought was nearly unbearable.

Jennifer glanced toward the top of the mountain, studying the foreign clouds overhead. Ugly times were rushing toward them and it was too late to

hide. All they could do now was stand and fight. Jennifer intended to give her all. Morals and ethics would be set aside this one time to bring peace. That was the only thing worth all this death and destruction to Jennifer. She said goodbye to her baby silently, refusing to cry. That time was also behind her.

Chapter Two
Cold Winds



1

“**I** gave you a job to do. Why isn’t it rolling yet?”

Kenn flinched, turning to see Marc. Instead of submitting to the scold, he scowled. “You don’t know what she’s like!”

Marc chuckled. “Don’t I?”

“I mean it. She does what *you* want, but everyone else has to fight with her. She isn’t Angela.”

“Yeah.” If she had been, he might have been tempted. Once he got over the scars, Kendle had a nice body and a lot of heat to keep a man warm at night.

“Adrian isn’t helping me.”

Kenn’s complaint surprised Marc.

“He says to leave her alone and let her settle in, so go argue with him.”

Marc could have growled or threatened, or even hit. “Okay.”

As he left, Kenn stared worriedly, not sure what he should do. Marc and Angela were running things, but Adrian had experience with battered women.

Marc was thinking the same thing. If Adrian thought Kendle needed more time to adjust, he would leave it alone, but he had her under guard. She wasn’t in control and being here, where there was no blood spilling, was rough on her. Marc had wanted to spend more time drilling his wishes concerning Adrian into Kenn, but a slender figure subtly dropping out of sight drew his attention. Marc headed for the livestock tent in concern.

2

Angela paused behind a pile of fat boulders, trying to calm her stomach. She’d been walking by the tents they used for protection while butchering and the smells had been too much to take.

Angela heaved noisily into the weeds, bringing up nothing. It seemed like it wasn’t ever going to stop; by the time it did, she was aware of not being alone anymore.

She wiped her face on the hoodie she was wearing, then unzipped it and dropped it on the ground. When she was handed a bottle of water, she rinsed and drank until it was empty.

“He’s going to figure it out. Tell him and let him try to help you. Or let *me*.”

Angela doubled over as a sharp pain hit.

The witch came forward to sooth the muscles.
Easy.

When she looked up, Adrian had seated himself on a large boulder and was chewing on a long blade of grass. He stared at her with a thoughtful expression and dangerously dark eyes.

Angela felt his power swirling over her, ready to give her what she needed, but he stopped before making contact.

Angela had tensed to tolerate it; she glowered.

Adrian let his energy slide across hers and pulled it back. “Ask me.”

Angela’s rage flew out.

Adrian found himself on the ground. When he stood up, she was out of sight.

Adrian chuckled. He loved her spirit, loved pushing her to be stronger than she thought she could. Having a child was hard and she wasn’t a teenager this time, though he was sure she hadn’t had it easy then either. He wondered if she’d ever talked about it and decided it was unlikely. She was doing it all on her own, like she had been after the war and like she probably had been all her life. And

there was no way she would tell him anything. Marc would have to grow the balls to dig it out of her.

“What is she hiding?”

Adrian turned to spot Marc standing inside the butchering tent. There was a slit cut in the canvas next to him—a quick exit point.

“The truth you’re too scared to ask for.”

“Tell me.”

Adrian had been waiting for this moment. “I suspect she had trouble the first time around, with Charlie. Something went wrong. I think she would have been told she shouldn’t have more kids. *Maybe she was told that.*”

Marc’s stomach dropped into his feet. “How can you know that?”

“How can you not? She knows too much about birthing to be avoiding her checkup with the doctor. She’s not eating well. I’m guessing her sleep is restless and she...” Adrian glanced away, not ready to be hit again. “She never smiles anymore, not the real ones.”

Marc had noticed all of those things and others. She was quick to snap and slow to offer encouragement. He’d assumed she was preparing everyone for the ugliness she expected this fight to result in, but she wasn’t spending bonding time with anyone. Even the sex was distracted. He’d barely been able to get her there.

Adrian winced at that image, but still devoured the sights and sounds of the memory in Marc’s

mind. Any time with Angela would be incredible. The wolfman was a fool.

“I may be a fool, but at least I’m not a Jody!” Marc went straight toward the medical area, mentally going over the questions he had. He wanted to talk to Angela about it, but she would deny anything that interfered with her battle plans. He wanted a professional opinion before confronting her.

Marc ducked into the medical canvas, but stopped when he spotted Angela talking quietly with the doctor. He waited for her to notice him. He was relieved when she waved him over instead of acting secretive.

Angela rested against Marc’s warmth as he wrapped his arm around her. “He’s going to give me an exam and make sure things are okay. Will you stay?”

“Sure.” Marc leered. “Can I help? I am familiar with that area.”

Angela snorted.

Even the sour-faced doctor snickered. “Here’s your gown. Please get changed and get on the table.”

Angela felt a sudden sob burn her throat. “I miss John.”

“Me too.” Marc understood. It didn’t help that she’d recently been reading John’s personal notebooks and papers from his tent. A fast death compared to the lingering one from cancer that many of their sheep were still suffering was

preferable, but it didn't make the aftermath any less emotional. It had been almost two months, but the pain was still fresh. Marc glared at the new doctor. "We use the recliner and real sheets."

The doctor huffed. "That is incredibly inconvenient to the physician and unsanitary."

Marc stared in cold contemplation. "You know, *Doctor*, we don't have a place for anyone who can't follow our rules and ways. That includes important people, like healers. I'll have someone come for you after mess. We'll let you get a hot meal first."

Marc steered Angela out of the tent, ignoring the doctor's angry protests.

"We need him." Angela signed resignedly. "It's why I've allowed it."

"No more," Marc stated, loud enough to be overheard. "They live here under our care. They can follow or go."

Angela gave in, allowing Marc to handle this one on his own.

Marc led her to the rear tents that wouldn't be up much longer and directed her in to Hilda, who was sitting at a small table as if she'd known they were coming. Marc hadn't sought the information yet, but he'd always known the sources Adrian used.

Angela sank down in the padded seat as Marc leaned over and whispered a few words to the German. Angela had assumed Marc wanted her to visit the real doctor, but she'd been tempted to ask

Hilda to midwife for her. It was a relief to know they could agree on this.

Hilda shrugged in response to Marc's query. "Don't need to pass word. When they see she's here, they'll follow."

Marc was satisfied. The new doctor would lose half his patients and suffer the outcast status for a while. He would either come around or be left behind, and Marc wasn't sorry. Here, you were either one of the team or you fended for yourself outside the fence. No one was too important.

Angela wasn't sure that she agreed, but she suspected this lesson would teach the new doctor to get to know his patients, as any good family physician should. Hurtful or not, it was part of the job to bond with them as people, not just paychecks.

Marc stayed with Angela while Hilda checked her out. While she worked, Hilda told them of the midwifing she'd done. She didn't say it had been done in another camp, a lifetime ago, but they knew. She'd been forced to hold those females hostage, but she'd cared for them too or those women wouldn't have survived to give birth. They would have had their baby slit from their guts as soon as they began to show.

Hilda also reminded them to keep the doctor's students happy, so that they would stay in Safe Haven. Hilda's age wouldn't allow for this type of work much longer than John's illness would have.

After the exam, Hilda went outside with Marc while Angela dressed. They both knew she could hear them, but it was easier to pretend they were alone than to talk in front of the witch right now.

“Well?”

Hilda’s face was grave. “Things are twisted. She’ll need a caesarian section. If...”

Marc paled. “If, what?”

“If she makes it to term.” Hilda lowered her voice, though she knew it wouldn’t do any good. “I would not give you odds on that.”

“Why not?” Marc demanded. They would cut the baby free when the time came. What else was there?

“I told you. Things are twisted, injuries that healed incorrectly. When she begins to stretch, there will be problems.”

Marc’s mind went straight to Kenn, but Hilda’s next words eased that fury.

“Many women are tilted, but in her case, the doctor made a mistake. I have seen it happen.”

Marc’s face was thunderous. “And they didn’t tell her.”

“I’d guess that she knew anyway.”

Marc was suddenly terrified. “What can I do?”

“Pray?” Hilda shrugged at his upset expression. “Miracles do still happen, especially now.”

Marc didn’t answer. He was busy mentally calling for his demon. Hilda and the doctor might be limited, but he wasn’t.

What have you got?

The demon hated to answer. *You won't like it.*
Marc braced. *Tell me anyway.*

3

Kendle spotted Adrian moving through the sparse trees in the rear of camp, weaving lightly. He looked rough. Sighing heavily, she left the tray of freshly harvested green beans she was supposed to be snapping and bagging. During the last few days, she'd discovered things about Adrian and Safe Haven. They weren't observations that she could share with anyone, but seeing his stop, his pause in obvious discomfort, she found pity for him anyway. He wasn't a good man, despite what some of the people here thought, but he also wasn't evil.

"He's just a man. They expected him to be perfect."

Adrian heard steps behind him, but he was busy fighting the heaviness in his chest. He'd gone for a fast trot around the fence and the dizziness had forced him to find a private place for recovery.

Kendle took a seat on a big boulder next to him, staying silent. She wouldn't have known what to say even if she'd been a member of this camp all along. The things he'd done, the rumors circling the Eagles, were nothing short of criminal. Most of the men thought Marc had plans to take Adrian out on a run and put a bullet into his brain.

"He'll use his hands." Adrian barked a laugh. "Bullets are too valuable to waste on a Jody."

“He actually prefers the knife.” Kendle’s voice was toneless. She was getting used to being around others like herself, but slowly.

“Yeah.”

“Are you scared of him? ‘Cause you should be. He loathes you.”

Adrian slowly straightened, but didn’t look at her as he answered. “The only thing I fear is already being held over my head.”

“The camp being told what you’ve done?”

Adrian snorted. “Like I care now.”

That response, the incredible heartbreak, gave the needed clue for Kendle to make the connection. “Banishment. Being away from her.”

Adrian didn’t answer verbally, but Kendle heard him thinking death was preferable. “Marc will give you that.”

“So you’ve said. Why are you here?”

Kendle sighed restlessly. “I have no idea why I’m here at all. None.”

Adrian saw her distant stare, the tears she wouldn’t let anyone know that she shed each night, and felt his own misery ease off a bit. “Are you okay? She does want you to fit in here and—”

“And find a man!” Kendle finished angrily. “Stop it.”

“Okay.”

“I’m fine. Thanks!” Each word was nearly a growl.

Adrian felt an honest grin stretch his lips. “You are a bitch, aren’t you?”

Not insulted, Kendle bobbed her head. “Of course. And you?”

Adrian’s amusement faded. “I’m a sorry son of a bitch.”

“See?” Kendle snickered this time. “Just be honest. It works for you.”

“No,” Adrian denied quietly. “It never has.” He turned to go and stumbled a bit as the dizziness returned, stronger.

“You shouldn’t have tried it yet.” Kendle slipped a stiff arm around his waist as he began to shake. “More idiots now than before the war.” Against his protests, she led him to his tent on the outskirts of camp. “Come on. Take a snooze.”

Adrian stopped arguing and tried to pretend he didn’t need her help. He tossed an arm around her shoulders instead and tugged her closer. “Thanks.”

Kendle shuddered at the manhandling and dug her fingers into his hip until her nails were able to rake skin even through the shirt. Her other hand tightened on the gun in her holster.

“Easy... I’m not him.”

Kendle pulled the rage in as best she could to tolerate the closeness. Being touched without a warning was enough to send her into a bloody fury.

“I understand, a little.” Adrian had avoided her mental state during the times Angela had scheduled them together. It was ironic that they had today free from each other and yet here they were.

“About what?” Kendle faked understanding, trying to avoid this conversation.

“Why you need to kill to get a release.”

Kendle paled a bit at hearing it aloud, but she didn't deny it. “So do I. I'm killing him again and again.”

“A lot of the women here feel that way. It's why females in the Eagles had to happen. If not, women might have become dangerous.”

Kendle stopped, shrugging his arm off. “Don't you understand that we already are? Men, in control just because they are men, is a myth. We've allowed it, but at some point, we're going to make a different choice and slaughter your gender. *You'll* go in the first few waves.” She left him standing there with a thoughtful expression on his face.

Kendle didn't care why. All she could see was a future where women ruled and men served. It was her dream now, along with blood. She hoped she lived long enough to witness that shift in power. Males didn't understand how often women had reconsidered their choice to be subservient. Now that the war had done so much damage to the world, it would be an easy repeal if they ever got together and voted on it. No mistakes that a woman-ruled world could ever make would be as bad as what the males had done during their centuries of terror.

4

Cynthia was relieved to discover the main room of the workout tent abandoned. The Eagles were busy loading and training outdoors with the new hit-

and-run styles that Marc had introduced upon his return. They were trying to get the basics down before everyone left for their missions.

Cynthia dropped down on the weight bench with a low grunt, hoping the morning mess bell now ringing would also keep people occupied. She needed the peace.

The lifting weight limit for her was too strict as far as Cynthia was concerned, but she didn't push it as she worked out. She wasn't going to do anything to risk her child's life. At least, no more than she had to for them to survive. Angela's chore was ugly enough to cost both of their lives if she screwed up or something unexpected went wrong, but it was a risk that everyone was taking.

"Can I join you?"

Cynthia didn't growl at the primed rookie Eagle who had just come in. "I'm not good company."

Kip didn't take the hint, immediately choosing the bench next to hers instead of one of the other five scattered around the canvas.

"That's okay." Cynthia's Asian features were the center of every fantasy that Kip had ever had. "No sweat. I'll talk for both of us."

Cynthia gritted her teeth and kept doing the repetitions without a change in expression, but the air in the tent grew chilly. She wanted to be alone.

"So, I hear you like to read. Me too. Read a lot before the war." Kip loaded too much weight for his 5'11", 190 lb. frame onto the bar, and didn't secure

the disks tightly. He dropped heavily onto the bench, making the plastic fart. “Bet we like the same stories.”

Kip began doing fast lifts that quickly had him breathing like a train and throwing off stale body odor.

Cynthia ground her teeth harder and tried to concentrate. The temperature in the tent went down again, cooling her off despite the sweating.

“I was thinking you and me are a lot alike. We should date or something.” Kip snatched a quick peek at his love interest and saw her nipples poking against the thin shirt and bra she had on. He lost his grip; the weights tilted, sliding the disks off the bar. They slammed to the floor with nerve-jarring clangs.

“Damn it.” Trying to be cool, Kip spun up and off the bench, but he slammed into the metal brace for the bar.

“Ug!” He slid to his knees. “Oh...” Kip felt around on his skull, whining, “That hurts! Why didn’t you warn me?”

Cynthia’s breath streamed out in front of her as she blew anger through clenched teeth instead of screaming. She lifted the weights faster as he stumbled around collecting the pieces and grumbling. *What an asshat.*

“I guess I’ll have to pay you back for that one.” Trying to carry too much at once, he lost his hold on the stack of heavy disks. They clanged to the floor again.

Cynthia set her bar into place. Icy air blew across the tent and lifted the flap from the inside. “In exactly one minute, this tent will be ripped apart. You should leave.”

Kip opened his mouth to protest.

A gust of cold wind slammed into his face. It sucked his breath away and replaced it with painful, choked tears.

Cynthia couldn't have stopped even if she wanted to. The wind slammed down Kip's throat until he was clutching his neck and gasping. His face filled with panic, face going bluish. Cynthia closed her lids in ecstasy. She'd never felt anything so amazing. *It will kill him. I can kill him.*

The thought snapped Cynthia into a place of miserable guilt.

Kip fell to the ground as the wind vanished. He lay there gasping and coughing, as she moved to his side.

Cynthia knelt down, stung by the way he flinched, but she didn't let that stop her from gently taking his hand. “Do you still want me and my dangerous child?”

As he realized it was the baby, not her, Kip felt some of his anger fade. The fear however, had him cautiously shaking his head.

“Good.” Cynthia smiled, patted his cold hand. “I'm sorry for what he did to you. I promise to talk to Angela about it and learn how to control him.”

Soothed more, Kip rubbed at his throat and kept his mouth shut. Talking would feel like chewing broken glass.

Cynthia leaned closer, face serene enough to make Kip think she was about to hug him. What she did was put her mouth against his neck and sniff him as if he were a buffet.

When she drew back, Kip was shaking lightly, expression fearful.

“You’ll tell them you gulped your entire mug of coffee while it was still hot. They’ll give you pain meds. You’ll spend a few days in your tent stoned and off work detail.” She stared hungrily at his neck, though she actually thought his smells might make her puke. “This didn’t happen. Because if it did, and you told on my child, I might have to do something about that. You can see that, right? I would have no choice.”

Kip nodded jerkily, opening his mouth to swear he would never tell.

Cynthia placed a finger across his lips; he froze in revulsion, very near panic. “Shhh. That coffee was hot. You better go visit the doctor.”

Kip didn’t move until she did and then he was up and out of the tent before she could blink.

Cynthia dropped back down onto the bench, ignoring the evidence in the tent and the feeling of being gaped at. She was too shocked by what she’d done.

“That won’t work on everyone.”

Cynthia found Kevin in the doorway of the large hay room. He'd clearly witnessed it all. They hadn't spoken since Marc had delivered the news.

Cynthia shrugged as if she wasn't horrified at her tactics. "It will on *his* kind."

Kevin stayed where he was. "Don't you think it was overkill?"

"You can say that." Cynthia's voice was dazed. Kevin frowned. "What is it?"

Cynthia slid a loving hand over her mostly still flat stomach. "My son."

Kevin felt the curls of jealousy and fear, but it also completed Cynthia for him. She'd been a fierce reporter. As a mother, she would be dangerous. It was admirable. And intimidating.

Cynthia started to ask Kevin if he'd made a choice yet, but he was gone from the doorway. The sound of him hitting the bags in the large hay room echoed. Cynthia felt the chill wanting to return. She rubbed her stomach. "How about some food?"

"If you wait a couple minutes, I'll go along," Kevin called, swinging out his anger and confusion as best he could.

Cynthia, surprised, stayed sitting on the bench, listening to his sounds and trying to catch a hint of his smells. She wasn't worried over Angela finding out. Her kind wouldn't become deadly when they found out how powerful her baby already was. However, the sheep would become the wolves and tear her apart in their blind terror. She'd known that as soon as she'd felt Jennifer's child express her

anger at a hold that was too tight. Only a handful of people knew, thanks to careful babysitting and swift excuses, but something like this was a direct threat.

The camp wouldn't understand the babies had no other way to communicate yet. How Cynthia knew that was common sense. In a few months, when their brains were more developed, advanced communications might be possible, but for now, it was sleepy, angry, hungry, or content, and nothing else would pacify them until those needs were satisfied. It was exhausting. She had no idea how she was going to hold it all together, but if it was like this for her, what was it like for their leader, who had to be a rock at all times?

Cynthia wouldn't have traded places with Angela for anything. The stress, on top of this constant demanding and weariness, would be too much.

5

“You're quiet these days.”

Jennifer tore her gaze from the amazing mountain views around camp to gaze at Kyle with shuttered eyes. She didn't like pretending things were fine when they weren't. “I'm growing up these days.”

Kyle didn't argue. It was becoming harder and harder to think of her as a teenager.

Jennifer flushed. “I know. You're doing great.”

Kyle grinned at the praise. He couldn't help it. "You think?"

"Yes. Especially at night."

Kyle swallowed at the quick, hot images. Just lying in the same tent, in the same bed, was enough to keep him... Kyle stopped the thought, reddening as she giggled. There was an edge of flirting between them now that was driving him crazy.

Jennifer didn't want to ruin the good mood, but she had to let him know part of her role in Angela's plan. He wouldn't like it, but orders were orders.

Kyle felt the calm vanish and braced. "What is it?"

"I'm supposed to work with Conner. Alone."

Kyle took that in as well as he could. "Does he scare you?"

"All guys do, but I'm working through it. He's just a boy."

"So why bring it up?" People were being thrown off teams for much less than what she'd just told him.

"My orders said to tell you."

Kyle didn't like the sound of that. "Did she say why?"

"Yeah, she...uh..." Jennifer stared at the ground. "She said I may need help later and you'll know where Conner is and be able to find me."

Kyle realized several things at once. The first was that Jennifer wasn't scared, she was excited. The second was that Angela knew all of them too well. Her ability to predict their future choices was

frightening. The third was that Angela was providing him and Jennifer a way out.

“I don’t want it!” he growled, making her jump. “I don’t need a safety net.”

Jennifer waited for him to calm down before delivering the rest of her message. “Angela also said the baby deserves a chance to live free, even if it is on the run. That’s why you’ll take the safety net she’s giving you. Her exact words.”

Kyle’s anger and guilt fought a nasty battle, but in the end, he chose to keep the information to himself. He loved Autumn and wanted her to be happy, but if it would allow Jennifer to live, he would do it and honor be damned.

Jennifer caught that and was relieved. Kyle knew he had to save the baby to have a future with her and that now meant two determined adults to look after Autumn. The baby was all Jennifer cared about. She was preparing herself to be hurt if it was needed, or even die. As long as Autumn got to live, it was enough. And if by some miracle they all survived, she was driving away from here, alone, and never looking back. She’d had enough of the ghosts, but she didn’t think it would come to that. She’d had the dream too many times to ignore it. She was supposed to die in this war, and Safe Haven would raise her daughter.

“The herd is on the move.” Kyle didn’t smile at his joke. He could feel Jennifer stewing over the future.

Jennifer saw three of the pregnant women advancing toward the mess and scanned for the others. She spotted Cynthia and Kevin emerging from the training tent, then Marc and Angela coming from behind a supply truck. Kenn and Tonya, appearing happy despite how hard Marc was working the Marine, fell in behind the couple as they came from the new doctor's tent, where Tonya had just received her checkup. It was as if a bell had been rung. Two minutes later, every mother-to-be was under the awning of the mess, cackling and picking through the food left over from breakfast.

Kyle wasn't surprised when the cook and his two assistants rushed out with fresh bowls. Extra food was one of the first concessions that Marc had made to the basic camp rules. He wanted fat, healthy babies and that only happened from feeding the moms.

"It's a bit creepy."

"Agreed." Jennifer laughed. "But it's also sweet. It's like the babies are..." Jennifer clammed up.

Kyle frowned. "Don't do that, Jenny. I know we're different, but don't shut me out. It'll put walls up that I can't get through."

Jennifer briefly considered telling him that she didn't want him behind some of her walls, but she decided that wasn't entirely true. She wanted to be able to be honest with him on everything. She just didn't want his bad reactions. She didn't know how

to handle most of them. “It’s like the babies want a play date.”

Kyle recognized the trust moment and was careful with his response. “That might raise some alarm in the sheep.”

“I don’t like it when you call them that!” Jennifer snapped. “They’re our people.”

Surprised, Kyle grinned at her. “Caught the bug, didn’t you?”

“Yes. I love Safe Haven.”

Kyle gently put an arm around her for a soft hug. “So do I.”

“I’m taking it.” Jennifer drew in a breath. “We’re taking the safety net, Reece. You’re coming with me.”

Kyle leaned down and placed a light kiss to her forehead. “Yes, ma’am.”

Secure in what she’d needed from him, Jennifer placed a return kiss on his jaw as a reward for agreeing, and for being patient.

Kyle froze, as he always did.

Jennifer lingered, resting her head against his.

Kyle felt peace and strength surround them, and gave up the act. He grinned like a fool. “You should insist on stuff more often, Jenny.”

“Maybe I will.” She liked the feel of his arm, the smell of his aftershave. “I miss the stubble a bit. That first night, it made you seem...”

“Dangerous?” Kyle supplied.

“Yes, but more than that.” She hesitated, not sure how to explain.

Kyle lifted a brow in amusement. “Sexy?”

“Yes.”

Kyle felt his day was getting better and better, and didn’t push. “Nice. You looked like hell.”

Jennifer gasped.

Kyle laughed aloud as she playfully slapped at him. This was all he’d ever wanted—someone to love who could at least care for him in return. He hadn’t planned to become obsessed with an abused teenager, but now that he had, Kyle wouldn’t trade it for anything. *Before rescuing Jennifer, I was only faking life.*

Chapter Three
I See More



1

“Try to relax.”

Kenn’s words drew a snort from both females. They were behind the main camp, using the naturally rough landscape and dreary weather to simulate bad sniper conditions.

Kenn frowned. “You can’t pull the trigger when you’re tense. You’ll miss every single time.”

Crista took in a breath and released it slowly, seeing her shot before she took it.

“Now fire.”

Crista jerked the trigger; there was only a puff of dirt near the target.

“Next.” Kenn wondered how much skill Angela needed these two to have. Crista was good when she took her time and Samantha was good even when she was rushed, but neither was trained for doing this during combat.

Sam gently pulled the trigger. She was pleased when her slug smacked into the balloon and popped it. They were saving the more powerful shells for the battle, but hitting a target hundreds of feet away was a big rush.

“Good. Next.”

Crista didn’t like being shown up. She hit the next two balloons without even trying.

Sam responded in kind by hitting her next target dead center.

Kenn settled down a bit. This was the first time he had worked directly with the snipers on Angela’s team. He hadn’t been expecting much.

“Bump them to the next set.” Marc was passing by on his way to help Charlie’s team with their practice. Marc had refused the teenager’s demand of Kenn as his running target; their aim wouldn’t be as careful with someone they didn’t like.

Kenn frowned. “Now or later?”

“May not be a later.” Marc paused. That old feeling of trouble was everywhere he went today.

“Tonight.” Angela joined them, leaning against his big arm. “Something’s close.”

“Yeah.” Marc didn’t ask what it was or send his demon searching for it. From here on, this was

Angela's show. He had to be careful not to interfere with it.

"I love you."

Marc glanced down in surprise. Not at the words, but the tone. It held an endless well of sadness. "You okay?"

Angela shook her head, allowing him a tiny glimpse into the true feelings that she could share. "I'm damned after this, Marc. We all are."

Marc didn't realize how much that would matter later as he slid an arm around her hip. "It's worth it, right?"

"Of course!" She'd forced cheer into her voice. There was a long time to go before the full truth could be revealed to everyone. She needed to cowboy up. "I have rounds." She moved off toward the small row of tents where she had other teams working on their coming runs.

Marc didn't watch her, drawn into the session again as both sniper women began to protest the new distance for the next level, insisting their coming targets would be closer. "Does that matter? If you can hit it at three hundred yards, you can definitely hit it at one hundred, right?"

The females got his point and returned to their challenge.

"Aim small." Kenn appreciated the support from Marc, but he didn't show it as he continued the lesson. "Account for the wind, the leaves, and even the spider web that might blow across right as you fire."

Samantha went first. Hard or not, she couldn't wait to be doing this for real.

Marc didn't stay for the next shots, but he was positive the females would hit whatever they aimed at. Kenn didn't understand how intent these women would become once the actual moment arrived to kill. Angela had chosen well.

2

Angela ducked into the tinkering tent, as Theo had dubbed it, and saw that their new partner had arrived. "Candy."

"Boss."

Theo held up a sheet of paper from the messy stack on the table. "These okay for her?"

Angela read it, sensing a spark that she hadn't seen before. That was good. "Yes. She can do all of that. Marc evaluated her yesterday."

"Great." Theo blew out a sigh of nerves and excitement. "We're all set then."

"Can I keep this?" Angela was sure they had another copy. Everyone was using carbon paper these days to be sure not to miss a single line of details.

"Yep." Theo glanced at Candy, who was sitting quietly, waiting to be told what to do. "Can I eval her? For my team?"

Candy didn't have the training her other females did. She'd come late to the party, but that didn't mean there wasn't work for her. Angela shrugged.

“If it makes you feel better. I think she’ll be fine with you.”

“No, I meant keeping her. We don’t have a female yet.”

Angela stared in surprise, along with Candy. “What position?”

“Lackey to start.” Theo passed over another sheet. “Eventually she’ll help us place things we don’t want seen. She has design experience.”

The second page was observations on all the members of his team, plus Candy and a few others. “I am keeping this.”

Theo grinned. “I thought you might find some of that useful.”

“Why wasn’t all this included on the personal sheets?” Angela skimmed it and saw that Candy had designed websites for her business and had a degree in graphics. The next line was about Theo himself. “And why didn’t you tell us you speak four languages and have a minor in architecture?”

“It wasn’t on the questionnaire when I joined.” Theo shrugged. “I’ve been a tool engineer for a decade. Didn’t think the other stuff mattered until recently.”

“I’ll let you know about her position. Handle her as you see fit until then.” Angela tucked the papers into her pocket and ducked out of the canvas. After this was all over, she would revamp the Safe Haven personal information sheets. If Adrian had known Theo was so valuable, she was sure he would have given the engineer serious work long before the

government had reemerged. Engineering was a prize during the apocalypse, but add architecture with it and that was someone who could actually build the future.

Zack fell in with Angela as she came from the tinkering tent; she let him stay as she slid into the next canvas where Seth and Doug were at a table with the same messy stack of papers that Theo had been surrounded by. “Gentlemen, are we all set here?”

“Almost.” Seth kept scribbling. “We’ve got it packed up except for the padding. I don’t have it on my list.”

“You’ll see to that personally?” Angela was depending on it. The padding would save lives.

Seth tried a little humor to ease her worry. “Right this minute, if you like.”

“Yes, that would be good.”

Seth frowned at the grim tone, but rose and did as she wanted.

Angela waited until Seth was gone and then met Doug’s glare. The big man hadn’t been given an envelope; he was staring resentfully. “It’s not because you’re sick. You won’t accept that, I know, but time will prove it.”

Doug didn’t respond.

She left the tent. In a few days, the big man would understand why she’d put him with the camp for the fight. Until then, he would help with the thousand other chores she needed done. It was FND,

for lying. Everyone now knew he had type II diabetes.

Angela knew where Seth would go first and took herself there as well, aware of Zack still trailing her. Zack had opened his first order this morning and he had questions. His was one of the few envelopes that hadn't been dated for Labor Day.

Angela spotted Seth lingering outside the kids' training tent, hoping for a moment with her even though Becky was busy working and he was supposed to be getting ready for a run to find the padding they needed. Angela took a paper from her notebook as she joined him.

Seth straightened defensively, but Angela only handed him the sheet, not even casting a disapproving glare. He understood when he read it.

I want the camp moved tonight. You're overseeing it. Start right this minute. I already have a crew going for the padding.

Seth hadn't been given an envelope either. This was the reason why.

Seth spun away from the training tent. He would see Becky in the morning, when he returned from escorting their people to the den. It was a job with too much honor and authority to allow anything to distract him. Seth was out of sight, then out of mind, a few minutes later.

Angela was pleased with being able to predict Seth's moves and moods. And sorry for it. More guilt settled onto her shoulders; she stood straighter,

balancing it. She'd discovered why Adrian had stopped to do this so often. There was always a new layer of weight being added.

3

Inside the kid's training tent, Marc wasn't happy. "What are you hiding from me?"

All four teens went still and silent, tossing up even thicker mental blocks than they had already been using.

"Let me guess. She gave you a job that I won't like and then told you to keep it secret?" Marc snorted at the crumbling walls and shifting eyes. "Great." He took the chair in the center of the tent and brought up his protective bubble. "Someone shoot me and do it now!"

Shoulder-to-shoulder, all of the kids drew weapons and started pulling the trigger.

Marc waited until all of them were empty before lowering his shield. Bullets clattered to the floor at his feet. "Jennifer, perfect. Conner and Charlie, not bad, but a bit low. Becky?"

The girl was staring at the gun in her hand.

"Rebecca?"

Becky's head snapped up. She shrugged. "Got lost for a minute. What?"

Marc pointed at the slug in the tent wall behind his head. "Is that yours?"

She nodded resignedly. "Yes."

"Why?"

“I flinched at all the noise, even though we have the plugs in our ears.”

“That makes you a frontline shooter.” Marc motioned them to reload. “If you’re in front of your team, you won’t hit any of them with a stray round.”

Becky vowed to always do that. She only wanted to hurt the enemy.

Marc got into the target position again and gestured. “Put the blindfolds on, one at a time. You’re following my sounds. Becky goes first. Everyone else, stay behind her.”

Outside the tent, Angela sent the witch in to be sure that no one was wounded. The teenagers weren’t like her girls, who were making fewer mistakes now that they had a couple months of training under their belts. It would take time for these kids to show that progress. In the meantime, Marc would pass on important details that might save their lives when things went crazy.

The kids knew what was coming. With their gifts, she wouldn’t have been able to keep their roles from them, so she’d told them shortly after they’d chosen Charlie as their team leader. Despite the youth and inexperience, all four of these teenagers were going to play vital roles in her plan and she would try to live with what came from it.

Angela went to the final canvas in the widely spaced row and tapped on the flap. The men inside were working on under the table projects that had to

be in place when the majority of the other envelopes were opened.

“Hey, Boss.” Neil didn’t look up from the temperamental explosives he and Jeremy were packing for travel. “Almost set. We’re on the last box.”

Angela stayed near the flap, aware of Shawn right outside. As her guard, he was ready to grab her and pull her to safety if something went wrong with the boxes.

Neil tucked the plastic under the edge of the white block and slid the package into the anti-static bag.

Jeremy took the brick from there and placed it in the thickly padded box. Neither man spoke.

Angela left the warm tent, not wanting them to be the least bit rushed. She felt Shawn’s relief and flashed him an annoyed glance.

Shawn shrugged, smiling wide enough to make his dimples show.

Angela threw her hands up in exasperation. *Men!*

Shawn chuckled, dropping back a bit as Jeremy and Neil came outside while their team loaded the boxes onto the truck that was also inside the wide tent. Angela hadn’t wanted anyone to see what this team was working on. They’d done a great job of deflecting the curious, even Kevin, who had pretended he was searching for Cynthia.

Jeremy updated her. “It’s a go—on all of it.”

“All three locations?”

“Yes. Half a team is at each site to wait for the main group.” Neil didn’t like it that Angela had felt the need for three dens to keep their people safe. It implied two of those might be breached.

“We cleared them yesterday and last night.” Jeremy smiled at her. “We’re all set.”

“Good. Seth is in charge of the move. You two will help him until it’s time to open your envelopes.”

Both men nodded, stifling questions and protests. She hadn’t responded to anyone who had tried to get more information out of her.

“In a few days you two will be here, with a lot on your minds. My plan is bigger and I see more. Follow your orders and things will all work out in the end.”

“Can you swear that?” Neil knew it was connected to Samantha or they wouldn’t be getting this warning. “Can you swear we’ll be with her again?”

“Yes, so long as everyone does their job.” Angela didn’t flinch at the new guilt layer. She had to have people like Samantha on the front lines, even if it cost their lives.

Zack had been observing as she visited with each tent; he now had the answers to most of his questions. “I’m heading out.”

Angela nodded. She’d let him figure it out for himself and he had. He wasn’t the only one being kept out of the main loop with a secret job. Most of the fighters wouldn’t like knowing Zack was wiring

explosives into all three of the dens that she'd chosen. Zack and his team had already been busy since Marc returned and their days were only going to get longer.

4

He comes. Beware.

Sam paused in the middle of twirling cold spaghetti onto her fork. She'd been enjoying the warmth of Dog curled on top of her boots, but that comfort was gone. She glanced around slowly, feeling an icy chill that screamed for attention.

Who? she asked warily. Samantha hadn't been communicating with that voice inside. She wasn't sure of the rules or the etiquette.

The enemy.

Samantha found Angela at the next table and locked eyes with her, uncomfortable with the new gifts she'd been given. The visions were often ugly.

Angela scanned her and then left the mess without a word to anyone.

Samantha found Marc in her mind an instant later.

Marc took in the blurry images with dismay and also left without speaking.

Neither of them had told her to keep it quiet, so Samantha didn't try to stop Jennifer and others from reading the danger. Instead of the panic and confusion that could have ensued, all of the females

and their mates looked at Samantha, waiting for orders. Even Cynthia.

Samantha felt the pride and the stress of making the choices, but the need to save whoever she could overwhelmed the other emotions. “He’s here. She’s right on the time. Go get your gear. While you’re alone, open the first envelope and get on it. The waiting is over.”

Neil and Jeremy appeared at her side an instant later.

Sam grinned sadly. “Wish there was time to get used to this.”

Neither man knew what to say.

Sam let them off the hook with a sharp tone and a big smile. “Snap to, Eagles!”

Neil opened his mouth, maybe to question her real meaning, and Sam stopped him. “No. Let’s go spend a few minutes in our tent while I pack.” She headed that way before either of them could argue.

The mess was deserted a minute later.

A few seconds after that, the camp sirens began to blare.

“There’s a storm coming. Take cover. I repeat, there’s a storm coming. Please proceed to your tent and open your first envelope. Camp will be rolled in according to the new directives. Be in your assigned place before evening mess. There is no backing out now, no backing down. We are going to reclaim our country and drive out the enemy. This is our land, our lives, and we will never surrender!”

The prerecorded message from Angela repeated continuously for an hour.

5

Conner stayed still and silent as the camp rushed around, chattering and appearing scared. He didn't care as much about that right now. He would do his part, and do it better than even Angela expected, but right now, he was focused on the couple lingering outside their tent. The pair didn't know they were being observed, and that was how Conner wanted it. His dad had said he would help, if Conner had the patience to wait for the right time. So he was contenting himself with watching from a distance. He'd excused his behavior by saying he went for a walk every morning to help strengthen the leg that had been shot.

Conner stopped breathing as a pair of Eagles came by, but they didn't notice him and he was able to resume his stalking. He had a basic pattern now (*find her, observe her and the guard that was always on her tent, then allow nature to take its course*) and he moved into the final part in a daze. This was the time when he could be easily caught. The excitement sent blood rushing into his loins.

Not far away, the vet spotted Conner hiding in the bushes and weeds, and scowled heavily at the scene, but he didn't stop. He had somewhere to be.

Angela hadn't given him an envelope. He was supposed to be with the rest of the camp when it all went down, but the vet had other plans. If he was successful, Angela would be grateful enough to grant him favors later, when it mattered.

Conner fell to his knees, breathing in hurried gasps that he tried to muffle with the sleeve of his jacket. As he knelt there, trying to recover, movement drew his attention. He watched the vet disappear into the thicker part of the woods. *Did he see me?*

Conner hurriedly covered himself and got out of the area in case Chris told someone and Eagles came searching. The teenager didn't wonder why the vet was sneaking out of camp, too concerned with his own infractions.

Conner hurried to his tent to reread his first instructions, vaguely aware of birds fleeing the new noises and small animals running for dens.

That'll be us shortly.

6

“Look.”

Sherman spotted the flock of upset birds that his right hand man had pointed out. “Finally!”

The mercenary team leader pulled a radio from his kit, aware that the other men with him were packing their gear in quick, eager motions. They were always relieved when the waiting was over.

Sherman clicked the mike in the code they'd chosen for this mission, breaking the static with calculated pauses of communication. If Safe Haven figured out what they were doing, they would switch to a different format. Sherman didn't think they would need to. He and his team had performed this particular invasion many times. It always worked. All they'd been waiting for was a sign that Safe Haven was on the move. Command knew they wouldn't stay out in the open for the fight. In the confusion of relocating so many people, Sherman and his team would have an opportunity to grab a few members of leadership.

Sherman didn't wait for a response. He slipped the radio onto the tool belt around his lean hips and began packing up his gear. They would be on their way within the hour. Dressed as Eagles, they wouldn't be stopped.

Chapter Four
Do Your Duty!



1

“We’re almost there, sir.” The pilot hadn’t expected an answer, but he couldn’t stop a glance at his passenger. Jonathan had never transported anyone as deadly. The Butcher even appeared dangerous while sleeping. The pilot didn’t repeat himself. The stories about Major Donner implied he was always alert.

The pilot checked his gauges, adjusting a bit for the stiff winds. He glanced through his left window, spotting one of the hundreds of battlefields that the descendants had left in their wake. The ground was charred, gapping, and even gone in some places.

The pilot looked to the right and found Major Donner sitting there, staring at him. “Fuck me!”

The Major grinned coolly. “I might, if you don’t pull up. Now.”

The pilot jerked hard on the stick; the plane missed the looted water tower by a foot.

“You’ll do.” Major Donner yawned. “How long?”

The pilot swallowed his guts. “Five minutes, sir.”

“Fine. Circle twice, then bring this bird down exactly where I tell you to.”

“Yes, sir.”

The landscape was harsh and ugly in the morning glare, matching Major Donner’s countenance. His scars, crooked nose, and missing tooth were a warning of how dangerous he was, much like the land below. Only the smartest would survive here, or those with descendants watching out for them. Major Donner didn’t plan to underestimate his prey. The powers that be had reached desperation in their fight to capture the Safe Haven descendants. They’d finally sent in the best.

Donner had cleaned out several pockets of their kind since the war, including one in Washington State that had earned him top-level security clearance. He’d spent the last four months in the north, cleaning. He was glad to be under American military rule again. The Canadians had been extremely strict when it came to visits from foreigners. Considering that Major Donner and his team had been there to assassinate their slowly forming leadership council, it seemed wise on their

part. It hadn't mattered, of course, but Donner had respected the effort.

The United States government also had people in the south, though few of those had checked in recently. The Mexicans, led by a man called Sebastian, were fighting more aggressively than anyone had anticipated. Safe Haven's hope had spread, but Major Donner was slotted to head there as soon as he put out these flames. The Mexicans would have a couple more weeks to live and then Donner was supposed to lay waste to them all. At least, that's what Uncle Sam had planned. What Donner ended up doing wouldn't even be close, but the boss wouldn't know until it was too late.

"Damn."

The pilot's shock was to be expected. The base below was destroyed. It was so bad that a tent city had been set up for the troops. Donner assumed the remaining buildings weren't safe, but he didn't care either way. The men now staring up at his plane with resentment would learn that he wasn't wasting any more time here than he had to. "Bring us down right there in the middle."

The pilot didn't argue, despite the fact that some of the tents below would be damaged. He brought the heavy plane down with careful, light hands, then gave Major Donner a nod. "All clear. Wait for you?"

"No." Donner grunted as he stood up. "I'll find my own way from here."

The pilot waited until Major Donner was visible through the big window and then began to turn the plane around to reuse the same area he'd cleared with his landing. As he rolled by the shouting men, the pilot radioed base. "Package is delivered. No trouble. Headed in."

The tent city was a disorderly clutter of canvas, equipment, and drunken, angry men. These were the reserves from the western base, the men who had earned passes and been promised that they would never have to venture out into this hell. Unlike the soldiers who had died in this fight before them, these thousand men *wanted* to be underground. It showed in the bad tempers and nasty remarks that had already begun to cause physical confrontations.

Philips, the highest ranked man on site, didn't push them or try to take control. He had to sleep and without friends (he was working on that, but it was slow going), Philips was sure he'd wake up to feel a blade sliding across his throat if he tried to insist on anything. He'd told base that in his last dispatch, flatly refusing to do his job. They'd informed him that a new commander was being sent to relieve him. The Butcher was rumored to be one of the best mercenaries in the business, but Philips wasn't sure that one man could handle these unruly soldiers, let alone make them attack Safe Haven.

Frowning, Philips watched Major Donner strut to the clearly marked tent waiting for him and duck

inside. Didn't the Major understand how upset these men were? They needed a sign of leadership.

Aware of all the resentful eyes on him, Philips limped into the tent behind his new boss.

"Welcome, Major Donner..." The man in front of him already intimidated Philips. "You have a full battalion of men to work with." The lackey looked around nervously when the imposing man didn't reply. "It's not much, I'm sure, compared to what you're used to, but it's all..."

"Stop."

Philips fell silent immediately. He'd served a congressional representative before the war. He knew when to be offended and when to tolerate. This was neither of those. Major Donner was here to assume command and Philips wanted to stay close. With his limp, he wasn't good for much else beyond supervising personal comforts.

"Where's the leader of this base?"

"I believe I'm talking to him, sir."

Major Donner sat down behind the ornate desk he was sure had once been in the hall of the base. It was a reception piece. Donner pulled a nearby pad of paper and pen closer, and wrote a short message. He held it out to his new lackey. "Take that to the *former* leader of these men. Make sure his group gets to read it. Report back."

"Yes, sir." Philips waited to be outside before scanning the small, tight script.

Only cowards go AWOL when it gets bloody. Remember your training and you may even come back alive.

Philips quickly handed the note to the man he thought of killing every day and quickly got out of the line of fire. It was a direct challenge that Sergeant Shilling wouldn't let pass.

“Get out here!”

“Come on, you bastard! No one calls me a coward!”

Major Donner came from his tent dressed in his usual hunting attire—kit on his back, rifle in his grip, pointed at the ground. The sight of those worn, well-fitting knives brought a tense silence to the small crowd. He was good with them.

Sergeant Shilling had brought a few friends, ten other angry men who thought they would shine while in charge. He stood in front of them with his arms crossed.

Donner raised a brow. “Well?”

Suddenly remembering that he'd called the Major out, Sergeant Shilling stepped forward. “Uh, call base and tell them we ain't attacking those people. Tell them to come and get us!”

Major Donner didn't respond to the demand or the cheering. He spent a few seconds evaluating positions, possible skills and reactions, then shrugged. “Maybe I will. First, you'll listen to what I have to say and make a choice. Okay?”

Caught off guard by the lack of resistance, the Sergeant caved. “Yeah, we’ll listen, but it ain’t gonna matter. We wanna go back where it’s safe.”

Major Donner smiled sarcastically. “So do I, but I ain’t goin’ underground to be ordered out again the next time they pick a fight they can’t win.”

“You sayin’ we couldn’t beat those Safe Haven rent-a-cops?” a soldier from Shilling’s group asked cockily. “Cause that isn’t true.”

“That’s right, man! We choose not to.”

Major Donner kept his smile in place. “You don’t have to convince me. I’m telling you that men who serve with me won’t be going back to the base after the fight. Ever. We’re going to...promote ourselves, to free contractors.”

No one spoke, confused to hear that talk from someone with so much authority.

Major Donner waved toward the serene mountains. “That’s where I’m going first. After I take over that camp, I will have supplies, livestock, and females, and maybe even a few powerful slaves to keep Uncle Sam off my ass.”

Now there was complete shock, exactly what Donner needed in this uneasy moment. He looked to Philips “You with me? They plan to send you off to Mexico to be a lackey there. One way ticket, I hear.”

Philips felt rage grow thicker in his heart. “Free contractor sounds good.” His choice confirmed, Philips was surprised when other soldiers began giving their agreement. It was as if they’d followed

his choice. Philips hid a frown. They were responding to the intimidating man next to him. Pretending he had their loyalty could get him killed and Philips wasn't going to let that happen. Not after everything he'd already suffered.

Sergeant Shilling felt his power slipping as men in his little group agreed with Philips. He snarled in defiance of the change in leadership. "This is my team! My men! We're not following you!"

The ten men came forward despite their true feelings, as Philips had known they would. He got out of the line of fire, sure he was about to witness Donner's death.

Ready for the reaction that he'd provoked, Major Donner jerked his rifle upward and began firing.

Soldiers scattered, some reaching for weapons still in holsters, but the element of surprise gave victory to the lone man and the hot machine in his hand. The Butcher mowed down the entire group.

The nearest witnesses fled, while the rest observed in shock. None of them had ever seen a commanding officer do that before the war.

If he had wanted to, Donner could have wiped out nearly a hundred gaping lemmings. Instead, he deftly slung the rifle over his shoulder and headed toward the largest tent. "Is that the mess? I'm starved."

Philips waited for the other soldiers to attack the crazy man or at least protest, but the shifting, eager

faces said it wasn't going to happen unless a spark was tossed.

Philips thought about it, but in the end, knowing his planned future tipped it in Major Donner's favor. Philips limped after their new boss, getting his notebook and pen out.

"Someone clean that up," Philips called over his shoulder, no longer worried about his orders not being followed. He stopped at the flap and looked back long enough to memorize the sight of his bitter enemy lying dead. "Leave that one there; let him rot."

Most of the men here knew how Shillings had killed Philips's son over a whore they'd found on a supply run. The order was obeyed without argument.

Major Donner ducked into the mess canvas and dropped his rifle and kit onto the front table. Behind the bare racks, a dirty, sullen cook was mixing something in a large bowl. The smell wasn't encouraging.

"We'll start on plans in a bit." Donner scanned the rest of the tent. "For now, no more calls to or from base. Tell them we're going quiet."

"Yes, sir, but won't they send a plane to find us after a while?"

"Yes."

"Do you know when?"

"We'll watch for it." When the plane came, Donner would either order it shot down or use it to secure his ride to the bunker for that attack. He

hadn't made up his mind yet and he certainly wasn't going to let these unhappy soldiers know when it was coming so they could plot a mutiny around it.

Philips studied the handsewn patches and symbols on the Major's kit. It appeared that the Butcher had traveled the world during his career.

"I have." Major Donner faced the opened flap where half a dozen men were watching and listening.

Philips paled. "You're one of them!"

"How else did you expect to defeat an entire group of descendants? You guys didn't stand a chance on your own." Donner eyed them, making silent promises. "But I can't kill them and take that mountain, not without all of you. Pass that on as well."

Philips was sure the troops would feel better knowing the Major was powerful. All of them had dreaded fighting Safe Haven after witnessing the destruction here. Their egos had prevented them from saying it, but the reason for refusing to fight had been clear.

"That's why I'm here." Major Donner noted the empty dishes waiting for mess to be called for this side of tent city. "We'll lose a bit—don't doubt it, but more than half will survive if they follow my orders. That's better odds than a bunker right now, yes?"

"Yes." Philips knew that to be true. Survival rates below ground were at 35%. The government needed control of the land again if they were going

to rebuild their evil empire. “We’ll get freedom after that? From you?”

Major Donner shrugged. “I’m the boss wherever I’m at and I like to have a wide space around me to roam. Any good man can stay with me and follow my lifestyle, or run for their tiny lives and stay out of my way. I couldn’t care less.”

Philips didn’t like all of it, but not answering to the government ever again was enough to start with. “I’m in.” Philips ignored the surprised sounds from those listening. “What do you need first?”

Major Donner grinned, brown eyes becoming solid black in his joy. “Hostages—as many as you can find. Any age will do.” In the silence, Donner pinned the surly cook with a hard glare. “Get out.”

The boy didn’t waste any time leaving.

Donner finally began the part of this job that Philips was familiar with. “Send out a hunting team. There’s a small farm ten clicks due north. Bring back everything they find—alive. Then call them all together right here. I have things to say.” Donner took a map from his jacket and unrolled it. “There are two underground ammo dumps, here and here.” He pointed as Philips came forward to hold one side. “We’ll scavenge what we can and then head here.” He pointed again. “This is a stockpile zone and has likely gone untouched. We’ll be in the black on weapons by this time tomorrow.”

The men were glad to discover the three areas were close by. It wasn’t hard for Philips to gather

three teams to head out on those missions. They were quickly out of sight as he returned to Donner's side, waiting for the next orders.

2

Donner stood on a stack of crates a short time later, rifle in hand as he addressed the troops. The rumors had circled the battalion. There was no need for a bullhorn; the soldiers all strained to hear and passed it back.

Donner knew how to set up a takeover. "Fresh meat for lunch!"

The cheer from that was loud enough to send birds flying and bring spies to their feet with notebooks in hand.

"Fresh ammo for breakfast!"

Another cheer came, this one nearly as enthusiastic. Bullets were always needed.

"I have promotions, awards, and a pass to give."

Quiet fell as confusion took over.

Donner stared at them. "I'll let forty of you compete for the bunker pass. Who wants to go? See me privately."

The soldiers muttered, wondering what the chore was.

Donner filled in the blanks with a simple sentence. "Snatch and grab. I only expect a few of the forty to survive."

There were more mutters as Donner finished his address by pointing to a small dust cloud in the

distance. “That’s our food rolling in. Pick the best three cooks and get them into the mess. Steaks for dinner, as rare as you want them.”

He hopped down from the crates and strode toward the coming team and their cargo. The four cows running behind the vehicle didn’t look as good as they had when he’d flown over, but Donner didn’t worry over it. The fresh meat would be enough. He would gain their loyalty through the benefits he delivered and when it all finally came together, south wasn’t the direction they would go. He’d decided on west, toward the skeleton crew of protection the government now had. It was the perfect time to take over the world. He just needed a few Safe Haven descendants to help him control things. *After that, nothing will stand in my way.*

3

“What are you doing?”

Shawn didn’t answer as he handed Angela a kit and a heavier coat. He pointed toward the truck nearby that was already running.

Angela kept a hand on her gun as she went to check it out. Around her, the camp was emptying and there wasn’t much for her to do. She’d been planning to grab a shower and a snack.

Angela opened the passenger door to find an envelope, a small purple flower, and a grinning driver. “What’s going on?”

Greg clicked his mike once, looking pointedly at the message.

Angela tore open the white envelope to read the small card.

I'm naked, I'm alone, and I have chocolate. Get in the truck.

Angela flushed bright red, sensing her driver was aware of what it said. Greg was a great blocker. His thoughts were currently full of gun names, serial numbers, and the various gear for those weapons—something she'd never bothered to memorize. He knew it would distract her.

Angela read the note again.

Then she got in the truck.

4

Dog scanned the camp as Angela left. She had moved the weaker members of her pack, leaving the strength and the magic here. For Dog, who caught too many of their thoughts and often sought out Charlie's one track mind for relief, the change was stressful. All the people here were worrying over the future; so were the ants. Dog was trying to work with them, mostly to keep busy, but their thoughts were full of anger at the sacrifice being asked of them. They also held loathing for the soldiers. Their communications were buzzing across the wolf's brain.

Dog padded into the middle of the struggling ants, sending a shout for silence.

The ants around him froze for an instant, then advanced aggressively.

Do it!

The insects weren't used to challenging things larger than they were and Dog had no trouble shaking them off. He tried to be careful not to step on them, as well, but that was a lost cause as the ants attacked.

Bite too!

The ants began nipping him, using their bodies to shove. The wolf allowed them to tip him over, completing the run.

Dog stayed down. He would have to do the wet work. The ants would make an excellent distraction so he would be able to get close to his target. That would have to be enough, because these insects weren't fighters, despite their size and numbers. He was relieved that Angela was only counting on the decoy.

Watching from nearby, Shawn joined Dog, kneeling down as the ants backed up. "Things okay?"

Dog liked Shawn almost as much as Dale. He pushed up to nuzzle Shawn's arm for a scratch.

Shawn did it carefully, still not used to the big animal's human qualities.

Yeah, right there!

Shawn rubbed a little harder, snickering a bit when the wolf began reacting to the urge to roll over and had to stop himself.

Dog got up after a minute, sitting on his haunches to view the Eagle he often walked their perimeter with. *I feel your unhappiness.*

Shawn's false cheer fell as the wolf glanced toward the couple walking by. Charlie and Tracy were laughing and whispering, arms around each other. Both males watching them sighed heavily.

"Yeah." Shawn forced his attention back to Dog. "But it's not our turn yet, you know?"

Dog huffed, rising. *That's not my problem.*

It is mine. Shawn was happy for the couples here, but loneliness was hard. "I need to do rounds. Come along?"

Dog padded to Shawn's heel. *Yes. She gave the ants training lessons today to keep them ready for tomorrow.*

"So it will happen then?"

Dog nodded his huge head. *Oh yes. Nothing can stop it now except fate. I believe this was her plan all along.*

That didn't comfort Shawn, but with nothing to do now except wait, he tried to put it from his mind. He and Dog would walk a while, then come back and surprise Charlie and Tracy.

Dog caught the thought and blew out an amused snort. *I'll jump through the window if you want.*

Shawn chuckled. "That'll kill their mood."

The pair made it to the rear of the newly shrunken camp, noting Jennifer and Kyle going into the training tent that was empty of people but not gear.

Dog looked up. *We'll make it a twofer.*

5

“Can I ask you something? You won’t like it.”

Kyle nodded, bracing a bit. “Sure.”

“If I were doing a...hit, what’s the most important thing to remember?”

Kyle’s expression became thunderous.

Jennifer was glad she’d waited until they were alone in the training tent.

“Are you?”

Jennifer nodded quickly. Angela knew they would have to release some details to their trainers. “More than one.”

Kyle was instantly terrified. Fear stopped the anger and replaced it with concern. “At the same time?”

Jennifer shrugged. “That wasn’t revealed.”

Kyle spun toward the small hay room to take his rage out on the punching bag. He already knew yelling at her or Angela wouldn’t change anything.

Jennifer winced when Kyle swung and blood splattered the bottom of the bag. He hit again, harder, and she forced herself to stay there and watch. She would be facing much worse soon.

Kyle seemed to catch the thought, but before he could begin ranting, Jennifer shoved into his darkening mind. *Come kiss me twice and then teach me. I'd like to survive this.*

Kyle was stunned with pain and desire, brain and body in opposition. “What?”

Jennifer leaned against the hay wall. “We’re alone and you keep thinking about kissing me. I said you can.”

Kyle was being led away from the danger line and he knew it; he allowed it because there was no other choice. Angela would have her way and maybe Jennifer’s life.

Jennifer paled a bit, but nodded. “If that’s what it takes, I’ll give it willingly, Reece. Wouldn’t you?”

“It should be me! You’re a kid, not a killer!”

Jennifer stiffened. “I’m neither of those things, though I’ve been both. Now, I’m a mother and there isn’t a hell I won’t smother myself in to save my daughter.” She went to their setup and started firing at multiple targets as quickly as she could.

Kyle watched without speaking, still running through ways to stop this even though he knew there wasn’t any. Angela’s warning was ringing in his ears as Jennifer rolled and fired smoothly. She was mad at him.

“Yeah, a little.” She reloaded. “You expect me to sit by quietly when you risk your life, but I don’t get the same respect.”

“It’s not what I want for you. I know it’s your life, your choice. I still don’t want it.”

“Then we have a problem, Kyle.” Jennifer resumed her starting position. “If I survive this run, there will be others.”

If you stay...

Jennifer went through her run again.

Kyle felt her teetering on the edge of a choice, though he wasn't sure exactly what decision she was stewing over.

"Us. I either have your support or I don't."

"I'm afraid you'll be killed. Or hurt."

"So am I." Jennifer was unhappy with her coverage of the two-dozen targets scattered around the tent. "But I'm more afraid of hiding and letting everyone else die for me. That's not the person I am, not after everything I've been through."

Kyle often forgot how much older she was mentally because of the hells she'd suffered. All he could see was a beautiful kid about to give up her life for nothing. In his mind, there wasn't anything Jennifer could do to help or hinder this war—at least not any more than Angela's male fighters.

Kyle was unprepared for her reaction to the thought.

Jennifer shoved her gun into the holster and faced him with her hands on her hips. "Do you think she's doing this so women can be full Eagles? Or to prove we already are? Do you think she would ever send females to the front lines if it wasn't needed?!"

Kyle hadn't been able to come up with a reason. "Then why?"

"Numbers." Jennifer placated him, knowing the biggest answer was one he couldn't handle yet. "She gave us the numbers, Kyle. Our enemy expects to face an army of men. If that happens, we'll lose

our fighters, our protectors. Safe Haven will be exposed to every group of evil that comes by and it would take decades for those who survive to be old enough for any adult chore, like reproduction.” Jennifer stared toward where her daughter was currently napping in Angela’s tent, with a guard standing inside the open flap. “By using women and kids to lure those soldiers into traps, she will have saved us now and for the future.”

Kyle accepted that answer because he knew it was the only one he was going to get. Jennifer had made up her mind. She was doing this.

“Yes, I am.” She motioned to the target. “But I have to do better. My aim is great, but I have to hit them faster. Help me?”

Kyle nodded, reluctantly moving to the training position. “You have one issue that I see.”

Jennifer gave him a go-ahead gesture.

Kyle forced the rest of it from his mind. She was doing it. He would help her. “Change the order of your targets. When you face a group, there’s a simple rule to remember. Packing, Possible, Everyone else.”

Jennifer raised a brow. “I don’t get it.”

Kyle explained. “Those with a weapon come first—Packing. Those who might have a weapon out of sight are second—Possible. Everyone else comes last.”

Jennifer stared at the targets, quickly picking out those details before firing in the new order.

It flowed better from the first shot. She grinned as she finished four seconds faster. “Sweet!”

Kyle chuckled at her happiness. *How about that kiss now?*

Jennifer moved straight to his side and slid into his tensing arms. “Here you go.”

Dog lunged through the tent flap and slammed into the side of the hay wall, knocking both of them to the ground.

Jennifer landed on top of Kyle.

His sexy chuckle gave her the courage to lean down and deliver the promised kiss.

Dog and Shawn stared in resignation at the couple.

Shawn shook his head. “That’s not the reaction we got from the camper couple.”

Dog snorted. *I know, right? We got to see cheek out of that one!*

Chapter Five
Bingo Time



1

“**A**re you finished yet?”

Tonya turned around to say she’d get out of the camper when she was done and found Kenn standing against the closed door.

Tonya noted that stare and those smirking lips, and shook her head. “No way. I’ve got work to do.”

Kenn flipped the lock on the door, aware of Shawn and Dog making rounds. “Come here.”

Tonya giggled as Kenn chased her around the narrow area, both ending up in a stall without the water running, but still making steam rise. If the boss could steal down time, so could they.

Outside the camper, a shadow padded by. Dog hadn't planned to bother Kenn, but the Marine thinking he had things covered by simply locking the door offended the wolf. He slipped under the camper and came out at the rear, hearing the couple right above him. He slowly used his nose to raise the latch on the rear door to the camper, the one they used during waste removal times. Dog nosed the door open.

“Hey!”

“Who did that?!”

“Close the door!”

The wolf casually padded away among the whistles and catcalls. There was more than a cheek showing now.

2

Quinn watched the island woman thoughtfully. He was her shadow this evening, but he didn't expect trouble from her. On the road, Kendle had done well at not hurting anyone except for the enemy and herself. Quinn thought the same would apply here.

Kendle stopped on the top of the cliff she'd just climbed for the fourth time. Working on skills and toughening muscles, she was also wearing out her body so she could sleep. Angela had said she would be given orders when the time came, but waiting sucked.

Kendle glanced down and spotted Quinn again. He wasn't trying to hide from her. She recognized it as a broken rule. "Do you want something?"

Quinn easily joined her on the rise, following her lead when she sat down with her legs swinging off the edge. "Thought you might like to talk, now that you've worked some of it out."

Kendle frowned. "About what?"

"Your choice."

"Not really."

"Okay."

Kendle waited for him to leave. When he didn't, she couldn't find the energy to be upset. That was why she'd chosen to climb up here in the first place.

Quinn was aware of her strength, and of the scratches and bruises that she'd added to the dozens she already wore. He liked a woman who could take a little pain. He didn't want to see it, of course, but a strong woman was much better than a whiner.

"Really?" Kendle chuckled bitterly. "I'm a screamer."

Quinn knew she meant that in an awful way and slowly patted her hand.

He didn't speak or linger in the touch and Kendle allowed it. Comfort was something many of these people had tried to give her, but their words were all wrong. Silence was better.

Quinn felt her accept his presence and wiped a mental brow. He hadn't been sure that she would want him around, but he'd found himself thinking about her a lot since they'd returned.

“Why?”

“No idea.” Quinn shrugged, not upset that she was getting his thoughts so clearly. “That’s why I’m here.”

Kendle realized he was subtly scenting her and shuddered.

“Are you cold?”

Kendle nodded to cover the reaction. She needed a release and whether he knew it or not, Quinn was giving off subtle vibes of the same.

Quinn dropped his jacket over her shoulders without touching her, and felt her lean toward him curiously. He asked himself the question quickly, as all men did in this situation.

Do I want her?

Sure.

For what?

Not sure.

Not good. Tell her no.

It was a method of self-preservation that men had learned too well for it to be removed by even something as traumatic as a war. If they thought for one second that they might fall in love, they refused to make a physical connection until the woman had proven herself worthy. In Quinn’s case, he already knew Kendle was and it scared him to find himself sitting here, breaking rules for a possible future with a stranger. He had Marc’s left side. Very few things would be worth risking that. Quinn stood up. “Excuse me.”

Kendle let him go. She wasn't confused, just not interested enough to chase Quinn despite the slight attraction. Anyone could give her sex. No one could give her Marc.

3

“Do you think they're okay?”

Marc handed Angela a cup of hot chocolate and then dropped a second blanket over her shoulders. They were in a small cave, with a fire in the doorway and bedrolls behind it. They'd made love and napped, but when darkness came, she'd tensed again. “Are you ready to go?”

Angela was, but she also wanted the time alone with Marc. She shook her head, smiling softly. “Not yet.”

Marc settled down next to her and wrapped up under the same blankets. For a little while, it had just been him and Angie again. He'd loved it.

“Me too.” She sipped her hot drink and leaned against his warmth. The fire crackled soothingly as she snickered. “Bet Shawn's got his hands full.”

Marc sighed. She couldn't leave it there. He would have to take her back to camp.

Angela realized she was spoiling the last of their free time and surrendered to the pressure from the witch. “Let's stay until everyone's asleep.”

“Really?”

“Sure. We'll sneak in when it's quiet and not have to listen to Shawn's rant.”

Marc leaned down and kissed her.

His hand slid around to rest on her stomach and Angela felt the tears rise. It wasn't fair. She had Marc and leadership, and now the baby, but in the end, she would only have one of those things and she knew it. Trying hard to fight the depression, Angela cuddled in Marc's big arms and stopped fighting the drowse.

Marc felt her sag and shifted so that she was under his arm. He covered her up again and sat there holding her as the night slowly passed. In his fantasies, this was most of what they did. Sex with her was as amazing as he'd thought it would be, but when it all came down, Marc knew these stolen moments were what would hold them through. He ran a hand over her soft curls. "We'll find a way."

Inside, his voice was warning that might not be possible, but Marc didn't listen. Even if they lost the war and had to run, at least they would be together.

All around Lookout Mountain, couples were coming to the same realizations of what was important to them.

4

Evening mess started out quiet.

Shawn was the unofficial leader until Angela returned; he walked through the eating people with a sense of pride. It had been hectic, but he'd done it. Marc and Angie had been gone since noon. It was

now six o'clock and the camp was still here and alive. He'd done well.

"Just took these messages." Kevin handed Shawn a small stack of notes. He quickly headed back to the radio, not looking toward the mess. Cynthia was there, along with the new group of male fans who were hoping for a shot with her. Kevin wasn't going to be drawn into that mix. He hadn't made a choice yet.

Shawn was busy reading.

We'll be back later. Hold it together.

"Ah, man!" More hours of listening to the men nag and the women brag. Great.

The next note was longer and so was the third. They were instructions for two people here. Shawn followed Kevin to the radio.

"Hey, boss says—"

"I took the message, recall it?"

Shawn snorted and went the other way. Kevin's tone had been joking, but Shawn knew the stress was finally getting to him. The more Cynthia ignored him, the worse it would get.

Shawn rotated, intending to head for the mess, and drew up in surprise. Kendle was next to him with her hand out.

"I believe that's mine."

Shawn handed it over with a friendly glance. "Welcome to Safe Haven."

"I've been here for almost a week." She didn't open the envelope. She'd already pulled the words from his mind.

“Yeah, but now you’re one of us.” Shawn motioned at the note. “She put you to work. You checked out. You can stay.”

Kendle walked away without responding. The chances of her staying here and trying to build a life while watching Marc and Angela were zero. She was doing her part for her country, but after that, who knew? Maybe she’d find her way back to Pitcairn. A few of the residents there might have survived and once she burnt down Kraft Manor, she might even be able to sleep.

Shawn got in line at the mess, hoping the coffee was fresh... He noticed silence from the corner. The rest of the fighters were eating and chatting, but that far corner held three people and a tense silence that drew Shawn. He joined them. “Is there a problem?”

Kenn and Tonya were on one side, with Adrian on the other. All three of them were scowling so hard that Shawn could see steam coming from their noses.

“That’s your call.” Adrian dropped his spoon into the soup. “But I’d keep an eye on the table next to us. There’s been a lot of BS over there.”

Shawn found that crowded table and sent a nasty glower over the team of rookies. He spoke to Adrian, but he didn’t look away from the now listening men and women. “What type of BS?”

“It seems there’s a bet on how many soldiers they’ll kill. Maybe they’ve forgotten those men are American survivors who are being forced to fight for the government.”

Shawn agreed with both sides, as did the mess of fighters now listening. He waited for more, aware that Adrian had set him up to hand out a punishment.

“Guess how they’re proving it?” Kenn was angry enough to start a brawl.

Shawn suddenly didn’t want to know.

“They plan to chop off thumbs and count them after it’s all over.”

Disgust and disapproval filled the area; heads at that table went down.

Shawn knew exactly what to do, thanks to Marc mentioning this yesterday. “If Marc hears that, he’ll rip you all apart with his bare hands.” Shawn normally would have let it go with that. Instead, he drilled in his point, like Angela would have. “I’m going to tell him. I won’t ruin his night with it when he hits the gates, but before you wake up in the morning, he’ll know.”

“And then so will Angie.” Tonya shook her head in mock sympathy. “Bet you guys just lost your runs.”

The people were properly scolded now, with heads down and shame coating them. It was a good correction moment for Shawn, who had never thought to see himself in this position. Shawn went to refill his mug as the table of rookies slowly cleared out, with each of them going in different directions.

Conversations resumed, most of them about what had just happened. Shawn was relieved that

the fighters seemed satisfied with how he had handled the trouble. Maybe this leadership stuff wasn't quite as bad as he'd thought.

Shawn swept the distance, where the faint lights from the Indian camps around them twinkled like a thousand fireflies. It was beautiful.

“Does he look smug to you?” Greg looked at Billy. They were at one of the smaller tables, opposite Adrian's corner. The center table was empty.

“Later.” Billy nodded. “Check out the hounds.”

Greg casually glanced over to see Cynthia was surrounded again. The single men in camp were hounding her constantly, trying to take Kevin's place. Cynthia appeared annoyed but not angry. The six men of various levels sitting with her were arguing and getting louder. In another minute or so, Shawn would have to intervene.

Billy returned to his food. “Will it be any of those?”

“Doubt it.” Greg let out a belch. “Who do you have odds on?”

Billy scanned the mess and settled on an Eagle who had guard duty over Charlie and Tracy, though they didn't know it. “That one.”

Greg saw who it was and chuckled. “He's on my list. I also thought about...” Greg used Eagle code to send the name.

Billy hadn't considered that and spent a moment running it through. “Interesting. Are we betting?”

“Sure.” Greg leered. “What are you willing to lose to me?”

The wording drew Billy’s fun side out and he lowered his voice. “If you’re right, I’ll trade you my next watch duty over the showers.”

“That’s good!”

All the males liked that post. They had too much honor to peep through steamy windows, but the sight of women in towels running for their tents was always welcome.

“And if you’re wrong?”

Greg made sure his prize was of equal value. “I’ll take your next shift over Bingo time.”

“Done!” Billy laughed, surprised at the good feel here despite their leader being out of camp. He’d thought Adrian might have to take charge.

“You son of a...!”

Shawn went flying by them an instant later to break up the fight at Cynthia’s table.

Greg sighed. “Should we help?”

Billy shrugged. “I think he’s got it covered.”

The sound of punching, wrestling, and debris scattering rang through the mess; the two senior Eagles calmly finished their meal.

It took Shawn a few minutes to get the males sent on chores or to their tents; he stormed through the mess, glowering at the other Hounds. Most of the guards had rushed in to help, but Shawn had still taken several swings and he wasn’t feeling like life was quite as beautiful anymore.

As he stomped by their table, Billy and Greg exchanged small grins and began cleaning up their garbage. Everyone wanted the job until it belonged to them.

5

The campfire group was still gathering in the evening and it was no different now, despite so many of their people not being here. A dozen fighters were on buckets and stools close to the center flames, with another dozen standing or sitting on the cold ground around them. The fire popped occasionally and low laughter rang out, lending to the impression that things were calm. Everyone knew it was an illusion, but the need for one last night of peace was prevalent. Even the camps of soldiers were enjoying their last hours.

The only ones who weren't relaxing were teams who'd been sent out early, and the Mexicans Angela had ordered to patrol their southern perimeter so they could get to their own land quickly if the government sent troops there. It had also been to keep them away from Safe Haven, to please Marc.

As the night wound down, couples began leaving the fire for an hour of intimacy before sleep; their noises rolled across the camps, bringing jealousy and amusement.

Shawn felt neither of those things now. He had a black eye from breaking up the fight in the mess. He also had a pounding headache from dealing with

the female fighters who had a constant stream of questions.

“Um, if I need to pee, can I go in my blind?”

“They wear green and we wear black. That’s how I can tell who the enemy is, right?”

“I think my compass is broken. The needle only points north.”

Shawn had realized he was being hazed. Shawn shook his head at Li Sing, who’d stayed behind to cook for the fighters. Shawn couldn’t take any more coffee. He needed a couple of Tums.

“Shawn to the QZ.”

Shawn groaned, but went that way without dragging his feet. He observed Daryl trailing Charlie and Tracy from the campfire. After the teenager and his chosen female participated in this war, there wouldn’t be a need to guard them anymore. Charlie was about to become a man.

The gate guard met him. “We have a group coming up, say they’re answering a call from the alpha.”

Shawn viewed the five fighters with interest. All the Eagles had been told to expect more descendants for the fight, but few had come or been found. All five of the men carried kits and were loaded with weapons. Shawn counted ten handguns, seven knives, and even two crossbows—something Safe Haven didn’t have many of. These men had come prepared to battle.

“Let them in.” Shawn pointed. “QZ for now. Tell Angela as soon as she gets back. Someone get a tent up for them.”

“The alpha is not here?” one of the men questioned. He was taller, darker, and meaner looking than the others. “We will go to her.”

Shawn glared at them coolly. “You’ll wait here for her.”

All of the new men bristled at the tone, but their leader wisely didn’t argue. “We will wait where you tell us. We will keep our gear.”

Shawn motioned to where a QZ tent was already being erected. “Stay in the taped-off area. She’ll be back later tonight.”

Vario led his group toward the large tent.

Shawn liked it when the fighters casually took over the setup, freeing the Safe Haven people. Those guards stepped back and observed their newest companions.

Unlike the Safe Haven descendants, these men used their gifts openly. It was fascinating to watch them communicate and get the canvas erected without knowing how. It was clear they’d never dealt with such large tents, but the men had it up correctly only a few minutes after starting. Shawn thought they’d taken the images from the minds of those watching.

“They did.” Adrian had joined Shawn as the show began and stayed quiet, reading their new members.

“Are they okay?”

“That’s not my call anymore.” Adrian sighed. “But I’d tell you if I thought letting them in was a mistake.”

Shawn took that as a good sign. He turned to ask Adrian when he was going to explain everything and found the man gone. He spotted him ducking into the other QZ tent and assumed Adrian planned to stay close to the new people just in case.

Shawn headed for the last of his rounds through the tents; he flushed as he passed the first one and heard what was taking place inside. He hurriedly moved on, but it seemed like every canvas he strolled by had a couple inside reminding themselves of why they were a couple. For the guards, it was torture.

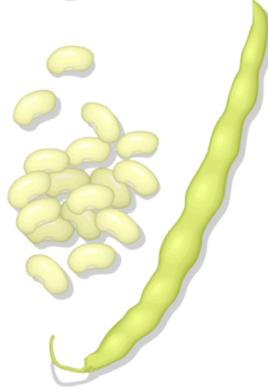
Shawn stomped through, seeing Tracy’s flap was open and the couple was in separate bedrolls. The same was true of Kyle and Jennifer, though that flap was only halfway open. Shawn didn’t care enough over the minor violation to react. He made it to the showers without hearing any other couples. He stepped into the dark camper to relieve himself and drew up short at the sight of Dog and Star. The canines were sniffing and growling, set to mate.

“Dog!”

The wolf looked up guiltily. *Sorry. I broke.*

Shawn stormed back out, slamming the door. “It’s everywhere!”

Chapter Six
Past Emotions
Labor Day Morning
September 2nd



1

Kendle glared at the large woman in front of her, arms crossing over her chest. “I’m not a cook.”

Linny glared, holding out the basket of freshly harvested green beans. “We work for everyone, not ourselves. You wanna eat, do it.”

Kendle snatched the basket and stomped to the benches, where a small group of women and men were cutting and cleaning the harvest. She didn’t mind helping, but the people here were treating her as if she had tried to come between Marc and his all-perfect Angela.

“Wasn’t even that good of a kiss.” The memory of it flashed in her mind and she immediately stiffened. It was easy enough to shake off as the talking and laughter floated around her, but at night that was a harder act to maintain. She’d gotten used to sleeping by Marc, seeing him, smelling him, hearing him. No one else was like that to her, no matter how much she tried to develop an interest. If she could find someone to tolerate, then these people would understand she wasn’t going to come between their leaders and she would be accepted. Until then, her time here would be filled with careful steps and long nights.

Kendle listened to the wind blow. She caught a chill and shivered. She hadn’t felt the bite of a sharp wind in a long time. All those months on the island had conditioned her to warm breezes and loving sunlight. Here, it was bitter wind with a sharp edge and a few hours of grudging sun. The layer of grit was an ugly haze that never left.

Kendle found herself wishing for Luke. *He’d know how to make me feel better.*

“Hey, Kendle. You doing okay?”

Kendle gave a grunt and nod to Missi as she walked by. Missi, almost as old and respected as Hilda, was her adjustment partner. They were sharing a tent, eating together, and doing chores on the same shift. Kendle hated it. Having a babysitter sucked. The only thing worse would be having no one to talk to at all.

Angela stopped by Kendle, hating the woman despite her promise to try being friends. She slid onto the bench across from the castaway with a polite tone. “How’s the harvesting work going?”

“Fine.” Kendle glared. “What do you need?”

Quick study. Long-winded requests and small talk weren’t big right now with any of the Eagles. “I have some jobs. No food involved.”

“Like what?” Kendle was feeling snarky. “Test for landmines?”

Angela gave it right back with a straight face. “We haven’t put those down yet.”

Kendle recognized the joke, but didn’t respond. She’d felt how dangerous Angela could be, but she also felt how loved her rival was. She had to be careful.

“Not really.” Angela stared at the woman. “I hate liars. So do the Eagles. If you want a life here, the truth matters.”

Kendle had heard it already, but she wasn’t about to argue with the leader of such a massive operation. When she’d heard a woman ran things, she’d been sure the female was cover for a group of men, but Angela really was in charge. Resisting, especially among this tension, wasn’t wise.

“Kendle Roberts!” Angela snapped the brunette out of her thoughts. “If I want you pissed off or happy or out of here, I’ll make it happen. When I tell you I need the truth, no matter what it is, give it to me!”

Kendle withered under the tone. She had no way to challenge, only heartache and a fierce need to...

Angela understood more than she wanted to as Kendle's ugly thoughts flooded with the past. Some of it matched what Marc had said, but some of it didn't. Kendle had lied to him about what happened after she landed. If she won the battle for her life, and survived her illness, the final truth would still have to be conquered.

"You said you have work, remember?" Kendle was sure the leader was reading her thoughts. She hated how it felt here, how unprotected her secrets were.

"In time, you'll be able to close those doors. Safe Haven heals those—"

"Save it!"

Angela calmly counted to ten and went on as if she wasn't annoyed. "One of the jobs I have will fill that need a bit, but you have to do the others first, in order."

"I have no control." Kendle sighed. "It's why he said I had to stay here."

Angela locked eyes with Kendle, forcing away the guilt. "If you do these things faithfully for me, I promise to find a cure, or kill you, when it's all over."

"Swear it!" Kendle's eyes blazed. "*He* wouldn't! I wanted to die, but he wouldn't give me that either!" Realizing she was yelling, Kendle dropped the volume, but her desperate tone didn't change. "Swear it!"

Angela placed a hand on Kendle's wrist. "My word, as leader of this camp and as a woman, I'll help you or kill you."

"Okay." Kendle slid her arm free. "But don't touch me and act like we're friends or that you care. You be honest too. You'd like me dead and gone."

Right at that moment, it wasn't true. Angela's sympathy came forward. "No, I pity you for the pain, and I respect you for surviving what you've gone through. I also envy you a bit, for being free to pick and choose." Angela stood up. "There are a lot of good men here. If I was single, I'd be sniffin' through, see who happens to be my match. There's a lot of that going on."

Kendle rolled her eyes. She was tired of hearing *fate brought us together* or *it was love at first bullet wound*. "I don't believe in two soul mates. Mine is gone and he isn't coming back, so get off me!" Kendle shoved away from the table and disappeared into the crowd.

Angela, content that her words had done the trick, was subtly scanning those around them. Most of the men weren't interested yet and it wasn't because of Kendle's fading scars. The men were waiting to discover if Marc did have any interest and Angela needed them to get over that. Kendle was fair game. Marc was taken.

Marc put her with Adrian.

Angela didn't answer her witch.

Marc waved as she walked by the parking area. "I need approval for a driving change."

Angela detoured his way.

The paper held one sentence. Angela looked at the trio of stony-faced men waiting for her answer. “You three? Alone in one truck to save gas?” Angela choked back a snide remark. “How does that work?”

From the silence, she assumed it wouldn't. The uneasy calm since Marc's return hadn't mattered. Differences would be settled along the way.

“Fine.” Angela approved the vehicle change with her initials, noting Candy climbing into Theo's truck. Her long purple curl declared her rebellious nature. That might be an interesting mix at some point. “You work it out, but don't miss a step of this plan or you'll kill us all for your egos.”

Angela left their sputtered protests. She knew they'd get the job done. She just wasn't looking forward to the aftermath.

Marc was still chuckling as he opened the rear passenger door of their loaded truck. He couldn't wait to be alone with the two people he hated most in the world.

Walking behind him, Adrian and Kenn didn't share Marc's good mood. He was bound to make the trip rough for them, but leaving the camp, the war, completely in Angela's hands, was unnerving. Kenn didn't think she could do it and Adrian now had doubts. This was more chaotic, more complex, than her time during his gunshot absence. It was also exactly what he'd been training her for.

Marc slid into the seat, dropping his kit onto the floorboard.

When he leaned his head against the cold leather and crossed his arms over his chest impatiently, Adrian grimaced. Marc was their boss now. He intended to act like one.

Swallowing a chunk of pride, Adrian closed Marc's door as if he were a rookie and went to the front passenger seat. The next week would be hell, but he would get through it without breaking.

Already scanning thoughts for problems, Marc yawned behind him. "In less than a week, you'll know that was never possible. All men break under me. I've never lost."

Adrian said nothing, but Kenn glared in the mirror from his driver's seat. "Maybe we'll kill you and dump your body."

"Be careful," Marc warned with an icy tone. "That might be *my* plan."

Both men in the front grimaced this time. They'd already considered the fact that they might not return from this run.

Kenn waved at Tonya as he drove through the gate, but Adrian and Marc stayed unresponsive as people shouted words of encouragement. The one person they might have lingered for had said goodbye last night. For Marc, it had been magical. For Adrian, it had been torture. She'd come with three guards who had refused to leave the tent even after he'd asked them to. Angela hadn't insisted. The guards were under orders and no one would

disobey them without a direct command to blame. The Eagles would rather suffer an injury than disappoint Marc. It was a reversal of roles that Adrian was struggling to accept.

“Where to?” Kenn listened to Safe Haven’s gate close behind them. The camps around theirs were doing the same thing—sending teams out on missions they might not return from—and the truck didn’t draw much attention until people saw Marc. Then the shouts of support for the Ghost grew into chants that rubbed fresh salt into Adrian’s mental wounds.

“Due west.” Marc grinned, enjoying Adrian’s jealousy.

“Where are we going first?” Adrian pressed tonelessly. Angela’s plan was just that, Angela’s, and she was only releasing a small piece of information on it to each group. Everyone assumed that was to keep the plans safe or to flush out other traitors, but Adrian knew she didn’t trust him specifically. Angela hadn’t even told Marc, so Adrian wouldn’t be able to pull it from his thoughts. He hadn’t told her how to handle any of this, but he was suddenly sure that she could. His concern for her ability faded. He’d spent a lot of time on the notes in his books and Angela was incredibly gifted in planning strategy. He had faith.

“Head for the base we destroyed.” Marc ignored Kenn’s rough driving as he took his anger out on the vehicle. Adrian was the only one it would hurt and

Marc was fine with that. “We’re not doing recon like we’ve led the camp to believe.”

Adrian frowned. “I assumed we’re snipers.”

“We’re delivering gear and escorting spies. Once they’re in the enemy camp, we’ll do other things.”

“Spies? Who?” Kenn scowled. “It’s Tonya, isn’t it? Damn Angela!”

Marc grinned again. This had to be annoying for both men. “We don’t open the next envelope until we pick up our spies.”

“You don’t know who she’s sending in?”

“Nope.” Marc enjoyed Kenn’s incredulous tone. “Didn’t ask.”

Adrian made a mental note to discover what Marc was hiding. The man might not know the entire plan, but he had enough clues to make an educated guess and Adrian wanted to hear it.

“You won’t.” Marc’s happy tone changed to cold warning. “And no, even if I knew, I wouldn’t tell you shit.”

“Why?” Kenn believed Adrian could be trusted with the plan because it meant Angela’s survival too.

“Because he’ll do anything he can to make sure we lose.” Loathing dripped from Marc’s words. “Adrian isn’t one of the good guys.” Marc stared at Adrian in his mirror. “Are you?”

It had to end sometime. Adrian was almost crippled by fear as he realized what Marc was about to do to him.

“Are you?!”

Adrian sighed, gaze going to the gate, to the camp of followers he’d built. “No.”

Kenn gaped at his idol.

Adrian stared out the window, unable to handle the guilt. “I never was.”

Marc gloated. “It would be easiest to just give up. You can’t stop him from finding out.”

Adrian stiffened at the light prying in his mind.

Marc grinned. “You’ll tell me *all* your secrets by the time this mission is over. I’ll know everything.”

Confused by Adrian’s silence, Kenn kept his mouth shut. *What’s going on?*

“All in good time,” Marc quoted the overused phrase cheerfully. “I’m sleeping now. Wake me in four hours for a route change.”

When there was no answer, Marc sent a stiff wave of anger through the truck. “I said, wake me in four hours!”

Two snotty “Yes, sirs,” came.

Marc chuckled again. “Yep. Gonna be a short trip into an ugly nightmare. Hang onto your faith, because that’s part of what I came for, Kenn. By the time this is all over, you’ll be on my side or also out of my way.” Marc laughed at Adrian. “*You’ll probably be dead.*”

Kenn and Adrian exchanged glances that said they would fight together. The threatening vibes coming from Marc implied it might be needed.

Marc chuckled.

Adrian leaned his head against the seat. He now suspected sleep would be hard to come by later. The new doctor had pronounced him fine, if he quit smoking, but Adrian knew he hadn't recovered fully from his mild heart episode. He certainly didn't feel as strong as he'd been, but that didn't mean an old dog didn't have more tricks up his sleeve. Thoughts defiant, Adrian started to doze.

A short time later, Marc also appeared to be snoozing. His body was slack, moving with the rhythm of the truck, but the muscle in his jaw twitched sporadically, giving him away to their driver. Kenn was sure Marc was working on their mission. It was the same feel as their times together before the war. It comforted Kenn a bit that he wasn't the main name on Marc's shit list these days, but he didn't want that top slot to belong to Adrian either. Adrian clearly had things to answer for, but what would happen afterwards? If Adrian wasn't in charge of Safe Haven, it wasn't the same and everyone felt it. Kenn's goal was to put his boss back in power, by any means, fair or foul.

"That's why you're here, with me." Marc didn't open his eyes. "So I can watch you."

Adrian didn't stir.

Kenn took the moment to point out something he was hoping that Marc had forgotten about. "The bunker wants him alive. We lose an advantage without Adrian."

Marc didn't answer.

Kenn felt it was a bad idea to continue along those lines. He switched to his other curiosity. “What did you mean? When you said he’d do anything to make us lose?”

Both of them heard the slight shift against the leather seat as Adrian tensed, proving his alertness.

Marc settled into a more comfortable position as the truck bounced down the narrow mountain path. “If you answer that, if you confess, there won’t be any need for me to break you while he watches.”

Adrian thought about it. He could be free of a lifetime of secrets in a few hours.

Marc didn’t want it to be so easy, but he didn’t goad Adrian into getting defensive and clamming up. If Adrian laid it all out for them without a fight, Marc would simply take his pound of flesh another way.

“What happens to me afterwards?”

“That’s up to Angie, so I’d say you’ll live,” Marc responded bitterly. “But I wouldn’t count on friends. In fact, she may not be able to save you when the camp finds out who you were and what you’ve done.”

“What the hell are you holding over him?” Kenn was frustrated. “Either spit it out or shut up.”

Marc looked at Adrian in the mirror. “Well?”

“I knew it was coming.” Adrian sighed. The first envelope he’d opened had held one order. *Tell Marc anything he wants to know. The time has come to face your many sins.*

“She gave you an order.” Marc had just pulled it from Adrian’s thoughts. Respect for his mate went up.

Adrian braced, unable to refuse two alpha commands. “I knew about the descendants, the cover-up, the plan to destroy society if the story came out—all of it.”

“What?” Kenn was almost too shocked to drive. The truck slowed as it rolled over the narrow stone path between huge trees and lethal drops.

“I’m on the *other* team. Marc put the pieces together right after he started sleeping with your ex.”

“I don’t understand,” Kenn stopped the truck and turned in the seat so he could look at them both.

Marc waited, pushing out that powerful mental order for obedience.

Adrian couldn’t fight it. He’d never felt anything that strong. *Even Angela wouldn’t be able to resist...*

“I can’t be distracted by thoughts of her like you can.” Marc stopped using his gift. “Last chance to do this on your own.”

“Fine!” Adrian glowered at Kenn, his most loyal man. “I work for the bunker. I’m on *their* payroll.”

Kenn’s stunned silence filled the truck. His mind flitted from crime, to trial, to judgment, to sentencing. Adrian had helped kill people. The camp wouldn’t forgive him. If this was true, Adrian

had committed treason. He was an infiltrator, a liar, a...a traitor!

“He gets it!” Marc let his sarcastic anger fly. “Yes, the man we’ve all looked to for protection of our lives and our future, is actually one of those who want to take it all away from us.”

“How is? That can’t...” Kenn tried to form sentences, questions, hoping Adrian could defend himself. “Why would... When?”

“He’s a sleeper, Kenn. He was supposed to deliver all havens he found into government hands. I doubt he’s ever been out of communication with someone in the remaining military.”

“But why would he...*you* do that?”

“It’s more like why didn’t I hand over this camp or let everyone die.” Adrian’s guts tightened into a knot. “The answer is currently sending the next team out behind us. I can feel her wishing you’d drive faster and get Marc back to her side. It makes me sick.”

Marc laughed at his rival’s pain. It was great to be home.

Kenn wasn’t amused. “I don’t understand.”

Adrian’s anger fled, replaced with misery. “I...changed. I got distracted. I...”

“He fell for that nice ass and those sweet titties, same as we did,” Marc supplied cheerfully. “She screwed up his plans but wouldn’t screw him! Talk about irony.”

Kenn grunted. Angela was definitely a distraction, but it didn't explain enough. "You mean you weren't on the other team?"

"Yes."

"No."

Kenn scowled. "Which is it?"

"Because I love her, you idiot! I couldn't have her if I handed this camp over. I knew that as soon as she signed up for my army."

"And César?" Marc prompted, temper waking. He didn't know all the details. He'd only been sure that Adrian wasn't a good guy.

"He was on the bunker's list for destroying NORAD."

"And your notebooks, where you wrote that you only found out right after the war?"

"Lies for anyone who found it. I was trying to find a way to reveal the magic back then." Adrian shrugged. "It worked out well for both sides."

Marc leaned forward and growled in Adrian's ear. "She almost died!"

Adrian shrugged again. "That's the price we pay for defying those who want authority over us. She knew what she signed up for. I carry no guilt for bringing her into *my* Eagles."

Marc leaned back. "No, you shouldn't. It's the one honestly good thing you've done for her."

"I've done a lot for her and the rest of the camp." Adrian gestured angrily. "Don't get too high on that soapbox. You'd all be dead without me."

“No, we’d be dead without the people who’ve worked under you. Samantha’s warnings, Hilda’s influence, Kyle’s recons. You’ve had everyone else doing the work, but now, that’s over. You’ll bleed and sweat like the rest of us.”

“I always bleed and sweat with my men!”

Marc was delighted to have already gotten under Adrian’s skin. “Settle in. It’s gonna be a fun ride.”

Kenn scowled when Adrian stopped defending himself. He eased on the gas to get the truck rolling. Kenn had already heard enough of the story to need the rest of it.

Marc was ecstatic at Kenn’s mental choice. “I thought it would take you longer.”

Kenn grunted. “I’m an asshole. I’m not stupid.”

Marc snickered. “I’ve always thought you were a bit of both.”

Silence fell again.

Marc returned to dozing, mood growing steadily better despite the miles once again coming between him and Angela. He’d waited months to expose Adrian. Now that the time was here, doing it in front of Kenn made it perfect.

2

Angela stopped by Kyle’s truck on her rounds. He was putting his first load of assigned gear into the vehicle. While she waited for him to finish, she scanned his fares. These females knew their roles so

well that they were ready half an hour early. They wouldn't let her or the camp down.

"We're set." Kyle waved to the small group of people lingering near his dark colored van. "We leave in thirty."

Some people began climbing onboard as Kyle joined his boss.

Angela held out the instruction packet. "Make sure it's too late to turn around before you handle it."

"I will." Kyle watched Jennifer and three other shadows vanish into the fog outside the gate. She wasn't going with him. The worry burning in Kyle's gut was constant. "The first time I think about a traitor they'll know, if they're descendants."

"I'm going to give you an advantage over that little girl and all the others, Reece. Are you ready to appreciate it?"

Kyle gave a curt nod, not sure if he should brace for more pain.

"Distraction, denial and defiance. The three Ds are how you handle us, like with the camp. And when that doesn't work, you block."

Kyle's brows drew together. "She can get through any of my walls."

"Why does everyone always try a wall and nothing else?" Angela sighed. "Hum an annoying song she would know or an old commercial. Say poems or tell yourself jokes. As long as it blocks her, it works."

“That’ll make thinking hard.” He slid his gloves on.

Angela stared at his scars, his badges. She lingered on the teeth marks. *I put those there, when death almost took me.* “Do you need to think about this one, Reece?”

Kyle tensed for an instant, and then his shoulders drooped. “No. It’s what has to happen now.”

“I agree.” Angela swung around to stop a rookie hand from grabbing the bandana on her belt.

Kip grinned up at her, hoping for a pass since he’d gotten close enough to touch the red cloth. He wanted to shout in victory, but his throat was still stinging despite the pain pill.

“Fail. If you want on a mission team, you’ll be perfect.”

The playboy dentist stormed off.

Angela turned back to Kyle, who was ready to get going now that he had a defense to use. “It won’t work if they gang up on you. And if they decide to do that, my advice is to surrender. You are no match for a descendant.”

Kyle left with the ugly thought in his mind. He still didn’t doubt it was true; he just loathed not being able to deny it.

Angela had four more teams to see off and that list would restart tomorrow. This was a timed plan to get her people into the right areas before it was all mined. She wouldn’t miss a departure because of emotions.

Angela went to the gate on the other end of the quickly emptying camp, where Neil, Jeremy, and their teams were loading up. Few of them wanted to leave at all and the mood was somber.

Angela surveyed the small pile of weapons and gear they had stacked by the rear of their vehicles. The men were currently saying quick goodbyes between carrying loads over. It was sweet to witness these hardened men caring for their women. The fact that some of their women were becoming as hard as they were didn't matter. They understood their females still needed the emotional care that they always had. In battle, that would sometimes become an issue, but it was unavoidable. Women would learn to handle it the same as any other fighter had to.

"We're ready in five," Neil was checking the kits against what was on his list. Samantha was in the van, and he and Jeremy were staying busy. Kyle would watch over her. They would all do their part.

Angela handed Jeremy the envelope. "Call if you need more men."

"We will." Neil frowned. Her hair was going gray faster than Marc could fill her up on energy. What would she do while he was gone again?

"I'll take what I need, the same as Samantha will."

Neil held his tongue. He hated not knowing what was going on, what the plan was. He also hated the tension in Safe Haven and the camps that

surrounded theirs. The relief to be away for a while was warring with the need to stay close.

“You guys ready?”

The call came from Stanley, their radioman and medic, newly appointed to both positions.

Neither Neil nor Jeremy answered.

Stanley frowned. “I’m sorry I’m late. I had to pack.”

The kit Stanley dropped, as his proof, was clumsily packed and bulging.

Jeremy waved at the neat pile he was loading. “Make yours look like these and hurry up.”

Stanley stumbled forward.

The XO gave his CO an exasperated gesture.

Neil shrugged.

The two men went back to work. Stanley was hopeless no matter what he did. Someone had to take him along for this ride. If he were left in camp, they might not have one to return to.

All around them, Safe Haven was having a busy morning. People were coming and going with serious intent. Neil stopped for a moment to watch the small circus nearest to them. The livestock truck was being loaded for the trip deeper into the mountains. Everyone assumed Angela had found them a cave and this would start getting people used to living inside it. By the time the battle made it to Safe Haven’s front gate, she would have them all ready to shelter-in-place. Neil thought that theory was likely. Once the camp was bunkered-in, it would be hard for the government to get to them

without blowing up the entire ridge of cliffs, but if they did that, they would end up killing the descendants they seemed to need so badly. Angela was obviously relying on that to protect their mountain shelter. So was everyone else. If the government came in with planes and bombs, Safe Haven would be buried alive.

Chapter Seven
Stirring the Pot



1

Seth slammed his kit into the truck, punching the door when it refused to close. He hadn't gotten to see Becky this morning and now she was gone. Overnight, the babies and younger children had been safely transferred into the mountain den that Angela had chosen. He'd returned an hour ago, gotten his packet from the boss lady, and then discovered Becky had left with Jennifer. How would he get to her when they lost if he didn't know where she would be?

“Faith matters now, Seth.” Angela was behind him. “We can do this.”

“I’ll follow my orders!” Seth slung the next kit into the seat.

“Seth.”

He didn’t want to look at her. He loved Angela as much as any of the men did, and he was still as loyal to Adrian as he could tolerate, but he’d give it all up for Becky and the baby. The feel of being about to lose it over the edge was too clear to ignore.

“There’s only one thing that can ruin my plan, Seth. Please don’t be the one to get us all killed.”

Seth spun around, but Angela had vanished, leaving him to wonder if she’d been there at all. Her gifts were stronger than the other descendants. Seth thought Becky could reach that level of power in time. *If she lives.*

Seth turned around as gunfire rang out. Eagles flooded the area, but he stayed by the vehicle. He wasn’t only in charge of loading gear. He was protecting it. Angela wasn’t taking chances that their food would be poisoned or their supplies would be sabotaged. She also had sentries on the mess, the supply trucks, the water, and guards on those guards. Cameras were in place, with a constant crew viewing them, and the mood was one of oppression. Seth missed the freedom, the love they’d shared under Adrian. So did the rest of the camp. “After we win, we’ll have it again. The fences will go away and the bubble will return.”

That magical sight hadn’t come into view in a while. None of the love and hope that had filled it

before existed now. Angela refused to reveal the black shroud hanging over them.

Seth scanned the truck, the area around it, the guards on it, before hitting his radio. “We’re set. Five minutes.”

Seth’s hard tone was quickly answered. The entire team was tired, but none as much as Seth. They all knew to tiptoe around him. Many of his men had also returned to discover their loved one already gone, so it was a feeling they understood. They were ready to rip someone apart. It almost didn’t matter who.

“You’re stirring the pot kinda’ hard aren’t you?”

“Yes,” Angela agreed, not looking at Cynthia. The reporter had refused to leave her side for the fighting. Angela had switched her with Heather, who she’d originally chosen to be her personal assistant for today. Heather was one of the click sisters who’d recently signed up to be on the next rookie female team. Kyle would now handle that issue during his ride. “Ready for your stir, Cynthia?”

The reporter swallowed nervously. “Yes. Get it over with.”

Angela chuckled without amusement. “What’s the rush? Kevin already left.”

Cynthia froze, furious. “You told me he would be here when you were finished with rounds!”

Angela moved toward the next parking area. “I’m not finished, am I? You wanted me to talk to

Hilda and then doctor had a favor to ask about his sons, and then the vet needed...”

“I get your point!”

“Good. When the van leaves, be on it. I don’t need a babysitter. I need my teams to do their jobs!”

Before Cynthia could protest, Angela stopped by the main gate and took a minute to view the area around them. The chilly mountains were serene, stunning even, but something wasn’t right. She was monitoring a number of people in their camps, but it wasn’t enough. That old feeling of cold dread swarmed over her. Angela hit the button on her radio. “Full alert. Lock us down!”

Cynthia spun round, searching for the threat, and found them surrounded by Angela’s personal guards. Chosen by Marc, the seven men stood shoulder to shoulder.

Cynthia unthinkingly climbed up on the nearest man to see better. Her training said to get up high to get eyes on the threat.

“Be still!” Cynthia snapped when Jax started to fight with her, thinking she was the problem. “I need to see.”

Angela motioned Jax to pull her down.

He did it carefully, not about to risk hurting the reporter. All the pregnant women were being handled with care.

Camp alarms started blaring to their right; the guards moved with Angela as she ran that way. Marc’s orders were protection, not detaining, but the men running along considered grabbing her and

keeping her in the middle, before quickly discarding the notion. Considering it was the only comfort they were allowed.

Angela darted between the running people and scaled a water tanker. She tossed herself down, hip taking the tolerable pain. She quickly slid forward on her elbows and knees like a reptile.

Her guards came up in almost identical movements as shots rang out.

Angela racked the slide on the 9mm that Marc had insisted she switch to. In a real fight, her 6 shooter wasn't enough. She wasn't a crack shot anymore, but she could hit what she aimed at as long as she used both hands.

Angela peered over the edge to find a large herd of mountain goats invading their walls. Many of the dingy white animals had been trampled in the rush down the cliff where Safe Haven was camped. The rest were bunched painfully against the fenced walls. Wood groaned, creaking under the strain. More shots rang out as those on watch tried to alleviate the pressure. Aiming at the crippled goats closest to the fence, the sentries were creating a barrier of bodies, as they'd been taught.

Angela was pleased. She stood up, looking around at the guards to let them know everything was okay. Her protection also rose.

Hiss! Thud!

The Eagle on Angela's right fell off the side of the tanker.

“Sniper!” Jax grabbed Angela. He slid her off the tanker and into Daryl’s waiting arms, then rolled onto his back and hit his radio. “I saw a flash, Shawn! He’s at my noon, high!”

There was about three minutes of tense silence and then one muffled shot rang out.

Everyone waited.

“Sniper’s dead. I’m hit. Switch out.”

Angela headed for the gate before Jax could roll from the top of the tanker. He had to run to catch up.

Angela met Shawn, healing him before he was in physical reach. The handgun wound wasn’t serious, but she needed all of them at full health. The witch, who wanted this baby as much as she did, would let her know when it became a problem.

After he was healed, Angela went to help the Eagles gather the meat that had delivered itself to their front door. She couldn’t do anything for Jack. He’d been dead before hitting the ground. Two of the camp’s older women would come to direct handling of the body. They were getting too good at the routine.

“Can I talk to you?”

Angela slung her end of a carcass onto the cart, scowling. “I’m not. So don’t ask.”

“You’re getting good men killed!”

Daryl’s accusation wasn’t new, but Angela felt the guilt threaten to overwhelm her. She shoved it aside to embrace the anger that she was working so hard to bring out in everyone else. “I’m trying to

save an entire country, our future. I can't do that from a covered tent!"

Daryl opened his mouth to make a different suggestion and Angela swung, punching him in the mouth hard enough to make him stumble and almost fall. "I'm sorry, Daryl. I am, but so help me if I hear one word about abandoning these people to save myself, I will shoot you dead."

The top Eagle clamped his lips shut. She never bluffed.

Angela went back to helping collect the food.

Those who witnessed the ugly moment took some of it with them and wished even more that Adrian was leading them again.

2

"I can't believe she sent us out alone." Conner held the bushes for Jennifer to pass.

None of the other team members spoke. They were scared and not in the mood to talk. Conner was excited. It was annoying.

Jennifer and Becky stayed together, with Conner in the front and Charlie in the rear. The guns in their holsters felt surreal. Even the stunted, abnormal ground was harsher than they were used to. Their roles were just as unreal, though all of them had agreed without hesitation. It wasn't something they had ever thought they'd be sent out to do.

“This is the place.” Conner held up his map.
“She said to split up when we reach the bridge.”

Charlie and Becky took the path to the right, while Conner went to the left. Jennifer hesitated, torn. She didn’t know Conner.

A hand pulled on her shoulder.

Jennifer flinched, swinging.

Conner landed on his ass next to her.

Charlie and Becky laughed. For an instant, the bubble around them became visible. Peace settled over the kids as they remembered they could protect themselves now.

Then reality returned. The two inexperienced teams headed down the mountain in silence.

Behind them, two trained teams also came down the same paths and then split up to watch out for the teenagers. The adult teams would split off on their own runs later, but for the beginning of their trek at least, the kids were safer than they thought.

3

“Ladies, I’d like to have your attention for a moment.” Chatter in the van stopped as Kyle cleared his throat. “Each of you has an envelope. Inside is a sheet of paper and another envelope. When I tell you, open it and read the contents of the paper only. Look at the time and date before opening the second set of instructions. Anyone who

opens the wrong one, even by accident, will get left right here.”

Doubting him a little, the females waited impatiently for permission.

“Open part one.”

Tearing sounds filled the van; an awkward tension followed.

Kyle brought them to a halt and put the van in park. He tore open his own instructions before looking at the passengers. “Mine says to tell you that I have the same message.”

“What message?” Heather was confused. “My paper is blank.”

Every head turned toward the former accountant, expressions shocked, angry.

Kyle filled her in. “Our papers say: One person has no instructions. Ask her why she betrayed us.”

Heather gasped, face flooding with fear.

Tonya grabbed the woman’s arms so Tracy could take the weapons from her belt.

“Start talking!” Crista had her gun ready. “I’ll kill you.”

Heather held up a hand. “Please, wait.”

As Tracy and Tonya stepped back, Crista looked to Kyle for guidance.

Sensing this might be the only distracted moment she would get, Heather swiftly pulled a secondary gun from her boot. She snatched the first person she could reach and held the hostage in front of her. “Drive or I’ll shoot her!”

Kyle shook his head, hands out of sight and moving, body set to react. “Don’t make me do this. Face a trial.”

Heather laughed harshly. “And let those idiots who—”

Kyle spun around and fired over the seat with one quick round.

The bullet slammed into Heather’s shoulder, knocking her backward to free Tonya.

Before Heather could do more than cry out, Tonya flipped around and began punching the woman in her bloody shoulder.

Kyle calmly got the van rolling as the other women hurried over to subdue their traitor.

4

“You all right in here?”

Peggy shoved hair out of her face and hefted the babbling baby higher onto her hip. “No. Part A is done. Here’s part B: The drafts need to be sealed in the kid’s area, the entrance gets closed one hour after sunset, and yes, that means you’re staying here.” She handed Doug an envelope before he could argue and walked away while he was reading, passing the baby to one of the other den mothers. She knew what his instructions were. He wouldn’t like it, but he was needed.

“Did you do this?!”

“No.”

“Who did this?!”

Peggy rounded on him, furious. “You did, ya big lug! And you had the nerve to lecture me!”

Doug suspected the knowledge she had, but his pride wouldn't let it go. “Why?”

“You're sick! You lied!” Peggy entered the bathing area and got busy giving orders to the lingering males who were eyeing the kids as if they were hungry jackals. “Set those buffalos more evenly, hang a thicker curtain, put down the adhesive mats...” Peggy made a sharp gesture. “Write!”

Doug fumbled his notebook and pen into hand as she repeated the current list, then kept going.

“After the mats, get guards in every area. Make sure happy, loyal men are on shift tonight.”

“I know how to set up security, woman!” Doug snapped, face red.

“Then why do you have to write it down like a rookie?”

Doug paused, mouth moving with thoughts he couldn't voice.

She made that sharp gesture again. “Get moving, man!”

Doug stomped off, muttering.

Peggy went to the rear of the cave. She stopped to consult her notebook, but when everyone was out of sight or not paying attention, she ducked behind a pile of boulders that appeared to be a dead end. She lifted a rough grey curtain and went under it before she was spotted.

The sentry she bumped into in the darkness put a steady hand on her arm. “Careful there, sexy.”

Peggy snorted, but didn’t snap at the man. They were all tense and using whatever outlet they could find. “Is everything ready?”

Tommy nodded. He loved being in the loop. As a member of Jeff’s team, he always was. “Right on schedule.”

“And the C4?”

“In place. When you call it, I’ll demolish it.”

5

“It needs to be deeper.”

Troy frowned, leaning on his shovel. “Don’t understand what we’re doing anyway.”

Zack sank his own spade into the pile of loose dirt and wiped at his neck with his already soaked bandana. “Following orders.”

Troy waved at the envelope sticking from Zack’s shirt pocket. “None of this makes any sense.”

“What do you mean *none of it*?” Zack asked, controlling his tone. Since being named fifth in command, he was learning to control himself in many ways. This was one of those moments where he acted cool even though he was furious that so many people couldn’t follow orders even when it mattered.

“Dig this, dump that, shoot here. None of it makes any sense is what I’m sayin’.”

“You opened all of them?”

“Well, sure.” Troy grinned. “Got curious.”

Zack blew out a resigned breath. *Another one. Great.* “Curiosity killed the cat, ya know?”

Troy snorted, starting to realize he was in trouble. “I’m a man. Takes more than that to kill me.”

“I can do it with two sentences.”

Troy sputtered. “I didn’t tell anyone what was in ‘em.”

Zack motioned to the guard on the detail, not responding.

Troy knew what was coming next. He tossed the shovel into the hole they’d been digging. “Don’t do this. You need me. I didn’t tell anyone!”

Kevin was the team leader of their current guards. He glared at Troy. He knew what the problem was without being told. “Did you break boss’s orders?”

Troy’s face and protests fell as Zack jerked a thumb. “Here are the two sentences: You are off this mission and out of the Eagles, per Angela’s punishment. Pack up and head out.”

Troy stormed away from the half dug hole without fighting. Once those words were said, they couldn’t be taken back.

Kevin waved one of his team over to take the angry man’s place, glad Angela had given him this chore. He couldn’t stand another day of listening to static on the radio and watching Cynthia prepare for war. Angela had known he needed a break of some

kind and put him on this low security guard detail. “We’ll round him up at closing time tonight.” It was what he’d been told to say.

Zack watched Troy huff through the working people and women, hoping for someone to get in his way. No one was dumb enough to. “He won’t go back to camp.”

Kevin wasn’t sure on that. Angela had made it clear that any Eagle who opened their envelope early would be below camp members in rank, but Troy had a woman in Safe Haven.

Zack was thinking about that too. “She refuses to settle down, keeps screwing around. He won’t go back to camp without an intervention.”

“I’ll let the boss know.” Kevin was already drawing on his new mental ability to do so. This was one of those times where the things Angela was teaching them came in handy. He’d been honoring his vow to work hard at it. “She says bring him in tonight, willing or not.”

Zack understood Kevin’s reluctance, but only nodded. Letting their unhappy shooters join the enemy wasn’t something they could allow and Zack wouldn’t, not even for a pal. That was the problem with secrecy done openly. Many people simply weren’t trustworthy on their own, even to follow simple directions. As a result, curiosity was rearranging their ranks again. Zack thought it was for the best. The camps around theirs held people who were better for those positions; failure to follow orders was going to put them there. The

funniest thing was that Zack didn't think Angela had manipulated it or looked into the future to determine cause and effect on this one. Fate was at work here. Zack took his comfort from that.

6

"Four hours are up." Kenn knew Adrian wasn't going to make the call.

Marc stretched and yawned before consulting his map. "Location?"

"Right where she said to be."

"Good. I used one of the cabins up here. We'll spend the night."

Neither man argued. The tension in the truck, even with Marc sleeping, had been thick. They were curious as to why he was calling it a day so early, but neither Kenn nor Adrian asked. If he wanted them to rest, they were fine with that.

Marc didn't let out a laugh at their thoughts, but his grin let them know they were wrong. They didn't realize how badly until they stepped into the over-decorated hunting cabin and found stack after stack of boxes and equipment. Most of the labels were military, but one pile along the wall said *made in China*. Another was marked for aid distribution, and yet another claimed to be fragile computer parts.

In the far corner, an Indian with a single braid and no feathers was sitting against the wall with two

guns. A decaying Christmas tree with fading packages sat to his right.

Kenn and Adrian waited for Marc, but let their eyes do the walking.

Marc pulled the truck to the rear of the building, where Grendin and Natoli covered it with netted camouflage tarps that blended perfectly with the dead and dying trees. He entered the cabin through the rear door, nodding at the rookie on duty.

The Indian holstered his guns and left through the rear door.

“Junit and his father will keep watch.”

Adrian moved toward the nearest box to read the instruction sheet taped to the top.

Kenn did the same with the box from China.

Marc went to the table where a small stack of envelopes and papers were laid out and weighed down with rocks and heavy knickknacks. “Meeting in ten minutes. Try to find the box she had them label with a big biohazard symbol.”

Frowning, Adrian began searching in the front, while Kenn searched the rear.

“When you find it, leave it there. We just need to keep track of that hot potato for now.”

“Over here.” Kenn motioned to a crate under a shelf. It was thick and wrapped in multiple layers of plastic.

“Good. These top sheets are arranged according to danger level. Not sure why, but I imagine we’ll find out as we go.” Marc shuffled through the stack

of papers, heart clenching at the script. He missed Angie.

“So do I!” Adrian sighed. “Stop thinking about her.”

Marc glared angrily. He sometimes forgot that Adrian had many of the same gifts that he did. It was natural that the blond would be monitoring his thoughts, but Marc didn’t like it. “Let’s get started.”

Other dangerous men entered the cabin and came to the table.

Kenn and Adrian kept their protests to themselves as Natoli and Atolius also joined them.

Junit closed the door after they came in, rifle now in hand for standing watch outside.

Marc handed each of them a single sheet of paper. “When you get that done, come grab the next one. She has five levels to this plan and all of them are deadly. As you can see, the outer ring starts with complete chaos. She isn’t giving them any merciful hits.”

“Good.” Natoli smiled coolly. “They don’t deserve any.”

“Those are Americans we’re about to wipe out!” Kenn glowered. “Show some respect!”

Sebastian grinned, puffing on his cigar to get it lit. “Touchy soldier boys, eh?”

“Yeah.” Marc snickered. “We’re definitely that. Maybe I need to set some rules of conduct. First, shut up. Listen to the boss. Second, shut up.”

Instant waves of anger and challenge filled the room.

Marc approved. “As I was saying, the first rings are bad. The second ring is a jungle of det-cord and mines. From there, it gets ugly.”

“What are me and my boys doing?” Half of the Mexican army, under Sebastian, had fought alongside the Ghost while coming over 40.

“Same as the rest of this team. We’re handing out supplies, escorting people around, keeping lines of communication open.”

Now all of them were scowling.

“Sounds like rookie work.”

Marc ignored Kenn’s comment. “As soon as the first sheet is finished, come to me for the next. We work in three man teams.”

Kenn was almost foaming with eagerness to rip it apart. “There’s no way six men can supply an entire battlefield.”

“Nope.” Marc smiled. “But those plans are above your pay grade.”

Kenn snapped his mouth shut, glowering instead.

“At dawn, the Safe Haven group will head out. We’ll make it back here around dusk and then Natoli’s group will go. We’ll alternate shifts like that to cover all the areas in our zone twice a day. During those times, we will pick up and deliver supplies, messages, give advice and help, and anything else that’s needed.”

Now that they were getting solid details, Adrian and Kenn began fitting them into their own ideas of what Angela might have planned.

“First runs are crates A-D. No other letters. Get on it.”

The men finished going over the small bits Marc was willing to tell them, planning the best routes to the camps on the map he laid out. Seeing how many there were again threw into doubt being able to reach them all, but this time, Kenn waited to see what the plan was.

Marc handed out a second sheet of paper. “That’s the allotted supplies for each location on the inner ring. *Do not* go over that.”

“Ten thousand rounds of ammunition, two week’s food and water, three hundred assorted handguns, one hundred machetes.” Kenn looked around at the room, the boxes. “We don’t have all that.”

“This is one of seven stockpiles that we have in this area.” Marc skimmed the notes. “As we empty each one, we’ll move to the next.”

“Ahead of incoming?”

Marc shrugged at Adrian’s question. “That’s what I assume, but we’ll find out together.”

“She sounds like a gem, this woman of yours.” Sebastian grinned again. “I am most anxious to meet my brother’s obsession in the flesh.”

Three cold glares swung his way.

The Mexican blanched, held up a consoling hand.

Two of those heads dropped, accepting. The third glared at him for a moment longer.

When Marc finally looked down at the next stack of papers, Sebastian was relieved in a way that he didn't feel the need to question. Marc was the boss and that was that.

"We're using standard Eagle code until they jam us up," Marc answered one of Adrian's questions before it rolled out of his mouth.

"Then field phones?"

"Yes. She already has the lines run."

"When do we fall back to our camps?" Natoli needed to know. "We have people to care for."

"When she gives the call." Adrian was reading the single sheet on future plans that Marc was allowing them to view. "She'll be contacting all of us at different times, getting updates."

Natoli guessed from those words that Angela was also gifted, and felt better about a female in charge. Marc was one man Natoli wouldn't ever want to cross. It was a comfort that the war was in the hands of someone who was like their Ghost.

Adrian growled. "She's not like him! He's like us!"

Marc's laughter was more salt in Adrian's wounds. The blond man stood up. "Are we done?"

"For now." Marc was still chuckling. "You can have first shift, up high."

Adrian left without slamming the door like he wanted to.

Marc glanced over to see Kenn wearing a confused expression. "Adrian thought he was the only gifted male in our camp, other than Charlie. A

teenager isn't a threat, but me, well..." Marc chuckled again. "I'm more than his match."

Kenn thought about it. Weren't there any other gifted males in Safe Haven? There was...Conner, though a son wouldn't be viewed that way. And there was... "Damn."

Marc nodded, no longer smiling. "Kids, he can handle. Eagles and camp members, he's great with. Our kind? He's on the bottom rung with little power and a whole lot of mistakes to keep him there. It allowed him to overlook people."

Kenn wasn't sure if that was true, but the fact that he had to consider it sucked. The information coming from Marc made it worse.

Marc shrugged. "Sorry about that, but you've earned it the same as he has."

"What about you?" Kenn sneered. "You've done the same shit we have, just at different times."

Marc wasn't going to be drawn into that. "I'm not on trial here, Marine. You and your idol are. It's time to pay for your choices, your lies, and the deaths that came from it."

Kenn was shaking his head. "Name one person I killed who didn't deserve to die!"

"Your unborn son."

"You piece of..." Kenn came over the table.

Natoli and Sebastian got out of the way as quickly as they could.

Marc met him with a vicious head butt that knocked Kenn out. He slid to the floor in a quick movement that scattered papers and cups. Marc

rubbed his forehead gingerly. “That’s gonna hurt tomorrow, right?”

Natoli chuckled, while Sebastian grinned weakly. “Yes, my friend, but it is much quieter in here.”

Marc sighed, now wishing he’d chosen to punch. The throbbing headache was already starting.

Take from one of them and it will heal you, the demon reminded.

Marc closed his lids, concentrating, and managed to bring the pain down to a level he could stand, without any help. Controlling pain was a skill that soldiers developed quickly.

Nice, the demon praised.

Marc didn’t respond as a punishment for almost being tricked into drawing when he didn’t need to. The demon didn’t realize Marc was also monitoring him.

The demon withdrew.

Marc looked over with the others as the rear door to the cabin opened. They’d left the jingle bells up, but Marc was already tired of the sound.

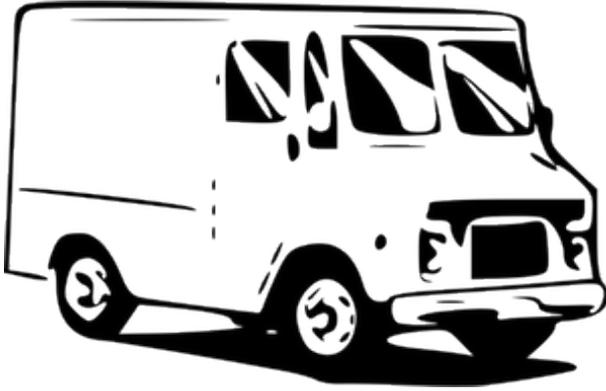
Adrian spotted Kenn and then the ugly welt coming up on Marc’s forehead. “Figures.” He stepped inside to pull Kenn’s big body onto one of the pallets along the wall. Once finished, he returned to his post outside, breathing heavily.

Marc leaned back, arms crossing. “You two should get sleep while you can.”

Natoli was honored to be on Marc's war council. He had no problem taking the order.

Sebastian obeyed without showing any emotion at all. The two leaders crashed in their bedrolls at opposite ends of the building and were soon snoring.

Chapter Eight
Choices to Make



1

Samantha stood up as the van came to a halt. They'd been traveling for hours, all watching Heather for signs of aggression. And they'd been grilling her, of course. It was still going on.

"Tell us when they're coming! That's all we need."

"I don't know."

"Marc won't go easy on you. Save yourself. Tell us when they're coming."

"I wouldn't even if I knew!"

Slap!

Samantha did a fast check of her gear to be sure she had her two kits and pack, then moved toward the door.

“Hey! Where is she going?”

Samantha flashed her instruction card to their driver, who frowned but opened the door.

As she stepped out, alone, Kyle couldn't stay quiet. “You'll be okay?”

Samantha didn't answer. She'd spent the ride getting set for her mission. She'd known something like this was coming from the remarks Angela had made to her when they were alone. Samantha had been longing for it, as if it was the air she needed. No one else existed for her now. Not Neil and his macho attitude, nor Jeremy and his whining charm. Not even the twin sons she was carrying. Her duty, her mission, would come first. It was the one thing she'd been denied her entire life because of her gender, but no one could take it from her now. She would either succeed or die.

Samantha vanished into the shadows with her head up and feet carefully moving through the tangle of underbrush.

Kyle closed the doors before the need to follow and drag her back could overwhelm his resolve to follow orders. “Next stop in fifteen minutes. If you have number two, get ready.”

Kyle was glad Samantha was the closest stop to their camp. He inspected the remaining females, seeing the reality settling over their faces, and got them rolling. Angela said to stay on schedule, not to

be late or early at any of the stops. The windows and avenues of detour she'd given him would cover almost everything that could go wrong, so long as he remembered to do his part.

“What are we supposed to do with her?” Tracy was tiring of the useless questioning between satisfying slaps.

Heather saw a moment of distraction and quickly spat the snot and blood from her mouth. She wiped her face with her sleeves, clearing until she was dry. She didn't act like any of the bruises hurt.

That bothered Tracy. She snagged Heather by her hair and slammed her face against the seat.

Heather screamed as her nose broke.

Tracy let the other women pull her away. “Felt that, didn't you?”

Heather flung a bloody hand toward Tracy splattering more bloody drops. “Drop dead, bith!”

It sounded pinched and garbled, causing the van of women to snicker.

Heather pulled her scarf off and used it to stem the flow. “Mean whore, hiping from fa back!”

Tracy crossed her arms over her chest to keep from lunging again. “That's what you're doing!”

Heather snapped her nose back into place, making everyone in the van wince, including Kyle. He knew exactly what it felt like to do that.

“Dust kill me! Don't dwag it out.”

“We want information and then you can go free.”

Heather held the scarf tighter as the blood continued to drip. “Swew you!”

Kyle shook his head at Tracy when she would have finished the job, as he’d been teaching them. “Not for us to decide. She goes to Angela.”

The thought of facing that anger sent a wave of silence through the van. None of those pictures were pretty.

Heather stayed quiet about that coming moment and about her shot shoulder, her broken nose. Complaining that she was still bleeding wasn’t smart, but she worried over it a little. Heather didn’t heal well. She had a weak system, her mom had told her that, and without the government’s medicine, she would die. Therefore, she had chosen to come out and betray her fellow man to keep on living. Now that she might be killed, it was still those shiny pills that she cared for. Living without her drugs was not an option.

“Next in line, get set.” Kyle sighed. This would be a long run.

2

“Are we ready?” Neil scanned the team of men behind him. “Cause we’ve got company.”

The Eagles were set. Everyone stilled except for being sure that they were indeed in position. This would be a quick hit and run, but it was also tricky on the timing.

They watched the three jeeps of soldiers roll right up to the cave entrance and rush inside as if they weren't worried over anything or anyone who might be in the area. Neil vowed to change that. He and his teammates had been here for hours, waiting patiently to start Angela's war.

Neil held up a hand as Jeremy's finger settled over the button.

The last jeep of soldiers was expected to remain outside, but Neil wanted as many of them as he could get. He waited until they took up sentry positions outside the entrance to the vast network of caves. It had been a military supply depot at one point. Neil and his team had gone through it a week ago, cleaned out what they could use before wiring the entire tunnel system. There wouldn't be any fleeing and escaping through a different exit.

Neil nodded.

Jeremy pushed the button.

An instant later, the cave began to blow up.

The Eagles stayed under the cover of the opposite cliffs, protected from the debris, but not the dust as the side of the cliff disintegrated into millions of bits of dirt and stone. The first blow had been struck.

Not far from the Eagles, a large group of soldiers snuck through the woods and rocks, headed for Safe Haven. They heard the explosions, but didn't detour from their mission. Armed with the

usual arsenal and hopes for a pass out of this hell, there were exactly forty of them.

3

“We have a report of shots fired at the base.”

“In-fighting again?” Zack was hopeful the soldiers would kill each other and save them the war.

Kevin shook his head. “A plane came today and dropped someone off. A few minutes later there was rifle fire and then a crew digging a large grave.”

“New leader must have come and put his house in order. Guess we’re back to the stress.”

Kevin snorted. “I didn’t know we’d stopped.”

Angela wouldn’t like the news, but both men were confident she had this covered. The base sending someone to lead those planeloads of troops had to happen.

“I’ll tell her. Go grab a nap. You look like you need it.”

Zack vanished gratefully into the weeds that lined the fences. They’d been here for a week now and it was starting to feel like a basic settlement. Zack hated it. That feeling wasn’t supposed to come until they were all back together.

Kevin watched Zack duck into the tent and continued on his way to where the boss was supervising trucks being loaded with their special defenses. Only a few people had been allowed a glimpse of Angela’s plans so far and Kevin was as

curious as everyone else. If he hurried, he might get a peek at the boxes while delivering the message from the guards still posted near the destroyed base. He refused to spend any more time worrying over his personal issues. There would be time later.

4

“Do it!”

At Marc’s order, Kenn fired on the small group of soldiers below them. It still felt wrong to shoot at men in uniform; he had to force himself to obey the one shot, one kill rule. They didn’t have unlimited bullets and this was now open war.

Marc released the lever as the soldiers came up the hill. He and Kenn ran down their escape path as trees exploded. Shrapnel whizzed through the woods as screams blared into the sky. The thin rope holding the rack of dead trees snapped under the pressure. The entire lot went rolling down the hillside, crushing the soldiers. Those who survived had broken bones and open wounds that would need stitching. The medic who would have performed that duty died when a large chunk of debris slid into his eye and pierced his brain.

Marc and Kenn circled back a short time later to clean the bodies of anything they could use. A lot of the gear had been damaged, but the uniforms were mostly intact once the logs were rolled off and the owners removed. They were in and out in a few

minutes, and back at the cabin by the time the sun started to sink.

5

“You okay to keep going?”

“Getting a little tired.” Becky didn’t usually get this much physical activity at once. “Maybe just a short break?”

“Come on.” Charlie steered them into the small cave he’d been scanning while considering when to stop for the night. Late afternoon shadows were deepening around them.

Becky followed Charlie into the cave without fear. Charlie had gifts to use if they got into trouble.

“You have a couple gifts now too. Don’t you?”

Becky nodded slowly. “I haven’t told anyone.”

The cave wasn’t high, but it was wide, with two entrances—one at the top of the rise and the second on the ground. The floor of the cave was rough, but even. Charlie removed his kit and knelt down to dig through it. “Mom knows. She asked me to give you this.”

Becky took the envelope reluctantly, scared of what was inside.

Charlie quickly hung his pre-taped black curtain, then activated the flashlight around his neck. “Can you see?”

Becky didn’t answer. What she was reading had sucked her brain into a zone she rarely ever accessed.

Charlie slipped in to discover what had her so upset, but there was a brick wall as soon as the door opened. Every time he clawed through, there was a thicker wall waiting. He finally gave up when he heard her snicker. “You’re good.”

Becky was pleased. “Yeah, being on your mom’s team adds something to the lessons.”

No longer feeling like he had to be careful not to offend her, Charlie renewed his mental attack on her mental defense.

Becky grinned at first, sure she could keep putting up walls faster than he could break through, but as they stared at each other, she could feel him gathering a blast that would plunge through more than one at a time.

Becky quickly began throwing up walls in panic, but they weren’t as strong without the concentration; they crumbled under his constant onslaught. “Okay. Can’t keep that up.”

Charlie, lost in the pleasure of a mental challenge, pushed deeper, harder.

“Stop now!” Pain lanced through her head.

Charlie almost couldn’t. The feel of invading her mind was better than the kisses he’d stolen from Tracy.

“Please.” Tears rolled down her cheeks. “Please don’t look.”

The door opened.

Charlie shouted in horror at images. He shoved himself back, biting his lip to keep the sounds inside.

Becky cringed along the wall, shoved back into those awful moments she'd suffered with Rick.

Charlie stayed still as she cried, wishing he'd been able to stop before that last door opened. He'd only wanted to practice, to be ready. "I'm sorry."

Becky didn't answer. She was in hell.

Charlie slipped in with much less eagerness this time and gently drew her away from the past. "Come on." He offered a hand to the naked, bloody girl.

Becky watched her spirit lift from her body and take Charlie's hand. A minute later, she became aware of sobbing uncontrollably in his arms. She let it come after that, soaking them both as he rocked her.

Lost, Charlie kept his mouth shut and his mind on good things. He never wanted to see something like that again. If he did, bullets would fly. Or worse.

Becky thought about the message again and burst into fresh tears.

You don't have to do any of this.

"But, I do." Becky shuddered as the tears finally started to ease. "It's the only thing I haven't tried to get him out of my head."

Charlie had begun calling for his mom mentally as soon as Becky had started crying. He had no experience with this. When Angela didn't answer, he thought maybe she'd done this to him on purpose. He could almost hear her laughing and saying he had a woman of his own who would have

moments when she cried. He would have to know how to handle it.

Charlie hugged Becky tighter. He could do this part. It was when they got mad that he wanted to run. Or duck. Or hide. He was never sure of the proper reaction on that.

6

Samantha had been traveling non-stop since Kyle dropped her off. She was into the thickest part of the woods by dusk. She'd made it nearly five miles away from where everyone in the van thought she would be. That had been on her instruction card and Samantha agreed with it completely. If Heather managed to escape, the traitor would give bad information on locations, which meant her dates and times wouldn't be right either. Angela was smart. Samantha respected her more now than she ever had.

Rather than oppress her people into searches and threats, with punishments to back them up, Angela had chosen to just limit knowledge. It would allow them to track down their traitors one by one, though the need for secrecy wasn't sitting well with some people. The Eagles were watching those folks closer than the rest. The whiners didn't understand how serious this fight was, so they couldn't be counted on to do what was right for Safe Haven. Samantha wasn't sure what would happen to the

rule breakers and rebels among them once the war ended.

Sadly, that was another problem that Angela had to deal with. Even reliable men and women were fleeing, afraid of the future. It made it hard to assign jobs and chores in a normal camp, let alone dole out secret battle plans. Samantha had no idea how Angela was keeping track of it, or keeping it flowing, but she was. The first round of envelopes and instructions had been delivered and were being obeyed, providing some people with opportunities to do more than they'd ever thought they would. When she signed up for the Eagles, Samantha had wanted to go on runs like this with the men, but she'd known it wasn't likely to happen. Now, here she was walking through the dark Georgia mountains on her way to kill someone. She'd never felt so alive, so needed. Nothing would pull her from this chore.

Samantha chose her spot carefully, exhausted after walking all day. She quickly unpacked her sleeping bag and a meal, settling into both in a kind of tired, relaxed haze. She'd spent the time thinking about her life so far and the choices she'd made. If she died in this final battle, she wanted to be ready to face whatever would come next. Samantha was sure many of their people were spending their waiting and walking time doing the same soul searching.

Samantha made sure the sleeping bag would be hidden under the pine needles and leaves, then

curled up in it and went to sleep, uncaring about the bugs or snakes that might crawl across her hiding place. Once again, she had larger worries to be concerned with. She drifted off thinking of the spider bite and how she'd had the strength to do what needed to be done. This time, she wouldn't hesitate to pull a trigger. She'd changed.

7

Adrian and Junit observed the landscape around them, each lost in their own worried thoughts. Junit was concerned over his actions during the upcoming battles; he was praying he had what it took to make his camp proud. Adrian was trying to contact Angela and beg her to bring him back so they could be together while Marc wasn't around.

Neither man heard the soft rumble of a van until it was at their front door.

Adrian sighed. *So much for being an Alpha.*

"I was just thinking the same thing." Marc was now standing at the door below him. "It's our first protective."

"Our what?" Junit didn't alert Sebastian and Natoli. He wouldn't unless Marc told him to.

"We're running escort details too." Adrian hating it that he was forced to explain. He was used to being the one who held silent.

Marc knew. It made his steps almost carefree as he went to meet the van.

Kyle opened the van doors, nodding to Marc and Adrian. This was one stop he didn't mind making.

Tonya stepped down with a last glare at Heather as Marc handed Kyle a sheet of paper.

"She said to tell you that Jennifer is fine. Conner wouldn't let her make a fire and she's pissed at him. That's why you can't reach her."

Kyle grinned in relief and closed the doors. "Number four, your stop is in twenty minutes. Please get ready."

Tonya looked around for Kenn as the van chugged away. "Where is he?"

When no one answered, Tonya went into the cabin. "I told him to keep his mouth shut. Guess he didn't listen."

Marc lingered with Adrian and Junit. "We should give those two a few minutes."

"You didn't tell Kenn she was coming?"

Marc shook his head, almost laughing. "No, Angie thought it was better this way. I agreed for the entertainment."

Adrian wanted to snicker, but the anger wouldn't let him. *These are my moments to set up and deliver!* He climbed back up to the roof in silence.

Marc smoked a cigarette and waited for the show to start.

Kenn opened his eyes to find Tonya sitting at the table, spinning a lighter on the dusty surface. He

groaned as he sat up, carefully feeling his jaw. “What are you doing here?”

Tonya didn’t answer yet. She needed him to be fully alert for this.

Kenn stood up, hand braced on the wall. He felt like hell.

Tonya pushed a travel mug of stale coffee toward him. “We’ll talk in a minute.” Tonya ignored the cluttered shelter, more concerned with Kenn’s reaction than garbage piled on the wooden floors or clothes hung to dry on a sagging Christmas tree.

Kenn took the coffee and the chair, but he kept his attention on her and not the pain. Something was wrong. It was the only time Tonya was quiet. Kenn rubbed at his face. “Spit it out.”

Tonya heard the tone and knew he was awake enough. “I’m headed in, as a spy.”

“Like hell you are!”

“Shut up!”

“You shut up! Tell him to send in his own bitch!”

Outside, Marc’s grin grew wider. Kenn wasn’t so big on sacrifice when it was someone he loved.

“He doesn’t love her.”

Marc rolled his eyes. “Yes, Adrian, he does. You not being able to recognize that is another symptom of your disease.”

“I’m not sick!”

“You are.” Marc raised his voice to be heard over the yelling inside. “Your greed and jealousy have sunk into your soul and caused a cancer. Until you get rid of it, you’re a dead man walking and I can’t stand the smell.” Marc stepped inside as Tonya came out.

“I have to go now. I’m on a tight schedule.”

Marc nodded, not telling her to be careful. He had no doubt that she would. He was also sure Angela hadn’t sent the redhead out here completely alone.

Tonya kept walking until the cabin was out of sight, and then checked her map. When she was secure in her exact location, she detoured to a nearby grove of trees. It was marked, but only in a way that her team would notice. Men never paid attention to shit like stomped on flowers that had been placed, instead of displaced.

She’d been trained to get up high for a clear view; Tonya snickered softly as she climbed her first tree in delicate boots. Angela hadn’t wanted her to wear them at all, but Tonya had given up her fancy clothes and she missed them. Any excuse to wear them now was one she always took.

Tonya reached the fork in the tree and stopped to rest. “You here yet?”

“On your right.”

Tonya didn’t look at her partner in crime. She recognized the voice. “Oh, great. It keeps getting better!”

Tonya honestly meant that. Kendle knew it from the tone. She stared in confusion. “You’re weird. You know it?”

“Sure.” Tonya pulled her kit off to rummage through for a snack. “Who else could love Kenny?”

Kendle shrugged. She didn’t know Kenn well yet, except by the stories and his short fuse when he refused Angela’s orders. None of them were good.

“You all clear on what we’re doing here?”

Kendle grunted. “Spilling blood.”

Tonya frowned a bit. “If we have to. They might be taken without that.”

Kendle shut her eyes and let her head fall against the tree. “God, I hope not.”

Tonya was frowning thickly now. “Yeah, and I’m the weird one.”

“Says the chick dressed like she’s gonna suck the enemy to death.”

“It’s my role.” Tonya had flushed. “You’re mean. Shut up.”

Kendle thought about ripping the woman’s red hair out strand-by-strand and sighed heavily. It would make too much noise. Kenn was sure to come running and Kendle didn’t think killing him would win her any friends, despite him being disliked by most of the Eagles. Kenn might be scum, but he was important scum. If that was the case, killing him and his whore wasn’t the best idea.

Tonya could feel the waves of menace, but it didn’t frighten her. She didn’t care that Kendle was like Angela and the others, or that she had Marc’s

protection. Tonya was well armed and she knew how to use those weapons. She also excelled at their kai fighting, thanks to Kenn and Seth. If the new woman wanted to scrap, Tonya had until dawn before her role officially began anyway.

Kendle chuckled as she picked up the thoughts. “Peppy, aren’t ya?”

Tonya rolled her eyes. “Sleep or something, will you? I don’t need a friend either.”

That caught Kendle by surprise. “What’s wrong with being my friend? I’m good people.”

Tonya snorted lowly. “If you were good people, you wouldn’t have been sent out here with me.”

Kendle couldn’t argue that and didn’t try. She’d never felt less good in her life. She expected more of the same. Hope was for people who hadn’t lived in the darkness. Once you spent time there, going back was impossible.

8

“Stop number four.” Kyle said it tiredly, already exhausted from the emotional battles each time he let a female out into danger. It wasn’t what he’d been training for.

“That’s me.”

Kyle groaned silently as Cynthia moved up the drafty isle. Kevin would shit when he found out how far away from camp Cynthia was. Adrian might too.

Cynthia hesitated at the door. She had spent a lot of the ride deliberating this moment.

Kyle waited for her to speak, sure he wouldn't like what she had to say.

"Tell them both the same thing."

Kyle braced as the perfume-less van of females went silent.

"I don't love either of them and this is what I wanted. I *chose* this part in her plan." Cynthia regarded the remaining women with tenderness. "My sisters."

"My sister," they echoed back sadly.

The feeling that they knew something about her role that he didn't hit Kyle with enough force to make his stomach twist. Kyle grabbed her hand and tugged her into his embrace for a quick hug that surprised all of them. "Try to come back! They do need you!"

Cynthia returned the hug. "Remember me. I mattered." She climbed from the van, ignoring the cries and protests. They knew what choice she'd made.

As the van slowly left her in darkness, Cynthia disappeared into the brush with her kit over one shoulder and a recent meeting on her mind.

"If you were team leader, who would you give this duty to?"

None of the women in the tent answered.

Angela grunted. "We're not done here until we have that chore assigned."

"You pick it." Samantha's voice was sad. "We know it won't be easy."

Angela grimaced. "I can't. I've tried. When I look, there's only darkness."

"Because I'm supposed to do it."

Cynthia's words drew gasps and denials from everyone except Angela. She stared at the reporter with sadness and resignation. "It just cleared. You know what it means?"

Cynthia snorted. "You've gone over it enough. I'd better know."

Her quip drew no smiles. Everyone in the tent knew that duty was a suicide run.

Cynthia hitched the kit further onto her shoulder and took a minute to reexamine her map. The small, reflective sticker glowing on it was just enough to read by. She put it away and resumed walking. Moving through the darkness was something Angela had been drilling them on, but Cynthia still loathed it. Right now, however, she was too sad to be scared.

She finally had her dreams. She was accepted by a great group of people who cared about right and wrong. She had the love of an Eagle, even if he didn't want to admit it, and she had a child on the way, something else she'd never thought to have. And here she was, about to get herself killed. "I wouldn't have it any other way! It's worth all our lives to accomplish this."

When Troy came to, he was bound, with a gag in his mouth. Three shadows had snuck up on Troy while he stomped toward the enemy to surrender. They had hit him with a dart and tied him up. Two minutes after the assault, he had been in the rear of a truck, rolling through the darkness.

Peggy looked down at him with a scolding frown. "Why did you break the boss's rules?"

Troy saw two Eagles on the other side of the room. He appeared to be in a small shed, but it was hard to tell.

"I'm gonna take that gag out if you promise to be quiet."

Troy huffed against the cloth. He wasn't agreeing to anything.

Peggy shrugged. "Then we'll leave it in and you don't need to eat or drink." Peggy blew out the candle and slipped under the carpet cover that was hiding the area.

The two Eagles stayed where they were, watching Troy and a few other bound shadows. He wasn't the only one who'd broken the rules.

Peggy took a minute to smooth her hair down and calm herself. She had friends tied up behind the curtain, explosives under foot, and a big, angry bear of a man bellowing the embarrassment of his assignment to anyone who would listen. Calling this stressful was like some horrible joke. Angela had chosen the tourist-like caves that ran along and into the rear of Mt. Lookout. The camp was in the

topmost set of caves, but Peggy knew there were miles more below them.

Peggy advanced into the first area, pleased to discover her list had been completed. As she examined each stone room, she found the same, along with other important improvements that she hadn't ordered. She knew Doug hadn't done them. He was still too mad. She swept the tunnels and small caves for the workers responsible.

She spotted three men doing things she hadn't asked for. They were from Marc's shadow warriors. Peggy understood she didn't know all parts of the plan for this location. Angela had people in here with her. Peggy stared hard to get the attention of the one closest to her.

The Indian gave her a respectful, knowing nod and continued his work.

Not being alone in her terrible knowledge was a relief to Peggy. She didn't like what she had to do, but it wouldn't stop her. She ignored the padding that was being subtly placed to protect the currently eating people from explosions. She and Hilda had helped to plant this awful idea in Angela's dangerous mind. It was too late for guilt now.

10

Kyle opened the van door and stepped from the seat with a series of grunts, groans, and pops. All he'd done was drive and supervise, but he felt like

he had been hit by Marc a few times in the cage. And then run over.

“How’d it go?”

Kyle jumped. “Damn it!”

Angela didn’t smile. She’d been waiting on his return, with only Marc’s anger to comfort her. She scanned their surroundings while she waited for him to regain his composure.

Angela’s den had been shrunk to a quarter mile and placed along the cliff line so their backs were protected. To the north was open air. Anyone who wanted to come up that way had better be a determined climber. The rest of the space was filled with a command tent and other similar structures to protect the fighters here from the rain and sleet that was falling.

“It went fine,” Kyle finally answered, handing her a small stack of papers and envelopes. “All drops were made on schedule and Heather is with the roaming group. She’ll eventually be with our other POWs until you’re ready for her.”

Angela wrote down the time and the information she’d been given.

Kyle frowned. “When did you sleep last?”

Angela put her notebook away and lied. “Going there now.”

“Needed my update first?” Kyle guessed. “I’m opening my next envelope as soon as I grab a cup of coffee.”

Angela sighed. “Open it first. And I’m sorry.” She moved away while he did as instructed.

Thud!

Kyle punching the van was followed by the sound of the doors opening and the engine starting. New boots began to file into the vehicle a few seconds later.

Angela continued on her rounds. Guilt had given her a fresh wind. She checked her watch and headed for the open area to the north of camp. Their next group should be about to leave. Now that the camp members were gone, Safe Haven's security cameras had come down and men had been relieved of their odious duty of spying on each other.

Ray and Dale had hated it, but there had been little else to do for a few days, and after the wounds Ray had suffered from Little Rock, Angela had wanted him to have a break. She'd gotten far enough ahead of her plan that she was content she could at least start this war even off the line and not have to play catchup. It also allowed the camp a break, though Angela hadn't bothered with a Labor Day celebration.

She had known they weren't going to get to enjoy it and she'd needed the manual labor used in other areas. Decorations and a feast meant nothing if they were a day late with her plan, except that it would be their last party ever. She had given most of the camp time off beforehand, telling them they needed to spend their last days doing what they wanted to. It hadn't been encouraging to hear that, but they had enjoyed themselves at the shooting contest where Shawn had claimed the title. They'd

passed the evening with food and stories around the fires, and even the wounded had attended. Many of those were heroes in these tales and they weren't about to miss the praise. Only a few people stayed to themselves during the festivities—mostly the Indians, who were now freely roaming in and out of their gates. Marc lived here. His Shadow Warriors weren't going to be parted from him yet. She'd known that when she chose his roles in her plan and adjusted accordingly. She had no problem with such devoted men surrounding Marc at all times.

The Mexicans were fewer in number around this camp. Marc didn't trust them after all the evil Cesar had caused, but they were still coming through the gates more than Angela's personal guards liked. Marc wasn't worried about having a problem in that area until Sebastian met Angela face to face. If he showed the tiniest sign of having the same issue his brother had, Marc planned to put a bullet in his brain. He'd do that sooner if it were needed.

As far as their spies at the base had noted, the soldiers were grouped in a disorganized cluster along the remaining walls and hills. They'd erected a sea of tents and foldout shelters, then stayed there without contacting Safe Haven. They had been waiting for a leader.

Angela shivered at a gust of wind, joining Ray as he stood sentry duty on the edge of the narrow field. "Are we on time?"

Ray motioned toward the foggy shadows moving toward them. “Couple minutes early. Dog says he’s got it timed better than we do.”

“Good.” Angela watched the large wolf lead his new pack toward the fence line, where Dale and a few others were holding open two edges of the wire. It was big enough for Dog and his ant army to slip through.

Angela was comforted by how the wolf gently nudged Dale’s hand as he went through. It did surprise her when several of the ants did the same to Ray’s mate. She hadn’t realized the ants were bonding with people. It was another sign of the evolution they were currently going through.

The line of ants was huge. More than a hundred of the always-hungry insects followed Dog out of the camp. Angela wished them swift travel. The ants weren’t very important to her plan, but they did matter. As for Dog, Angela could already feel Marc calling on him to protect Charlie. She had counted on it, but she’d made Dog swear to finish his part first. Marc hadn’t thought she would assign their son to something so terrible. She’d known he would send in Dog when he found out. *Am I getting smarter or becoming more devious?*

There weren’t many camp members still here to witness the insect parade, but those who did, stopped and stared. It wasn’t something you saw every day, even in this new world.

“Neil and Jeremy reported in an hour ago.” Shawn joined her, pushing a mug of tea into her hand. “Seth is late.”

Angela sighed. “He has choices to make, like the rest of us. Leave him alone.”

Shawn shrugged. He had enough to do anyway without worrying over Seth going rogue.

“Same here.” Angela sighed at the lie. “He’ll come through when we need it. What else do you have for me?”

Shawn began rattling things off.

Angela waited until he was gone to record it all in her notebook. Until she got some sleep, she wouldn’t count on remembering. Angela’s mind switched to Neil and Jeremy, her communications men for this ring of the battle. Those two and their team would relay messages, provide lookouts for working teams, and kill any soldiers they came across. Angela had several groups already out doing that very thing. Even if Seth took off, his team wouldn’t. They were the adult killers for the area where Becky and Charlie were, though Seth wasn’t supposed to find out where Becky was until she sent an update. Angela assumed Becky and Seth would stay together after that; she had included it in their envelopes, but Angela needed time to get Becky so far into the mission that when Seth told her to go hide in camp, she would refuse. From the mental update Charlie had sent, it seemed like Becky was doing okay so far.

Angela was pleased. Not that her kids were now out there killing, but that Becky was finally understanding anyone could hold the power if they had the right tools and training. She didn't have to be terrified when she was alone or keep a man close for protection. In time, Becky would be dangerous, with a limitless supply of rage to fuel it. Then, she would have to be guided the opposite way and taught to respect life again.

It was an ongoing process with any army. Learn to kill, remember to live. It made it hard for a soldier to come home when they didn't have those two lines drawn clearly. The teenagers would be no different. After they'd become killers, they would have to be taught to be kids again. One usually smothered the other, but Angela would try to keep that from happening. It was no good to win a war if the survivors didn't have any light left amid all the darkness.

Chapter Nine
One Lie or Fifty?



1

“Move out!”

The call echoed down the thousand-man convoy, sending birds into the air in surprise. The rolling wheels and eager shouts also sent foxes and raccoons fleeing down opposite paths.

The soldiers took up a lot of room as they traveled. They carelessly let themselves get spaced out. Men shot at windows of cabins as they passed, angry to be on foot in the cold.

Donner let them vent. Their anger needed a target. He had one for them, but until the battles began, it required loose reins. Donner stood with Philips, surveying the battalion of soldiers marching

for the new area he'd chosen as his base. Those bringing up the rear were headed to other locations, but they would all travel together for half the day. Their recon men had gone out this morning to secure the route and their destinations.

"It's all ready, sir." Philips was marking things off the list on his clipboard. He wisely didn't mention their three missing teams. No one had returned from the ammo mission yet.

"Tell them to push in one hundred miles every week, starting right now. That's it."

"Yes, sir." He rushed off to deliver the orders.

Donner headed for the waiting jeep that was surrounded by a full squad of protection. His driver had the engine running; a man was there to open his door. Donner slid inside the warm interior with a slight grimace. "Kill that heat."

"Yes, sir."

"Sorry, I was cold," a voice stated from the back seat.

Donner twisted to look at the two people behind him. One was Louis, a Special Forces man with tattoos running the length of both brawny arms. He had joined their camp this morning. The other passenger was the first hostage they'd captured.

Donner didn't speak right away. He liked to size up the person before the interrogation. What he saw was a pretty whore about to lie her ass off. He wasn't picking up anything mentally, though the brick wall flashing in his mind was a bad sign of things to come. The coming lies were in the

fidgiting, the averted eyes, and the white knuckles on her handgun.

“If you fire by accident, we will kill you.” Donner watched for the correct reaction.

“Not if I kill you first,” Jennifer stated shakily. “I’m pretty good with this thing.”

Both of Donner’s men snorted. The trembling hands kept the barrel of her 9mm jumping all over the place. She obviously had no idea how to kill someone with a gun, not like they did.

Donner held out a hand. “Give it here. Keep the two in your belt and the knife in your other hand.”

Jennifer swore furiously, bringing laughter from all three of the men. She clumsily gave Donner the gun and slid against the door. “I told her I couldn’t do this.”

Aware of the game beginning, Donner motioned his driver to get them rolling as he stashed the 9mm in the kit at his feet. He would examine it later for clues.

Jennifer didn’t try to hide her fear at being surrounded by these evil men, knowing it would help with her mission. She and Conner had ridden the waiting dirt bike all night to get here.

“Who sent you to spy on us?”

“You know who. I’m supposed to kill you or bring you in.” Jennifer slammed her hand against the seat. “I hate being a decoy.”

Donner already wasn’t sure which part was a lie and which was truth. He didn’t rise to the bait. He watched her frown in the mirror, but she didn’t say

it again or try a different line. Donner was impressed. He had no doubt she was working from a script. He would let her go through it all before rewriting the lines.

“Where are we going?”

“For a drive. You were found on the edge of this campsite with a gun. You’ve said you were sent here to kill me. You’re a prisoner of war.”

Jennifer shuddered. “I’ve been that since it happened.”

Donner heard the truth there and immediately understood how he was being played. She wouldn’t have been sent in alone. “Pull over.”

The driver brought them to a fast halt.

Donner got out. He jerked Jennifer’s door open and grabbed her by the arm, ignoring her attempts to get to one of her other weapons. Louis slammed his hands across her arms, bringing a satisfying cry; they hauled her roughly to the side of the road.

Donner shoved her to her knees, then again, onto her back. His man put a boot on her neck to keep her there, grinding enough to get her attention.

Donner unzipped his trousers as the cheers of the men rolling by echoed over them.

“Tell your guard to come out.” Donner knelt down.

Struggling to breathe, Jennifer was helpless as he forced his body on top of hers.

“Call for help.” He watched as real tears oozed down her cheeks. He put a hand on her jeans, tone

deepening into need. “Once these come off, you’re mine in every way.”

Jennifer screamed.

Donner nodded at Louis, who assumed a sentry position.

“Again, girl!” Donner slid that hand up her shirt to rip the front of her bra apart.

“Kyle! Kyle! Kyyyyle!”

Donner squeezed greedily, thrusting forward. “Later, we’ll get back to this position.” He rose in a quick move, fastening his pants to be ready for her to run, but she only sobbed as she rolled over.

“Put out word on anyone named Kyle. Sweep the troops with a surprise roll call. Get her secured.”

Louis grabbed Jennifer roughly, yanking her to her feet. As she veered toward the jeep, Donner came around and punched her in the temple.

The Special Forces man caught her as she fell and hefted her over his shoulder as Donner ducked into the jeep.

Louis tied her hands after he dumped her into the seat, lingering on her soft hair before he shut the door. His late girlfriend had been a brunette and about this size. Maybe after Donner was finished, he would pass this one around, like the women in Canada.

Charlie and Becky stayed silent and still as they woke. The male voices were loud, close.

Charlie eased toward the curtain he'd hung and slowly peeled open a corner. He quickly shut it, moving to where Becky was clutching her gun as if they were about to have a shootout. "A small group, five of them. Probably scouting."

"What should we do?"

"Wait until they go, I think." Charlie quietly gathered up their things. "Let's be ready to run if we have to."

"Wait."

"What?"

"We're searching for them anyway, aren't we? Kinda?"

Charlie got her point and spent a moment considering it. "We are supposed to be hunting... You sure?"

Becky nodded shakily. "Yes. It's us or them."

"Okay. Let's slip out first and come back around. I want this cave to run to if we need it."

"We'll leave the curtain up and no one will find it for at least twenty years." Becky hated her nervous tone; she couldn't help it.

Charlie understood, as much as he could. "My mom said you don't have to do this."

"I know. But I'm good now. Let's go give 'em hell."

"You know it."

The pair slipped down through the rear of the cave, where the narrow opening would prevent all

but the thinnest of adults from getting through this direction, and emerged into the dim, cold daylight.

It took a few minutes to circle around, but it would have been hard to miss the loud male voices comparing life underground to life on top. They weren't being quiet or careful; they clearly weren't expecting to run into anyone this far away from Lookout Mountain.

Charlie waved Becky behind him as they came into view.

The five soldiers scanned them. Hands went to holsters and faces turned cruel.

Charlie felt Becky tense behind him. "It's okay. I'll do it. You keep it together."

"Okay." Becky was almost unable to believe they were here, doing this.

Charlie held up his hands, grinning. "Hey! Maybe you guys can help us!"

The soldiers were ignoring him in favor of leering at Becky.

Charlie put his hands down. "We've been alone for a while. My sister needs help."

"Oh, we'll help her, kid." The closest man leered. "Come on over here, baby."

Becky took a step forward.

Charlie yanked his gun from the pocket of his hoodie. The first shot hit the farthest man in the chest, knocking him to the ground. A second quick pull of the trigger dropped the Corporal next to him with a trim along the throat. Blood gushed as he began to suffocate.

The three remaining men started to raise their weapons, finally reacting, but a grenade finished the short battle. The soldiers dove to avoid the explosion.

Charlie managed to shoot all three of them in the chaos.

“Down!” Becky had remembered to count.

They hit the dirt as the grenade exploded.

As the debris settled, Charlie made sure the men were all dead with extra rounds.

Becky watched without reacting. She didn't fear death or pain, only being raped.

Charlie grimaced as he used blood to write the message on the jeep seats, as he'd been instructed. “You can do the next one.”

“Okay.” Becky agreed. It would be easier now that she'd seen how it was supposed to go. She'd been terrified that the soldiers wouldn't be distracted enough, that she was too ugly to keep their attention while Charlie killed them, but Angela's outfit had certainly done the trick.

The bathing suit top and blue jean shorts made her feel almost naked. She quickly donned her long coat while Charlie gathered the guns, ammo, and a few other items on their list of things to never leave behind. Angela knew they would need these supplies later, but it was also to make sure the enemy couldn't come through and resupply themselves. Without reinforcements or fresh

ammunition, the soldiers would be at Angela's mercy and she didn't have any.

Charlie and Becky returned to their little cave long enough to erase their tracks and signs, then continued down the mountain. They were both happy with their first test of adapting to a new situation.

"I'll let Marc know, if you want," Becky used her mental grid to make sure they were in the correct place. "We should run into them shortly."

"I'll let him know now and give him time to blow off steam before we meet up."

"Okay." High on getting justice in any form, Becky giggled. "Good idea."

The soldiers were the enemy, the same as Rick had been. It felt good to kill them.

Charlie frowned a bit, picking up her thoughts, but he didn't say anything. Killing wasn't supposed to be fun... Was it?

3

"Get on there, you son of a bitch!"

Samantha had been fighting with her blind for an hour and still didn't have it the way she wanted. The sun was getting higher in the sky, a time when she needed to be under cover, and yet here she was, fighting with a straw curtain.

Samantha sighed. She was doing fine with the blind. It was her mental state that wasn't so hot. She

hated waking up alone. She hadn't shaken off the morning fog yet.

Her fingers slipped the tied wire over the stick frame and she exclaimed happily as the rest of it fell into place the way it had in classes. Her time with Kenn had been a huge help, though he still didn't know why she'd asked for lessons on it. When she'd dug the sniper training out of him, he'd assumed she wanted it for one of her boyfriends, not for herself.

The trees here were a mix of healthy and dying. Many of them had mold growing up the trunks, but Samantha didn't mind. Her gear was thick overalls and sturdy gloves that allowed her to scale the trunks without concern. Her only worry up here was hitting wet leaves and falling while trying to get her blind in place. The foliage was getting set for the change of season. Crunching would also be an easy alert that someone was nearby.

Samantha finished setting her cover and got on the next part of her instructions. The escape plan was something she would definitely need. She took her time choosing the correct path through the cliffs. It was rocky and rough here, hard to walk, let alone run up or down.

Samantha was careful as she traveled. There was no way to know who might be in this area with her; she stayed hidden as much as she could, as she'd done during her time after the war. Only now, she had weapons and she knew how to use them. Samantha also kept an ear out for engines. According to her instructions, the supplies she

needed would be delivered in the next few hours. She didn't want to miss that. Those long crates were critical.

On the cliffs above Samantha, her secret protection swept their surroundings alertly. If Samantha wasn't able to get under cover in time, he had instructions to delay whoever was about to discover her. Billy had already decided he would do that by her side if there were more soldiers than she could handle. He'd witnessed her using the equipment that was coming. Angela was right to worry over the success here. This side of the mountain would see a lot of action. Samantha was good, and she would have the element of surprise, but she also had common sense. If they were overwhelmed, she would welcome an extra hand.

Billy used his binoculars to view the land around her, spotting animals, but no people. He then checked the area around himself, hoping for the same. A faint flash of sunlight off someone's rifle glinted. Billy's heart stopped before he realized he recognized the shadow keeping to the trees that lined the cliffs to the left.

The Eagle waved, then motioned.

Billy grinned in relief. He gestured and then pointed to where Samantha was now carefully marking her escape route with natural forage items. Then Billy curled up to grab a few hours of sleep. He'd been wondering how he was supposed to stay awake all the time, but Angela had that covered too.

Jax stared down at the blonde woman now placing a thick rock by a fork in the path before kicking leaves and dirt over it. She knelt down and blew odd patterns in the sand that would seem natural, then swept away her tracks with a crooked branch. After tossing a few handfuls of dirt and leaves onto the path, she relieved herself and then settled into the blind. She appeared to be fine, but Jax couldn't help the concern. He had no idea what she was supposed to be doing, but if she got into trouble, he was breaking his instructions of no contact and damn the price. No female under his watch could ever be killed.

It was his single biggest goal as an Eagle now. There was no way he could live with that guilt, not after what losing Leslie had done to him. He didn't think he'd ever feel normal again and she'd only been a lover! He hadn't had enough time to discover if it had actually been love. The robbed feeling was a sharp blade that continued to slice him open months after her death.

4

Answer me!

The mental shout was so strong that it felt like someone had fired a gun inside a closed space.

Adrian drove faster, hoping their next stop would cool Marc off, though he did understand the man's outrage. They had listened to Charlie's mental message with horror and anger.

We took out five of them. They stumbled across us while we were sleeping. Tell her we're good and rolling.

“She’s using kids as killers!” Marc bellowed, making everyone in the truck jump.

“Yeah, we got that.” Kenn sneered. “Now shut up. We need to think.”

Marc was furious. “She didn’t tell me he was going in!”

Adrian and Kenn both enjoyed that.

“She probably assumed you would try to interfere.” Kenn glared. “So cool down and do what you keep telling the rest of us: follow your instructions.”

Marc controlled his outrage. He would deal with Angie later.

“Can I listen in on that?” Adrian was suddenly worried. “I didn’t know she sent Conner out either.”

Silence fell for a moment and then Marc shrugged angrily. “You will anyway.”

Adrian wisely didn’t agree.

“We should see a mark any time now.” Kenn was reading his next instructions. “Should be a—”

“There she is.” Marc pointed to nothing any of them could make out. “Park under that tree. We’ll have a smoke while we unload.”

They knew that meant Marc wanted to spend a minute checking out the area and verifying Samantha was okay. None of them had been happy to discover who their contact was upon opening the

next instructions at dawn. The idea of a woman out here alone, pregnant with twins, didn't set well with them.

Marc snorted. "I should have known better. She has two Eagles guarding. Samantha doesn't know about them. We're all good."

"You know where she is?" Kenn was searching for the blind that Samantha would have been instructed to set up, but he couldn't spot it.

"She used the training in lesson Five C." Adrian had easily spotted her once he remembered her preference for heights. "Though, how she got that blind to stay there, I don't know. Tell Angie I'd bump her a full level for it."

Marc climbed into the seat. "Angie already knows how good Samantha is, otherwise she wouldn't have sent her out here alone."

"But she's not."

Marc scowled at Kenn. "Don't you ever tell her she wasn't alone. You hear me?"

Kenn nodded, not about to fight over something like this when he couldn't care less.

"Good. Let's go."

"Where to next?" Kenn took point.

"East for a mile. Charlie and Becky are waiting for us there."

Kenn scowled. "For what?"

Marc didn't answer. He couldn't. He had no idea what the pair was doing. He wouldn't unless they were allowed to tell him. It was scary, maddening.

“I know what they’re doing.” Adrian stared at Marc. “She didn’t say I couldn’t tell you.”

Marc knew Adrian was using this to cause trouble. “Spill it, then.”

Kenn moved them into a grassy area with a thick tree cover, and listened with half an ear. Neither Charlie nor Becky interested him much. They were walking over piles of stones that hadn’t been cleared from these hiking paths since the war, sometimes climbing over full trees that had come down. Nature had piled up here. It would make it harder on the soldiers who had to come in after them. Kenn wanted a better vantage point to determine if any of those men might be close yet.

“As this fight goes on, we’ll be hearing stories of renegade people who aren’t following orders. Instead, they’re attacking soldiers, taking out patrols and perimeter camps.”

“And the kids are providing support, right? Lookouts or something.” Marc knew better, but he hated to accept it.

“She sent them out here to kill.”

“You knew!” Marc slammed his fist into Adrian’s jaw.

Adrian let himself fall backward onto the dirt and rocks. He stayed down. “Worse than that. She took it directly from one of my notebooks.”

“You gave her this idea?!”

“Yes.” Adrian frowned. “And this is one of the nicer plans.”

“Do I want to know the others?”

“Spies, traitors, and killers are how you quickly win a war.” Adrian told Marc what he already knew in an ominous tone. “Do those things with children and you could conquer the world in a month.”

Marc’s resolve to remain calm vanished; he used his mind to register his complaints.

Angie!

Yes, dear?

What the hell is wrong with you?

I don’t have time to give you that list.

How could you do this?

How could I not? You wouldn’t.

It’s barbaric! Who are you?!

It’s survival. Why don’t you know that?

Adrian swept Marc’s face, seeing he was delivering blows and receiving them. The blond man grinned. “Gonna be a good evening.”

Shots rang out ahead.

All of them broke into a run.

5

“They’re all dead.”

Marc and Adrian swept the dim scene with expressionless faces as Kenn moved to a higher vantage point. They’d heard gunshots and came on the run. Someone else could have done the same.

Charlie stripped the nearest body of its gun, mags, knife, and vest, dropping it all into the rucksack that Becky was carrying. Both of their

faces were flushed, not pale like the adults had expected.

Becky shoved the rifle further into the bag to make room for a second vest and quickly shut it before opening a new bag. “We’ve got two other stashes of gear like this so far. Our instructions said not to tell anyone except senior men.” Becky went to Marc. “You can add this one yourself.” She handed him the paper, ignoring Adrian’s careful nod.

It was the only response Adrian could form at the moment. He’d never thought to find Becky so calm amid death. He was waiting to discover if she’d participated. Marc was currently replaying the battle in his mind. Adrian stepped closer to him. Had Becky done her share?

“More than her share.” Marc’s tone was choked with horror. “She led this assault. She likes to back-shoot.”

Marc waved Kenn down to take his place, fighting to keep himself under control. Angela was more ruthless than he’d ever thought her capable of.

Charlie and Becky continued to loot. There were ten bodies and several tents to explore, and then the vehicles under the camouflage netting had to be disabled since none of the Eagles here had time to drive them back to camp. Their plans were all based on following rules. They wouldn’t deviate, even for two Humvees and a crate of grenades. Those, the entire group loaded up on. Kenn knew to

grab a share of them for Marc, who was staying on sentry duty.

Kenn asked the obvious. “Will this make the difference? Having kids out here playing war like it’s a movie?”

Adrian, who now had more hope than when he’d woken, nodded slowly. “If she’s got enough little side plans like this going, yeah, it could. They won’t be expecting this.”

Kenn scowled, lowering his voice so that only Adrian could hear. He often forgot about the mental abilities the descendants had. “Isn’t it all wrong?”

“More than I can say.” Adrian sighed. “And it’s also exactly right. It’s their future that will be gone if we lose. If they fight with us, they’ll care about that future when it comes time to rebuild it.”

Kenn couldn’t understand how something so wrong could also be right, but he didn’t say anything else. Even when he’d been beating his wife or scheming against someone, he’d known it was wrong. How could this be okay?

“It isn’t, you douche.” Charlie grunted, but without anger. His glimpses into Kenn’s dark mind had explained a lot. “It’s what keeps us alive, gives us a chance.”

“And some of us need this release.” Becky was calmer now.

“What happens after the war, little girl?” Adrian used a hard tone. “When the killing has to stop?”

Becky stilled, thinking. She finally turned to them with dead eyes. “I probably won’t be here then. That’s someone else’s problem.”

Adrian and Kenn pulled a face, but Charlie understood what she meant. They had the same plans for the future, the same instructions to follow, and they would, no matter what. The only way the soldiers would go past Angela’s second ring of death was if they thought half of her army was made up of women and children. So it was. Angela didn’t bluff.

Chapter Ten

Disguises and Reprisals



1

Jennifer woke to a mild pounding in her head and a faint stinging in her arm. She opened her eyes to darkness as memories came flooding in. She'd done her job. She was in the hands of the enemy.

“She’s awake.”

The voice was hard and cold, yet eager for the torture to begin. Jennifer sucked in a tight breath to calm herself. She'd been told this would be the worst part. If she could get through this, she would be okay.

“Remove the blindfold and the gag.”

Jennifer realized she hadn't been able to feel the gag or recognize the blindfold; she felt a tremor of panic. *Was I drugged?*

"While you were out we gave you a mild sedative."

That hard voice again, controlled, ruthless, and excited by his job. Jennifer blinked to clear the fog. "Will it make me tell the truth?" She could see shadows moving now, but not in clarity.

"It'll let you last longer."

Jennifer swallowed. "She made me come in. I told her I couldn't do it."

"I don't believe you, my sweetling."

That tone was dangerous. When her captor's voice became compassionate, pain was coming. "I'm sorry—"

The punch to her gut drove the contents out. She puked harshly, struggling to breathe. "Please!" she gasped out. "Just had a baby!"

The second hit took all the air from her lungs. Jennifer sagged against her bonds, face turning purple.

"That's enough for the moment." Donner came from the shadows, unimpressed with the spy sent to kill him. "You're a decoy? From what?"

Jennifer, who still hadn't gotten a lungful of air, passed out.

Donner sighed. "Make sure she comes around. No more damage until I'm ready for it."

"Yes, sir." Louis slapped Jennifer on the back.

Her lungs expanded as she gasped in air; her color slowly returned to normal.

Louis settled into a chair in the shadows as Donner left, leering at the naked girl hanging from ropes around dusty shed beams. She belonged to the Major right now. When Donner traded up, Louis would be there to have his turn. All these sessions were foreplay, like in Canada.

Jennifer swam through the fog slowly, tending her injuries, strengthening her determination. Conner would come soon and then they would teach these men not to underestimate people based on gender or age. The young were often more dangerous than their elders because they lacked a fear of death.

Her stomach throbbed from the punches. Jennifer stayed in the fog as long as she could. They'd estimated she would have to tough out at least two interrogation sessions, maybe three before Conner could get to her. If it reached three, things were bound to get uglier than she could tolerate. Angela had told her to destroy them all.

When Jennifer had asked why the descendants simply didn't do that anyway and end the war, Angela's answer had been haunting.

“Because we'll tip the balance again and become hunted creatures by both sides. No one can ever know how powerful we really are.”

“But so many of them will die! Wouldn't it be better for the descendants to sacrifice themselves instead?”

“No. There would never be peace after that. Humans will force us to fight for them, to destroy their neighbors. We will all become corrupt.”

“I don't understand.”

“Imagine two towns. One member has a fistfight with someone from the neighboring town and wins. In retaliation, that neighboring townsman kills the son of the first man. As the first man's neighbor, wouldn't you go to war to eliminate such a person?”

Jennifer hadn't been sure.

“Imagine now that both towns are at each other's throats over water rights or land for grazing and farming, and someone uses a descendant's powers. Even for protection, you now have an entirely new war, one where magic is the weapon and domination becomes the goal.”

It was a bleak picture. Jennifer had agreed that letting the descendants go willy-nilly with their gifts was a bad idea.

“I know you can hear me.”

The cold, eager voice brought Jennifer back to her own reality. She grunted in hatred, but didn't give him words. She was still savoring her breaths.

“You should tell him everything you know, then beg to be his whore. He might not hurt you as much that way.”

Jennifer already understood what drove Louis. She'd spent enough time with a psychopath to recognize one. She let herself cry, but still didn't talk to him. He might get the chance to rape her that he was longing for. She'd known that could happen coming in. It didn't stop the terror or the longing to kill him.

2

Donner left the shed to find Philips waiting for him. The rest of the convoy was settling in for the night. Campfires and tents were being worked on for a half-mile in every direction.

"We're missing a scouting team and a spotter set."

Donner motioned the cook to bring him his tray and sat down on a stump to eat. "So?"

Philips was confused. "Do you want us to go search for them?"

"No. They're dead." Donner dug into the food. "Or AWOL. Either way, we don't split our forces to search for missing men. Go do a fresh count. Take my jeep."

"Yes, sir." Philips went slowly, not eager to tell their teams that more men had been lost under Donner's command.

Louis had followed Donner. "Is that wise, sir?"

"No, but I need them to understand that I won't go searching for them. They'll stick closer that way."

“What about the girl?”

“What about her?!” Donner snapped. “Got a soft spot?”

“The men want her when you’re done, is all.”

“She won’t be passed around. She’s bait.”

“Sir?”

Donner waved him away and ate his MRE. Jennifer was here for a reason. After he discovered what that was, Donner intended to use her to draw out the man she’d screamed for. When descendants chose a protector, it was almost always someone in a position of power. That was what Donner needed to bring this Safe Haven to its knees. They thought they were clever, but he knew what made the good ones tick and how to use it against them. They didn’t stand a chance.

Philips motioned his driver to get them moving.

The young man did, not quite smirking.

“What’s the joke, private?!”

“Nothing, sir. Just happy to be moving.”

Philips frowned. “I though Donavan had this post.”

His driver shrugged. “Couldn’t find him at roll call. Captain Louis assigned me.”

Philips made a mental note to verify that and then resumed studying his conversation with the Major.

His blond driver watched him in the mirror, blue eyes flashing excitedly.

3

Samantha adjusted the sight on her rifle, loving the feel of power that came with the motion. At some point during this hell, she would get to fire this weapon at live men and make them dead.

The enemy was unfurling below her, one of a few camps that Angela had assumed would spring up. Samantha watched the tiny men flit to and fro on their chores, unaware that she could take any of them out with a single short jerk.

Sam removed her finger from the trigger it had been absently caressing. She wasn't supposed to enjoy her role. Causing death was awful, but she couldn't wait for it to start. To her mind, the coming men were Melvin and Henry, Cesar, and more politicians who would destroy the world all over again. Samantha would do anything to keep that from happening, and to ensure that Angela's dream was birthed here.

It was fascinating to watch the insulated aluminum rooms being setup by the soldiers. They unloaded and unfolded the portable military shelters in less than twenty minutes. It would have been faster if not for them being dropped in the center of the road so they had to be dragged into the correct position. The fold out shelters weren't bulletproof, though, so Samantha wasn't worried. The rifle she was using would pierce those frames like a hot knife going through butter.

Samantha surveyed the camp, marking down times for things like meals and shift changes. She

would pass the information when she got her next resupply. She expected it to be Neil or Jeremy by then. Word would have spread among the senior Eagles on the locations of their women. Angela had also counted on that. Samantha was sure she'd have company before too long. Right now, she didn't want any. Being alone for the start of this was right.

You're not alone.

Samantha chose to make sure her sights were lined up, rather than to respond. It was odd to suddenly have a voice in her head after all these years, reading her memories and thoughts.

The scope's optics gave her a detailed view. Samantha kept the crosshairs on that larger center tent, sure that's where the boss would be. She didn't have a name for her target or even a rank; she had no photo to work from or even a hint of who he was, but Samantha would know him when he appeared. No matter how organized, a leader had to come out of cover eventually to do normal leading. "You should have picked our side. You brought this on yourselves."

4

Zack tossed the last shovel of dirt onto the mound. They would be finished with this site in the next half hour and then they could head for Safe Haven, showers, and their tents. Today had been as exhausting as yesterday had.

Zack thought about the future moment that would take place here, but he didn't smile even though his team was currently joking about it. This had once been a depot. Angela was counting on the soldiers coming here to supply their army. When they arrived, they would find more than bags and bullets.

"We good here?" Kevin had his clipboard out. "I'm sending an update."

Zack wiped pungent sweat from his face. "All set on the packages. We're adding the ribbons."

Kevin grinned tiredly. "You guys are doing good work. Four sites in one day should be a record."

"With Kenn out there somewhere doing the same?" Zack snorted. "Bet he has in twice as much."

Kevin shrugged, still chuckling. "Kenn's no one here now. You know that, Zackie."

Zack growled, pretending to be upset about the name, but the truth was that he adored being accepted enough for someone to do that. He had good friends here. *Zackie loves Safe Haven*. "Come on. Let's get to camp."

"Heads up!"

All of them looked to the guard, who was perched on the edge of a nearby cliff to have a clear vantage point. He was motioning frantically.

Zack didn't need to decipher it to know what was happening. "Get them out of here!"

Kevin shouted orders, helping to grab loose parts and pieces as an exodus of the area began. Kevin was glad their black Eagle gear blended perfectly with the gray, white, and black landscape around them, but he didn't relax as he lingered to translate the message from their spotter. His voice said as much as his words. "Forty soldiers. Five minutes!"

Zack hurried his group as quickly as he could, casting anxious glances at the single access road that came into this area. They would have a few seconds of viewing the enemy before the soldiers would be able to see them through binoculars. If they cut it that close, their vehicles might also be heard.

Zack scanned. He saw fresh mounds that had been dug recently and groaned. There was no way anyone would believe this area was untouched.

Zack spotted a shed and a small garage on the edge of the property and ran to them, hoping for a tool they hadn't thought to bring along.

Two shiny rakes gleamed as soon as he opened the door.

Kevin joined him in scouring the area. They started at one side and zigzagged furiously, darting around workers and ducking equipment being removed.

"How long?" Zack tossed debris around like the wind would have.

"Any second now." Kevin threw his rake into the last truck. "We've got it. Let's go!"

Zack grabbed a hand to be pulled into the truck bed. He swept the area as they sped away. “Stop!”

Zack jumped out and snapped a long branch to run back and erase their tire tracks.

He dove into the truck bed as the sound of engines swelled. Their driver eased on the gas to get them out of sight.

A minute later, they were also out of hearing distance, but none of them celebrated. The soldiers were coming for Safe Haven now. All the groups like themselves were in danger.

“We’ll tell the boss.”

Zack nodded at Kevin’s comment, but he didn’t respond. Angela had known it would be like this. She had guards and spotters on the groups to give them time to get out of the way, but Zack didn’t think all of her groups would be so lucky. His had been a minute from ruining everything and they were one of the more organized, trained teams out here. It wouldn’t go as well for the others if they were surprised this way.

“We’re far enough.” Kevin motioned for the driver to stop. He waved at two of their companions. “Get word to Angela. I can’t send a message with the enemy so close.”

One of the men, a faster, quieter Eagle, climbed from the truck and vanished.

Kevin pointed. “Go find out if they camp there. We’ll be a few miles ahead.”

Another man slipped into the trees and headed back the way they'd come.

Kevin tapped the driver on the shoulder to get them rolling again, wondering where Cynthia was.

5

“We're here.”

The sun was high in the sky by the time Marc's group made it back to the cabin. Leaving Charlie and Becky hadn't sat well with Marc. He'd lingered until they were almost behind schedule. Only a sharp remark from Kenn had gotten him going.

Tonya was waiting at the cabin door. She and Kendle had put in a long morning and then split up for different sleeping sites, as per ordered. Now, it was time to go meet her partner in crime again. “I'm leaving.”

Junit and Natoli, her escorts for a short while, stepped around her as she lingered. Tonya was hoping that Kenn would come in for a quick goodbye.

Kenn surprised them all. “Just go.”

Tonya did, frowning. Kenn wanted her to go back to Safe Haven and resign her post.

“If I have to give Charlie a break, you have to do the same for her.” Marc grunted. “Go catch up to her, idiot.”

Kenn huffed and stomped into the cabin. “I'll be sleeping.”

“Not until we sort out what came in while we were gone.” Marc went inside to a new, large pile of taped crates and boxes.

Kenn got his notebook out; the two men settled into it, anxious to be finished.

Adrian lingered outside with the guards as they switched shifts. “Any messages come in with the new gear?”

Natoli nodded. “Yes. Our spies say all the soldiers are on the move.”

“Good.” Adrian lit a smoke. “Right where we wanted them to be?”

“So far, yes.”

Adrian let the Indians work as he sat on the steps of the cabin. Marc and Kenn talking through the open door about the gear was a soft babble; his mind went where it wanted. *Angie!*

Monitoring harder now than before he’d found out Charlie’s job, Marc caught the plea for attention and quietly stood up.

Kenn, who had been on the receiving end of that look many times, ducked to be out of the crossfire.

Angie!

Marc picked up the nearest object and threw it.

The half a cup of coffee cracked into Adrian’s head, shattering into a dozen pieces. Adrian slumped to the damp ground.

Kenn regarded Marc with resignation. “You are gonna try to kill us, aren’t you?”

Marc snorted. “Try?”

Kenn dragged Adrian to the cot he'd woken up on, not happy with the irony.

6

"They didn't like leaving us here."

"I know."

Both teens were dressed in warm gear and were well fed on rations, but the feeling of being in over their heads was still bigger than anything else.

"Why did she send me out here? I know you know the truth."

Charlie didn't think it would hurt to tell her. "She knows you're not as recovered as you pretend to be. She says Seth knows better too, but he wants to believe it, so he accepts the act."

Becky had paled and didn't respond right away. Hearing her deepest secret spoken aloud so bluntly was a bit surprising.

"Sorry about that. You want the rest?"

"Yes."

"She said you need to have justice and to be the one to hand it out. She also said you might go too far into the dark side and that I need to keep an ear on your mind."

Becky wanted to deny that she might become a problem in the future, but Charlie didn't let her. "We know better. It's not something to be ashamed of, only a feeling you have to battle."

Becky understood then. Angela knew she was suicidal. “She’s giving me a way out that everyone can live with!”

“Please, don’t take it. We love you.”

Becky burst into tears.

Charlie left her alone, hoping she would get more of the poison out of her system. His mom said Becky wouldn’t do it when it came down to it, but after spending a day with her, listening to the awful voices in her mind, Charlie wasn’t sure. Becky had a well of pain inside that was deeper than anything he’d ever felt. It would take a lot to keep her from drowning in there.

Becky curled up in her bag and tried to get herself under control so she could sleep. She drifted off almost immediately. Pretending to be happy was tiring.

Charlie watched her for a moment and then contacted his mom to deliver an update on all that had happened. When he was finished, he also sent a quick message to his dad, not wanting Marc to be angry with him.

Marc sighed deeply in his mind. *Worried is not angry. Get some sleep.*

Charlie did that as the dawn came, waking Becky to stand watch. It had been a long night and there were more of them to come.

Seth's call brought a shadow from a ledge above them, who pointed toward their feet.

Before he could move, a hand shot up and grabbed Seth's ankle. "Hey!"

The men burst out laughing as Cynthia sat up with her hands out like a zombie.

Seth sat a large kit by her shallow grave, impressed and horrified. "That's pretty good."

"Thanks. Tell the boss it's ready to go out here."

"I will. You need anything?"

Cynthia shook her head, not opening the bag. "No. You?"

Seth hesitated. "Yeah. Do you know where she is?"

"Yes. You'll be with her if you stick to your envelopes."

It was as if Angela was scolding him. Seth let out a curse before stomping down the ravine. He had two more stops after this one, and then he was breaking for the night. Would Becky's camp be one of those stops? He hoped so. There was no way he would sleep tonight without knowing where she was. All he would be able to imagine was her lying under leaves and dirt somewhere like Cynthia had been.

Cynthia waited until the team was out of sight before opening her delivery. The gear in it was too heavy for her to carry this far. It would be left when she had to run. By then, the weapon would either be out of ammunition or destroyed in the fight anyway.

Cynthia quickly set up the portable grenade launcher in the spot she'd already cleared, reciting the steps mentally. Once she pulled the tall blind over it and untied the tree branch that she had secured, the handheld, gas plug operated, semi-automatic, revolving action M32 was invisible. She'd used one a couple of times during her more recent training, but this part of her job wasn't hard. Aim, fire, reload. It was the dying part that might be rough.

Feeling better than she had when she'd dug this hole, Cynthia carefully recovered herself. If she'd fooled Seth's team, the soldiers would go for it too. This was the main road into Safe Haven, the most direct path. They were sure the troops would be thickest here. Angela had surprises all along this street, like Marc had suggested during the one female team meeting he'd been asked to join. He hadn't liked giving them those deadly answers, but he had delivered a number of ways for females to be lethal. Angela was using all of them.

Cynthia's post was isolated. It would take the soldiers a bit to reach her. The reporter wasn't happy about being alone on the mountain. She also wasn't terrified of it. Angela's orders had mentioned Eagles were in the area if she had to have help. It was a comfort to know that was true, but she was also heavily armed. Even the wind howling through the branches didn't cause panic as it might have before. She'd faced most of those fears since coming to Safe Haven.

As she closed her eyes, Cynthia hoped Kevin was in a better place than she was. Angela had him on protection detail for someone. Cynthia had recognized the gear he'd been packing from a checklist. She didn't know over who or where. She also assumed she had a shadow, but Cynthia didn't think Angela would put them together. It would risk one of them getting distracted and Angela wouldn't do that. It was why Seth and Becky couldn't start out together.

Faced with too much time to think, Cynthia tried to make herself go to sleep. If she thought about what she was doing, about the life she carried and the future she'd almost had, she might not be able to do this.

8

“Hold up.”

Seth's team stopped a few minutes after leaving Cynthia, going still and quiet. Voices came to them.

“I heard something.”

“One of ours.”

“You sure?”

Seth recognized the voices and cleared his throat. “Good thing we're friendly.”

Zack and his men appeared through the trees.

The two teams greeted each other, glad to know they weren't out here wandering the dim wilderness alone.

Zack gestured. “What's next?”

Seth opened his next envelope. “Someone will meet us here and they have the next step. We’re supposed to sit tight.”

“I’m here.”

They peered up to discover Tracy straddling a thick tree branch above them. She tossed Seth a wrinkled envelope.

Seth read it. “You’re kidding, right?” He shoved it into Zack’s waiting hand. “I won’t do it.”

Tracy frowned coldly. “Then get back to camp for reassignment. Boss’s words.”

Seth gritted his teeth as the other men complained.

“No way.”

“Is she nuts?”

“We don’t do that. We’re Eagles!”

Tracy was already tired of hearing it. She dropped from the tree and opened her long coat to reveal an outfit a hooker might have worn.

The fighting ceased.

Tracy smoothed the wrinkles from the dress and brushed at her wild hair. “It’ll work, right?”

“Yeah, it’ll work.” Seth, now disgusted with himself as well as Angela, shoved by her. “Let’s go.”

The sight of Tracy standing there looking like she was about to film a porno was almost more than he could take. Was Becky out here somewhere doing the same thing? “Does Charlie know?”

Tracy nodded, increasing her pace to account for their long strides. “Yes. The teenagers were the

only group Angela didn't have to hide things from. She said it was a relief."

Shamed, the men fell silent.

The group walked to the first location on their list. They were now a roving patrol on the western side of Lookout Mountain. Their instructions were to eliminate anyone who came toward Safe Haven by using Tracy as bait for ambushes and traps. While it was devious, it was also hard. None of the men were sure they could do it. As a result, they were a somber group that traveled through the thickets of pine and stacks of nature-forged stone without speaking.

9

"That's our ride."

The large group was happy to hear those words. They'd been walking for hours and only reached their pickup spot a few minutes ago.

The van pulled alongside the resting Eagles. Marc opened the doors with a grin. "Who needs a lift?"

Low cheers echoed as they piled into the crowded van, grinning and laughing when they spotted friends. Zack and Seth's team were quickly occupied with refilling their supplies, but Seth stayed with Marc, hoping for an update. None of the groups they'd stopped by or come across had had word on Becky.

Marc held out a small envelope. “This is where she’ll be at noon. Boss said not to be late.”

Seth snatched the paper and slammed his tired body into the seat behind Marc. “This is bullshit!”

It was a feeling all of them had experienced today. Marc nodded. “Let’s go. Everyone in?”

The van pulled into the darkness with a full load of men and supplies, all of them deadly in their own way.

Marc heard Seth crumple the paper up and shove it into his pocket. The anger was thick.

Marc wanted to ease the man’s fears by telling him that they’d talked to Becky earlier, but he didn’t. Angela had said it was best to let Seth get wound up this time. Marc hadn’t argued. Angela saw further than he did. If she thought Seth needed to be strung out by the time the fighting started, it was no problem to accomplish it. “I’m sure she’s fine. Want a juice box? We brought grape.”

“A what?” Seth stared in fury. “You’re kidding, right?”

Marc shrugged. “Sorry.”

Seth fumed in silence as Marc eased on the gas. The sooner that ticking bomb was out of range, the better. If Seth did explode, he would take out an entire block.

Marc surveyed the teams in the mirror, noting that Tracy was being treated like a member of the group and not a whore. He also saw that she had cuts, scrapes, and a nasty bruise on her cheek. He understood she was another piece of bait. He

scowled. Angela had refused to explain what her female team was doing. Marc had assumed it was bad, but he trusted Angela to do the right thing. It hadn't been hard to let it go then. Now, he was seeing these women being used in ways he never would have approved; the concern was growing. *How far will Angela go to win?*

10

Marc shut the van door and clicked the lock into place. They'd reached their final stop of the night and while he needed rest, he wasn't eager for the dreams. He'd stayed behind to lock up, stalling the moment when someone would shove him into a tent and insist he sleep.

The Indian camp was spread out, with patrols of braves on and off horses, roaming the perimeter. In the center, a giant bonfire was roaring. Natives were dancing and singing. At another time, Marc would have been in the front circle, taking in as much goodwill as he could. Tonight, the drums were an instant headache.

"We're all set." Quinn joined him on the short walk into the Indian camp.

Natoli's people would be their shelter for a few hours and Marc was glad. The still-decorated hunting cabin was getting on his nerves. If he never saw another Christmas tree with dead bulbs and dusty ornaments, it would still be too soon.

Marc spotted an old woman cooking outside a plain teepee. He was drawn there, shunning the rows of tents his men were using.

The woman was holding out a small wooden bowl before he got to her. Marc took it gratefully. "Thank you, Mother."

The woman didn't have any teeth, but her grin was warming. She patted his big arm and pointed toward the teepee waiting behind her. "You stay?"

Marc started to say no, then shrugged. "Why not." He left Quinn standing there in surprise and sank down on the fur pallet with a groan.

Marc dug into the food with his fingers. He didn't stop until it was gone. Then, he licked his fingers. Nothing that came out of a can ever tasted as good as what a little old woman with an ancient pot could accomplish.

Quinn went to let the others know, thinking Marc's choice was right to stay away when the men got loud and had to be quieted. Their jokes and chatter drew disapproving looks from their Indian hosts. Quinn had to threaten to send them back to Angela before there was peace again. Some lessons were harder than others. Not making noise, even on down time, wasn't easy for most of these men.

Quinn found a place behind Kenn and Adrian, wondering why those two were acting as if they'd had a fight. The two Marines hadn't spoken more than a few words since they were picked up.

Quinn noticed Kyle was absent and assumed that Eagle was still sleeping it off in the rear of the

stinky van. He revised his theory when he saw who had guard over the tents behind them. Quinn frowned. Angela was burning Kyle at both ends. Why?

“She knows he’ll need it.” Adrian looked at Quinn. “Just like you do, like we all will. This won’t be a walk in the park.”

“When does it begin?” Natoli knew, but his braves wanted it confirmed.

“Any time now.” Adrian sighed, accepting a small bowl of the pungent venison stew. “I’m surprised the peace has held this long.”

Natoli’s men passed that around; the Indians surrounding them immediately began to pack and prepare. Each camp had duties to perform. No one wanted to be the cause of failure.

Quinn gave Kenn a subtle nod and got a glower in return that was also surprising. Quinn shrugged. Kenn was often an ass to him just because he was Marc’s new right hand. Why he would pick now to be one, Quinn wasn’t sure.

“You wanna walk and talk?” Adrian stood up.

Kenn thought about it, and shook his head. “You go on. I’m good right here.”

That drew more attention from both teams. There was an awkward silence where Adrian left, alone.

“What’s up with that?” Seth was drawn out of his worry over Becky.

Kenn didn't want to lie, so he chose his words carefully. "Things may not be right with him. I'm checking it out."

Quinn snorted. "Oh, yeah. Look who that's coming from."

Kenn flushed, but didn't defend himself. It told the men around him that he was serious.

"What are you talking about? Adrian's the shit," one of Zack's team said firmly. "Nothin' he can't do."

"Really?" Kenn watched his idol walk into the shadows and vanish. "He can't quit chasing Angela. I had to, and even our new alpha asshole was stopped by the camp, but not Adrian."

There were frowns and furrowed brows, but no denial.

Kenn went on, sounding confused. "He said he isn't one of us; he told me that during the ride here."

Quinn frowned. "What did he mean?"

Kenn found the choice easier than he'd thought it would be. "I...I think he might be a traitor. Maybe he was one all along and we overlooked it to save our skins and have some glory along the way."

Zack waved, glaring. "That can't be true. You're lying."

Kenn began to repeat the conversation from the truck almost word for word.

Aware of what was going on, Adrian stayed in the shadows. There were questions to be answered and fates to be chosen.

Do I still want it? I've screwed most of it up. But there are others, in other lands. I could be that again.

It wasn't an easy choice for Adrian, but he made the only one that felt close to right.

I'm staying until the end.

And will you give them the truth they think they want? his demon asked.

Adrian nodded, voice like razors. "As soon as she gives the order, I'll deal out so much truth, they'll choke on it."

Chapter Eleven
Wet Work



1

“**W**ake up!”

Jennifer’s demon couldn’t wait to face what she’d spent so long surviving. Her lashes opened to reveal crimson orbs. “You can’t keep me. Better kill me now.”

Donner grinned eagerly. “Oh, I will, have no doubt about that. Now, where were we?”

Jennifer drew in enough air to spit in his face.

She was rewarded with Louis hitting her too hard and knocking her out again. *Success!* she thought as the darkness slammed into her.

Donner shoved up from the table to pierce Louis with inescapable rage.

The Special Forces man dropped heavily to his knees, clutching his throat as he fought for air.

“She brought the witch out! I had her!”

Louis shrieked as Donner roared, blood trickling from his nose and hairy ears.

Donner spun from the room, growling and snorting like something wild.

Everyone stayed out of his way. Donner was the uncontested leader here. Unless one of Safe Haven’s descendants took him out, it would stay that way.

Louis slowly picked himself up off the cold floor, not sure what he’d done wrong.

When Jennifer moaned lowly, Louis dragged her to the crate Donner had insisted on. He dumped her inside, making sure she was breathing as he reveled in the scrapes, bruises, and dried blood on her body. He’d been getting into punishing her every time she displeased Donner. When she’d spit, the urge to tag her temple had been too strong.

Louis held his head as he straightened up, vision swimming. He missed the shadow near the open door as he shut the lid to the crate and left by the opposite exit. He needed a bathroom. *Donner might have made me shit myself. I need to check.*

The shadow by the door came into the room and advanced toward the crate as quietly as he could.

Conner opened it and slipped a small bundle inside without looking. He could hear her breathing. It would have to be enough. His job was to arm

Jennifer, not rescue her. His instructions had made that clear, but it was one of the hardest things that Conner had ever done. If he looked at her, there was no way he could leave her here.

Conner remembered to leave the door open, reasonably sure he hadn't been noticed. Everyone had faded into the woodwork when Donner melted down. Conner had taken advantage of it.

The teenager returned to the vehicle area he was lingering around during their stops. He had to hope no one noticed he didn't have any military training. He was surviving off the supplies in his kit, items that were quickly running low. He was supposed to have a delivery coming. He hoped so because when they arrived, he was going to insist they help him break Jennifer out against Angela's orders.

2

“Sir?”

Donner didn't answer.

The private took a step back. “I'm sorry, sir. I have a message.”

Donner grunted, mostly under control now. “What is it?”

“The other two base camps are set up and getting ready, but they don't know what to do with the hostages they've gathered.”

“How many?”

“Three in northern camp, one in central. None so far from our western base.”

Donner was glad to hear it. Safe Haven wouldn't be guarding from that direction. "Have them transferred here in one daily transport."

"Where do you want them stored?"

Donner shrugged. "Out in the rain, naked and shivering for their army to see. How does that sound?"

The private had paled. "Cruel."

"Excellent. Get on it."

"Yes, sir."

Donner turned to the tree line he'd been concentrating on to calm himself. So far, things were going as he'd thought they would, though there were more spies being sent in than he had predicted. All of these first roundups would be attempts to do to the government, what the government had done to them, but Donner wasn't new to this game. He now had three small camps to launch his attacks from. It was time to make contact.

Donner turned around and caught a jerky movement from the corner of his eye, sensing quick, worried thoughts.

He narrowed in on a soldier who clearly didn't belong among them. After a minute, he grinned sarcastically. "Oh, Louis? Come here a minute, will you?"

Conner was taken before he knew they were onto him, grabbed and hauled to the ground where Donner blew a dart into his neck. As he faded,

Conner glared at the enemy. “My dad’s coming for you.”

Donner laughed. “Tell that cow farmer I’m right here.”

“No farmer,” Conner muttered, trying to hold on. “Mitchel.”

Donner froze. That name was on the top of every fugitive descendant list. Donner felt the winds of fate glance in his direction as he considered the odds of success. In the end, it was the challenge that made the choice. By accident, he now had Adrian Mitchel’s son. If he was careful, and sly, he might be able to turn this all guts, no glory run into a tale that would become his legend.

After Canada, Donner had decided he was going freelance, with thoughts of taking over in some far southern land or even challenging Benjamin at the big bunker, but with two alphas...

Donner made his choice; he didn’t care that it would cost him nearly every one of the nine hundred soldiers he had in his command. This was his chance to improve upon the result he’d gotten in Canada. Adrian had gone rogue himself and according to the rumors, that had happened because of Angela. Donner considered it proof of compatibility. They could be forced to send out a Maker’s Call. After that, Donner didn’t think he would care about bunkers or power anymore. *I’ll be going home.*

Still at Donner’s side, Louis realized what had happened. He wasn’t surprised that Donovan’s

body was one of those found outside the campsite. The two ammo dumps were already stripped clean, and the third had been a trap that killed all but two of their men. Those soldiers hadn't been all the way to the cave entrance when the explosions had started. Now, the enemy had come in, killed, assumed a hiding place in plain sight, and Louis had fallen for it. Everyone understood why he wasn't in command of anything. Jobs like these took men like the Major.

3

“I have your spies.”

The evil in that voice would have stunned the listeners if they hadn't already been shocked by the radios suddenly working. All over the camp, in the trees and across the two hundred miles between them, Donner's ruthless words spilled out in a disruption of every activity that was taking place.

“Some of these hostages are being sent to base. The rest will be executed for treason.”

Eagles quickly turned down overlapping volumes and stood silent in thick dread.

“If you attack anymore of my men, I will kill those being held here and elsewhere. Defiance will result in much bloodshed of your kind.”

All those listening waited for the surrender demand, expecting Angela to pop up at any moment. She would defy this hard, merciless man and more of their fighters would die.

“I demand the surrender of the Safe Haven council, all of them that I don’t already hold, anyway. You have ten seconds to reply.”

In small camps and groups, people exchanged terrified glances, hearts pounding. The enemy had made first contact and he didn’t sound forgiving.

“This is a negotiation attempt. Would you hear terms?” Angela’s voice was cheerful despite the situation.

“I would, if you’re discussing surrender.”

“Terms to be discussed include that.”

Donner’s voice finally showed some signs of life as he chuckled. “So we can meet face-to-face? No, that won’t be necessary. You’ll surrender yourselves.”

“No.” Now, Angela’s voice was as hard as his. “You’ll send a representative here to negotiate.”

“Or what?” Donner expected trouble from her.

“Or, I will shoot myself and Adrian, destroying your mission, ruining your career, and making sure none of these people ever stop trying to kill you, no matter where you land after this mission.”

Shock, outrage, and determination to make her words the truth filled the survivors. Every one of them was handed a tiny victory when Donner caved.

“I’ll send a chopper.”

“We’re ready when you are.” Angela returned to her cheerful voice, but her words were hard. “One man, one guard, and the pilot. We’ll shoot it down if we see more.”

“At noon. In return for my negotiations, you’ll send Adrian Mitchel back with the chopper.”

“Agreed.”

Angela hadn’t hesitated. Donner read the tone. His voice held a deep frown. “Alive. A dead body will earn you the bombing you deserve.”

“And a bombing will earn you a slaughter! My people are everywhere.”

At an impasse, Donner fell back to the deal they’d made. “Chopper at noon. Mitchel sent back on the bird.”

“Agreed. Out.”

Angela hanging up first, on top of the impasse, gave the Eagles some hope. They talked about how badly it could all go, and whether or not Adrian was being given up so easily because he’d come between her and Marc. A few of them also wondered if he was being sent in as an assassin or a decoy.

In Safe Haven, where only a few people remained, Angela stayed in her tent. Donner wasn’t going to be fooled—not in the ways she needed him to be. He had an obsession that she hadn’t counted on, one that was infinitely more dangerous than a bomb. Their losses would go higher than she’d estimated and in the end, it might not matter anyway. Now that she’d read Donner, Angela wasn’t confident her plan would work. Daryl may have been right that she was about to get them all killed.

Angela stayed in her small tent, working on it. Every cloud came with a silver lining. She just had to find this one before the storm slammed into them and drowned everyone.

4

“Well, that was a great way to find out.” Adrian glared as Marc and Sebastian tied him up. He hadn’t bothered to struggle after seeing how quickly Marc had reacted to those words. The wolfman had known this was coming.

Kenn was already unconscious nearby. When he’d tried to stop them from taking Adrian into custody, Shane had knocked him out with a rag soaked in chloroform.

“She sold you out.” Marc smiled happily. “And not on your surrender terms, either. Gotta admire that.”

“I do!” Adrian snarled. “My son, for yours. Was that the deal?”

“I had no say in that.” Marc shrugged. “But it’s better if Conner isn’t with us, either. He’s like you.”

“Yes, he is. And he heard that. He’ll come for both of you.”

“No, he won’t.” Marc used his sweaty bandana to gag his enemy. “He’ll spend his life trying to rescue you. I know how this bond works now, remember?”

Adrian was forced to shut up as Marc jerked the bandana tight. He began pelting Angela with mental protests.

Marc grunted. “Yeah, she said you’d do that.”
Shane handed him two items.

Marc quickly tipped the bottle into the handkerchief and slapped it over Adrian’s face until the grunting, fighting man sagged in his iron grip.

The Eagles thought about lending a hand, but Marc didn’t need the help; they gawked instead.

“Get the jeep.” Marc looked around to find that Sebastian had already done it and was pulling up next to him.

Marc lifted Adrian’s heavy body over his shoulder to drop him into the seat. He then slid cuffs around Adrian’s wrist and pulled out the dart gun Angela had provided through Kyle. The chloroform wouldn’t hold their kind for long.

Marc shot Adrian in the neck, loving the feel and wishing it were real. He motioned to the curious Eagle in the driver’s seat. “Get him back to our base camp. Angie will handle him from there.”

The jeep took off as Marc went to Kenn, who should be waking soon. Unlike Adrian, Kenn’s exposure had been minimal. Marc nudged the Marine with his boot. “You up yet?”

Kenn groaned.

Marc settled down across from him to wait. When Kenn woke, they would have a short talk. Kenn would make a choice and then they would go together on the next parts of their mission or he

would spend a few minutes burying the body. Either way, Marc didn't care. The worst of this war was about to begin. He didn't have time for forgiveness right now, only justice and vengeance.

5

"You'll go in my place, to negotiate," Donner stated as Philips came into the room and closed the door. "Now that we have Mitchel's son, it's time to meet them."

"What am I negotiating for?"

"Adrian and the woman, the one in charge. Kill the rest of the descendants after those two are secured."

Philips stilled. "What did you say?"

"Kill them all." The Major gave his lackey a sharp glower. "Do you have a problem with that?"

You've earned your name. Philips knew better than to give any answer except the expected one. "Of course not, sir. I'll pass it down."

Donner studied the man with a cold glare before lighting his pipe. When the silence thickened to uncomfortable, the Major pointed to a photo on the folding desk. Everything they were using right now had come with them. The descendants hadn't left anything usable at the other base. "She is the only one we don't kill if things go south. Bring her in alive at all costs."

Philips glanced at the old photo, recognizing a birth scene at a hospital. “How long have you been watching that one?”

Donner snorted. “Decades. We were waiting for her powers to reach full range.”

“And they have?”

Donner laughed, a short, miserable bark that belied the anger inside. “The destruction of the base and the soldiers was man-built and delivered. She’s the equivalent of ten scenes like that.”

“Then why not kill her too? She might be able to hurt us.”

“We came for her. The others are relics, including Mitchel. *She’s* the future.”

“What’s so special about her?”

“Our spies said she’s pregnant. Any offspring of two alpha descendants is rare, but combine it with the most powerful mother and father that we’ve seen in a hundred years and you can understand why the scientists are screaming for us to bring her in now.”

“You mean you had a choice to get her sooner and didn’t?”

“Yes. We wanted to see what she would become, what she could do. It’s been fun.”

“Fun? She’s killed hundreds of us with her orders! Thousands soon! She should be eliminated before she brings that power to our front door.”

“You think so?”

“Yes.”

“Then it’s a good thing I’m in charge. Get out. I have plans to make.”

Philips slipped to the door and exited with a nasty glare thrown carefully over a hunched shoulder. He wasn’t anyone important; he hadn’t been before the war either. His life didn’t matter, only some pregnant whore’s did. That stung.

“Is he the right man to send?” Louis was near the window of the small foldout room.

Donner handed him a sheet of paper. “Get the boys rolling as soon as the chopper is in the air. And cut the radio again.”

“Sure. We attackin’ under negotiations?”

“And putting pieces into place. I want one hundred, ten-man teams sent out. Tell them to kill anything that moves. Oh, and get us packed for a bug-out. She knows where I am. We’ll switch base locations.”

Louis didn’t argue. He’d never seen Donner lose an advantage before. He stared curiously.

Donner returned the look. “They’re descendants. It’s not supposed to be like picking someone up for speeding.”

“Then it’s normal? You losing the edge like that?”

Donner was already tiring of the questions. He turned toward the back room. “Let’s make sure. Wake the girl.”

Louis went in a hurry. He’d been thinking about it all day. Taking her clothes hadn’t done the trick and neither had beating her, but Louis had noted her

reaction when she'd thought Donner was going to rape her. That was the trick to bring that witch right out and make up for his earlier mistake. "Want me to get her set for you?"

"Yes. I'll be there in a few minutes. I want to check on the son and be sure he's still out. Reports we've collected say some descendants are nearly immune to the drugs and wake quickly."

Louis didn't hear the last part. He was already on his way to the crate. Donner would only give him five minutes, but Louis planned to be finished in three. He'd take it easy on her though, and swear not to do it again if she cooperated. If she refused, he would become...insistent.

"Louis?"

Louis stopped, freezing. "Yeah, boss?"

"Wait for me to bring the boy in to watch your...fun. It'll be more effective that way."

"You got it!" Louis spun into the room with one hand already opening his belt.

He drew up at the sight of the open crate and the naked girl in front of it holding a gun.

He opened his mouth to shout.

Jennifer pulled the trigger.

As he fell, she began to cackle wildly. "Oh, Boss man!"

Donner stopped as soon as he heard the single shot, immediately forming a different plan. As clear as it was, he had no doubt where it had come from. Either the girl was loose or her protector had come. Probably both.

Donner drew his gun as he stepped into the room where they had Mitchel's son stashed. When she came to release him, Donner would grab her.

“Hiya, Major!”

The cheerful voice was unexpected despite what Donner had told his men about some of them being immune to the drugs. The Major ducked too late. The dart plunged into his neck as a gun went to his temple.

“Well played, kid. But I'm immune.”

Surprised by the same thing that had given him the advantage, Conner had no defense against the nasty gut punch that nearly knocked him out.

Donner slammed his weight down on the dazed boy and got him cuffed and gagged. He stood up, turning around to find the door swinging open and the barrel of a gun entering the room.

6

Jennifer raked her knife across the last drunken man's throat without blinking and then moved to the next room. She'd found the officer's quarters. She was taking out as many of them as she could before the full alarm was called. If she were caught, she would be beaten, raped, and killed before Donner could rescue her. It was an amazing feeling as she stabbed into the next throat with a huge grin on her bloody face.

The soldiers were taking advantage of the lack of supervision and drinking on their shifts. As a

result, there were passed out and hung-over men scattered everywhere. *Easy targets.*

The final room was a shower setup. She stepped inside and closed the door as happy male voices echoed from the portable locker room she was advancing toward.

“Remember. Packing first, invisible threats second, everyone else last.” Jennifer put her knife in her mouth and raised the gun. She checked to be sure it was fully loaded, safety off, and that the mag in her other hand was turned in the right direction.

Then she went inside.

7

The gunshots from the opposite end of the compound told Donner that his visitor was friendly. He gave the door a vicious kick. “Get in here!”

Philips came in with a pale face. “What the hell’s going on?”

Donner snarled his rage as he lifted Conner and dropped him across Philips’s shoulder. “Follow me. If he dies or escapes, shoot yourself before I can.”

As the two men took off running toward their parking area, Philips understood the Major was fleeing. He didn’t argue. There were reports of men in the trees behind the base, but those awful screams were coming from *inside* their portable walls.

Gunfire cracked out again, to the south this time.

Donner got them flying toward the gate. As they rammed through it, Conner woke up and started to struggle, but it was too late. The jeep vanished into the thick woods.

Behind them, the small base camp was alive with screams. Donner had kept three-dozen men for protection. Jennifer killed them herself, stalking through the camp that hadn't even been warned of the breach. Silent and still naked, the moment of surprise during each encounter allowed her success where it would have taken a dozen men who wouldn't have all survived.

8

On the perimeter of the now burning camp, two groups of Eagles waited for the signal. Their inside man was supposed to give a shout or a whistle when they were ready for help, but it hadn't come.

“Should we keep waiting?” Like the others, Zack was listening to the screams and gunfire that was now sporadic.

Based on helping to load the van before they left, Jeff had a good idea who was inside. “It's not safe right now. We had a long march here. Let's sit outside the front gate so we're in clear view.”

“You're kidding, right?”

More screams came from inside the building they were behind.

Seth waved his men out into the open, agreeing. “No, he’s right. That’s one of ours in there causing all that noise. If he sees shadows outside, he may assume we’re the enemy as well.”

Point taken, all of the men moved toward the front gate in a quick, nervous pace.

The front gate was already wide open, with two bodies sprawled face down in front of it. Puddles of blood and red footsteps were haunting sights through the blowing grit. It looked like three of the smaller foldouts were on fire.

Zack pointed toward a rear shed. “That’s where we were.”

They all swept the shadows for movement, and were rewarded with the sight of Jennifer, naked except for a blood coat, stepping from the farthest door. She spotted them right away and placed a finger to her lips. She then pointed down at the small porch she was standing on.

Under the porch, a single soldier was cowering, trying not to make any noise. The Eagles could see him shivering in fear.

Zack thought of interfering.

Jeff sensed it. He put a hand on the higher ranked man’s arm. “Please, don’t do that.”

Horrified, they watched Jennifer stalk the hiding soldier, herding him to the side of the wood that was weaker, with gaping cracks. When she slithered over the railing to keep him from seeing her coming attack, Zack turned away. “I can’t watch this.”

Seth and Jeff weren't about to look away with all their men to witness it. They both narrowed in on Jennifer as she leapt at the soldier who'd thought she was gone.

Seth was the only one surprised when Jennifer went for the throat, teeth clamping down with a delighted growl that twisted stomachs. She was already covered in crimson; it rained down her now like a hose being sprayed. She moaned in delight as the soldier shuddered in her grip and tried to scream through his ripped out throat.

Seth spun away and puked.

Jeff raised his gun a bit, not sure if they were all in danger.

Jennifer glared at him, orbs glowing vivid crimson.

All the men felt scolded for their revulsion when she put her nose in the air and disappeared back inside the main building.

Chapter Twelve
Go for the Throat



1

Kyle came to a stop directly in front of the burning base, not concerned about being out in the open when he saw the large group of Eagles clustered there. He opened the door and stepped from the empty vehicle, glad of the sleep Marc had insisted he be left alone to get. He'd exited the Indian village feeling almost alive again.

Zack met him. "We're waiting for one more."

Kyle looked at his watch and clipboard. "We're already ten minutes behind."

Zack looked toward the burning base. "I know, but we're waiting for one more."

“Who?” Kyle assumed their mission had gotten rough and their one man was likely dead.

Zack didn’t want to say. It was in his stony face and averted eyes.

“Come on, man.” Kyle smiled lightly. “You’re acting like its Jenn—”

Zack pointed.

Kyle’s mouth dropped open as the smoke near the gate parted to reveal Jennifer coming through the smoky debris. “Are you kidding me?!”

Jennifer flashed an evil glare that told Kyle his sweet girl wasn’t in control. His blood began to boil. “She did this?”

“Had it going before we got here and never called for help,” Zack noticed there was gore between her toes and then wished he hadn’t.

“She didn’t need any help.” Jeff wondered if Crista was out here somewhere, doing these crazy things, and found he didn’t like it. Usually, he was happy that she was also an Eagle, but not for this.

Instead of the revulsion that Angela had worried over, there was admiration on nearly every other face. Those who didn’t admire it were only upset that their chance for glory had been stolen. It was the senior members who understood what the cost could be in the end.

“Okay, people. Time to open our next envelope.” Jennifer held out a hand toward Kyle.

He placed the ‘spy’ envelope in her bloody hand angrily.

Jennifer's witch cackled cruelly as she turned toward Seth. "Major Donner is traveling east. He has Conner. Tell whomever you should and let's get rolling. We're behind schedule."

Zack tried to break the tension. "We wouldn't be if you'd shared."

Jennifer laughed, a hard sound much unlike what they were used to. "Sorry. Got greedy. I will next time."

Kyle stared in horror as Jennifer went behind a stand of trees to wash and change, while the Eagles laughed and offered encouragement. What had Angela done? Was she letting all the descendants out this way? Didn't she know how dangerous that was? How hard it would be to settle them down?

"What's your role?" Seth wasn't sure who was in charge with their top Eagle here.

Kyle ripped open his envelope and read it aloud. "I'm driving you all to the nearest camp. Jennifer will stay with you."

Everyone waited for Kyle to argue, but he was stronger than he was being given credit for. The mobster stomped into the van. "Let's go."

The men climbed into the van, cramming in to fit. It left the small stool by Kyle for Jennifer. She settled onto it with her legs spread, her kit between them.

Kyle grimaced. This wasn't what he wanted.

"But it is what I want." Jennifer looked at him through her witch's hot eyes. "I need this Reece. We'll talk about you and me later."

Kyle angrily got the van moving. When Jennifer placed a hand on his in comfort, he shrugged it off.

She wanted to let him sulk, confident he would come around. Having a woman who could fight had to be better than one who was a burden, right? But Jennifer also didn't like being ignored. When she was doing it to Kyle, it was almost fun. Now that she was on the other end of it, the frustration was disheartening. Was this what he felt like when she did it? Did he care this much?

Why do I care? He cheated, and I used him to become an Eagle so I can protect my daughter. He'll hurt me in the end.

But when the van hit a bump and their legs brushed, Kyle glanced down at her with a naked need that she welcomed. Talking to Becky about her and Seth had helped, but mostly, it was Kyle who was swaying her. He never pushed, never crossed any line she wouldn't accept, and he asked for nothing in return except for her presence in his life. Jennifer wanted a moment like that now, something to help both of them get through this, but she wasn't sure how to do it. If she were too open, he would think she wanted to be physical. If she didn't do anything, this sullen silence would continue.

Jennifer spotted a rough patch in the road and let the bump carry her instead of bracing against it as she had been. It tossed her against Kyle, who caught her automatically.

As he swung her gently back toward her place, Jennifer held onto his arm.

Kyle stiffened in surprise...then slowly curled his arm around her shoulders.

Behind them, the van stilled.

Jennifer glanced around. "Mind your own Ps and Qs!" She leaned against Kyle's side as he rested his arm against the softness of her braid. He twined his fingers into it almost absently, lost in the feel of her leaning against him. He'd only been close to her like this a few times. It was as good as he'd remembered.

Conversations slowly resumed, but eyes stayed on the couple. The age rules were working so far, but everyone was watching for violations. Now that Jennifer was a cold killer, they weren't sure if she had to be guarded anymore.

Jennifer yawned, lulled by the drive.

Kyle shifted so that she could lay her head on the seat by his leg. She smiled gratefully and quickly fell into snoozing. His fingers on her shoulders were a warm comfort.

"When can we stop watching them?" Jeff clearly meant more than Jennifer and Kyle. He loathed spying on Seth. He often read a book during that shift.

In the next seat, with his feet on the window ledge, Zack shrugged. "When she says so."

Jeff understood Zack meant Angela, but he disagreed, tired of the chore. These were grown men with willing females. They didn't need to be policed. Those who broke the rules would be shot.

Zack's thoughts were on the females who would be hurt by taking the chance. With no one guarding them, the older men would take advantage simply by their levels of intelligence. Angela didn't want to let these men create their own timid, subservient wives. She needed killers who would fight by their mate's side and so far, that's exactly what she was getting. "You hear anything?"

Jeff shook his head. "Didn't ask."

Zack could have asked if anyone on the van had information about Crista, but he didn't. At some point, Jeff would realize what an idiot he was being by staying away. Until then, Crista would get to see exactly what her man was like when he got upset. Zack was reasonably sure if his wife had gotten that option, they never would have married.

"Be careful, Jeff. Be sure you don't need it before you throw it away." Zack stood up and went to the front of the van before Jeff could respond. Zack didn't think of himself as a contender, but he liked Crista enough to hope she chose a different protector. Jeff was selfish. The thought of him coddling a pregnant woman or a child was impossible to envision.

Jeff was thinking along the same lines. He liked his life the way it was; he didn't want to make room for a baby. It hadn't ever been in his plans. Women had put down traps before, but he'd always recognized them. This time, he was lost. Crista was more than he could handle and the thought of a baby too was overwhelming. "Can't stay though, if I

don't *stay*." The camp would make him an outcast if he didn't step up here and do the right thing. So he either did that or left.

You could die, the voice inside suggested heartlessly.

Jeff stared out the window, torn between self-pity and outrage. Intentional or not, he was trapped.

Allan frowned. "He still stewin'?"

"Yeah." Zack didn't add more.

Allan shrugged. "He knows the difference between a man and a boy. He'll own up."

"I hope not."

Allan grunted. He and Zack had come to their awareness of the evil inside together, at roughly the same time. The two former abusers shared the same shame and determination to atone, but Allan was surprised by Zack's comment. He had thought it would take much longer for Zack to admit. "Why would you say that?"

"He's not good enough for her. She thinks it's the other way around, but he's a user. I know the type."

"I hope you're wrong." Allan pulled himself up to scan their radioman. "I was hoping to see you two fighting over her."

Zack stared in surprise. "I don't..."

Allan lifted a brow. "Not at all?"

"Kyle and Neil's team always get first pick. You know that." Zack sighed. "Plus, I have the boys, you know. No woman wants that type of hassle."

“Well, maybe you’re right. I’m sure she’ll be fine with Jeff.”

Zack took the dismissal easier than the words. He tossed himself into his seat with a sour expression and confused, scattered thoughts. He didn’t feel that way about Crista. *Do I?*

Allan snickered, wondering if it was wrong for him to enjoy the manipulating so much. Zack had three sons who needed a mother and whether it was Crista or some other Safe Haven hen, that man needed to learn to forgive himself for the mistakes he’d made and pick a mate. It would give him a little peace and go a long way in taming his wild offspring, something everyone needed. Allan considered his own love interest and fell into his favorite fantasy, not seeing the apocalyptic landscape that rolled by.

2

“Faster!”

Donner wouldn’t let his driver slow down until the safety of their secondary base came into view. The cliff walls along this camp gave him little comfort, however. Donner kept his gun out as they moved inside the fold out camp of curious men to unload their prisoner.

Philips came to meet them, surprised at their arrival. He’d only been here a few minutes himself, just long enough to hear about fresh sightings of the wolf called Dog, Indian scouts coming closer, one

report of a camp of Mexicans moving toward Safe Haven's location, and a rumor that Marcus Brady was actually alive and running that camp. "I thought we were supposed to bring the hostages to you?"

Donner ignored him, shoving Conner into a shed and slamming the door. He then went to the closest building.

Philips moved aside for the stomping Major to shove his things off the main desk before plopping down in the chair. He yanked his kit off and dumped it onto the desk, clearly rattled.

Philips left the room, heading for the Major's driver to find out what had happened. In the excitement, he forgot about his update.

"One girl?"

The driver nodded, taking this moment to wipe the blood off his hands. He'd lost two good friends back there, finding them after their throats had been cut. "One witch."

Philips scowled. "You don't believe that..."

The driver turned away, leaving Philips to gape. How had he missed all the noise?

"Damn mountain and weird echoes." He swept the crags around them, then glanced toward the shed where their new captive had been tossed, but he didn't go near it. Interfering with whatever Donner did now was likely to get him killed.

Philips settled into his cramped quarters to wait. At some point, Donner would begin screaming out orders. Until then, Philips would rest and pretend he

hadn't signed up for this madness. He still wanted everything Donner had promised; he just didn't want to do all the work required to achieve it.

3

“He just rolled in. You ready?”

Becky nodded. “I’ll wait five minutes, and then start.”

“Don’t forget to use the mirror to get their attention first,” Charlie reminded the nervous girl. “Keep going until you can hear their boots, then get under cover.”

“I will.” Becky took off her jacket. “You be careful.”

Charlie swallowed, looking away from that mature body. “You too.” He trotted down the hillside, staying in the cover of the trees. He was now sure Becky would draw enough attention. He’d never viewed an outfit with less cloth.

It took Charlie almost the full five minutes to reach the small camp below them. Their envelopes this morning had said to rescue the hostage on this base. Last night’s orders to do recon had told them which buildings the prisoners would be held in, and given them a simple plan. As long as they stuck to it, everything would go fine. Up to the ambushing part, anyway. Charlie wasn’t sure how that was supposed to work, but he assumed his mom meant for them to use magic. Charlie had no problem with

it. As he neared the soldier's camp, voices became clearer.

“Look at that!”

“Is she naked?!”

“What's going on?”

Charlie eased closer, staying low.

“A girl, sir!”

“You sighted the enemy and didn't call it in?”

“She's just a girl. Lonely!”

There was lewd laughter and crude remarks that made Charlie's ears burn, but it also told him Becky was doing well.

“Well, let's go up and get her!”

“Hell, yeah!”

“No! Follow orders.”

“We'll just be a second! Don't snitch!”

Boots ran off.

Charlie slipped inside the perimeter and over to the small shed. He opened the final door to find Conner on his knees, glowering through his gag and bound hands.

Charlie quickly helped the boy up. “Let's go, huh?”

Conner grunted. They didn't pause for more, not even to remove his gag or ropes. As they came around the side of the small shed, Neil was there to wave them into the cover of the trees; they all vanished as if they'd never existed.

Donner hadn't thought he could lose control so quickly. It had only been two days. He was still in the beginning stages of his plan. How were the rebels so far ahead of him already? They had a dozen spies among the Eagles, but not a hint had come about the ambush.

Donner frowned. Had it been an ambush or had the girl simply lucked into the opportunity?

"They tried to kill *me*." Donner's laughter spilled out into the hall and rolled through the small base camp. "Oh, you little vixen! You wanna play? We'll play."

Donner jerked a drawer open and pulled out a notebook. "Philips! Get in here."

The man appeared in the doorway, keeping his distance.

Donner gestured curtly toward the other chair. "Sit."

Philips did, but he was already sure he wanted no part of whatever Donner was writing, just like he wanted no part of what would happen to the dancing girl when their now AWOL men found her.

"Act like nothing happened. We have no idea what smoke they saw or what their guard reported. We still have the girl and Mitchel's son."

Philips nodded, not saying the Safe Haven people would read his thoughts and know he was lying.

"That's why Trey and Sergeant Wallz will handle it. They're members of my personal team.

You'll appear to be their guard and bring me this information about her camp."

Philips scanned the list, feeling a little better about his role. All he had to do was stay beside the chopper and appear mean.

"These Safe Haven people are honorable. You'll be safe as long as you don't open fire." Donner looked up, sarcastic. "And you won't without reason, will you?"

Philips shook his head, not sure why it made him feel guilty to make that choice. "No, sir. I won't."

"Another reason *my* men will do this job. You keep your gob shut."

Philips nodded again, waiting for more.

Donner waved a hand. "Go beat that Mitchel kid for a while. I want to hear his pain or you'll take his place."

Philips left with glares and clenched teeth. If he argued, Donner might send him back to the bunker. Nothing good waited for him there. Hardening his heart, Philips motioned two beefy men with him and went to where the teenager had been dumped. "I'm a soldier. I follow orders." Removing his jacket, Philips stepped inside the shed.

"Son of a bitch!" Philips spun back out. "He's gone! Security breach! We have a breach!"

Donner came running, joining Philips at the door.

Pop! Pop!

Nearby gunfire rattled by them, taking out the radio pole they'd put up, and the communications tent. A jeep exploded; a shed flamed.

Donner realized he'd been driven into a second setup. "You bastards!"

Donner snatched Philips by one arm and a panicking soldier who tried to run, in the other iron grip. He shoved them both toward the nearest jeep that Sergeant Wallz was sliding into. "Get us out of here. Now!"

Philips was a good driver. He had little trouble avoiding the gunfire and the shadowy figures throwing knives and swinging pipes, but he had to hit his own men to do it.

The jeep ran them down and then left them behind as Neil and his team advanced from their cover in that deadly V.

5

Forced to wait in the thicker cover of the cliffs and trees, Conner and Charlie waited for it to be over so they could find out what had happened and who was where. In the chaos, Conner did manage to ask Charlie how he'd gotten to this base, but neither boy could answer it. Charlie wasn't allowed to say and Conner had woken somewhere else. All he could think about was Jennifer. *Did she escape? Did I leave her there to die?*

When the others finally joined them, Jeremy bleeding from a trim along his arm, Conner's

patience had run out. "I have to go." He headed for one of the few army jeeps that had survived.

"Hang on. Open your envelope first." Neil had reread his own instructions a few times before believing it. He wasn't about to be the one to deliver that news.

Conner tore it open impatiently, hoping it would set his fears to rest. He scanned it quickly, face growing red. "She did what?!" Conner glared at them with his demon's hot eyes. "She gave them my dad."

Neil and Jeremy showed no surprise. They were two of Angela's more informed people at this stage.

Conner snapped. "You knew!" He dove at the Eagles, fists swinging wildly. "You traitors!"

Jeremy clipped him on the jaw, stunning the teenager. He spun the dazed teen toward Charlie. "Get your friend under control."

Charlie was ecstatic at the news about Adrian. He shook his head and stepped back. "I was told not to interfere with the hostages."

Neil sighed, seeing Conner was getting set to lunge again. "Fine, but remember that when you get a shift carrying him."

Conner quickly reevaluated the situation and took off running toward the tree line.

Jeremy started to go after him, but Charlie caught his arm. "She wanted it this way."

Neil frowned. "You sure, kid? He's a lot like his old man, you know? Dangerous."

Charlie nodded, watching Conner vanish into the trees below where Becky was supposed to be. “Yes, but I trust my mom. I was told not to interfere. You shouldn’t either.”

Neil motioned his team to go to their next stop. Behind them, the small base was being set on fire so any soldiers who had survived couldn’t use it. The men who’d gone after Becky wouldn’t find her. They would return to destruction and no authority. *If* Becky let any of them live. She wasn’t supposed to, but Charlie thought maybe she was starting to like the job they’d been given. The three men who were probably still trying to find her hiding place might not like it if she did come out.

6

Becky was in plain view, sitting on a boulder when they arrived. She was going through the kits stacked at her feet. The Eagles didn’t see blood or bodies, but all of them were sure the trio of soldiers was dead.

Becky didn’t look up from her looting, voice flustered. “My envelope says to send you all on your way. I’ll catch you later.”

Dismissed, the grumbling men kept walking, not doubting the orders had come from Angela.

Charlie lingered, not wanting to leave her behind.

Becky glared. “Do your job and I’ll do mine.”

Sighing, Charlie opened his envelope, hoping his mom said to follow her and keep her safe.

Get to your dad. ASAP!

Charlie shoved the paper into his pocket and looked down at Becky, but she was busy dividing the new items into her kits. He stomped off without saying anything else.

Becky looked up. "He's gone now."

Tracy came down the tree, glad this part of the plan was over. Going around half dressed wasn't what she'd signed up for. "We're going south. Then we wait for the others."

Becky nodded, suddenly wondering where Seth was. "My paper says to be there by noon. Let's roll."

The two females traveled south with quick, alert steps that took them by a pile of bodies that had been stabbed or impaled repeatedly.

Tracy didn't ask how Becky had accomplished it without getting any blood on herself.

Becky wouldn't have answered. Some secrets were too personal, some gifts too violent, to be talked about as if they were idle chatter topics. Plus, she still wasn't sure herself. She needed to sit down with Angela when this was all over. If there was an after. Despite their small successes, Becky still didn't have hope. Rick had killed that for her.

Donner was rattled, but not so much that he didn't understand he was being herded. He slapped

the driver on the shoulder shortly after the gunfire faded. “Turn toward their camp. We’ll bunk with our men on the front lines.”

The driver veered them that way, not arguing. After barely escaping twice in just a few hours, the front lines were safer. The jeep sped up the rough incline.

Donner held on as they bounced around. No one had been on these roads since right after the war from the way it felt. He began to relax. He would settle among the fighters and spend the night planning a fast attack during the negotiations. He looked at Philips now. “You’ll still go in as... Damn it! Duck!”

Gunfire sprayed the jeep, hitting Philips in the eye and wounding their unwilling private.

Sergeant Wallz hurriedly slid behind the wheel and rotated them to clear a line of rifle fire, but there was nothing he could do for Philips.

“You gonna live?” Donner barked.

Holding his bleeding arm, the private shouted, “I hate you, sir!”

Donner laughed hard, unceremoniously shoving Philips’s corpse from the vehicle. “Didn’t like him anyway.”

Donner again kept his gun in hand as they neared the next base camp, shouting orders before he hit the portable gate. “More security! They’re in the rocks and bushes!”

Soldiers flooded the area; dogs and men barked eagerly.

Donner felt control slip back into place. He assumed the hard stride and tone that had bluffed his own men for so long, wishing his full team had arrived already. Not that they were familiar with these tactics. Descendants always fought fair, always kept their word. Donner now suspected Safe Haven's leader wasn't the saint the government files had led him to believe. Unlike Adrian, who'd taken decades to bend, Angela had apparently succumbed to evil in mere months. The only question that Donner didn't have an answer for was why she was still protecting the weaklings.

Donner ignored the wounded private who was declaring his grievances to the new men. Donner stormed through the camp, calling orders and taking charge. "Come morning, we head for Safe Haven!"

The resulting cheer of bored, restless males drowned out the Private's complaints. It echoed off the walls of the mountain, where it rang into the valleys below and the cliffs above.

8

Samantha adjusted the sight on her rifle carefully, heart thumping. She put her eye to the scope, pulling until she felt the trigger notch. She was ready.

Her target stopped to take a canteen from a passing soldier... Samantha had to fight her nature

to follow her orders instead. She aimed for a wound instead of a kill.

Donner grunted as the bullet slammed through his thigh and hit the soldier sitting on the ground. It went through the unfortunate boy's forehead and opened a hole that Donner hadn't ordered put there. It enraged him. "Come down here and fight me, you cowards!"

Another bullet flew toward him.

Donner moved too late, taking a second slug in the same leg. He fell, screaming.

The soldiers rushed to get him into a jeep, as they'd been taught to do with officers. *Brass, then your own ass.*

"Find them!" Donner clutched the jeep with a bloody grip as Sergeant Wallz sped down the hillside.

The soldiers who had been in combat before knew that by the time they scouted the area, the sniper would be gone, but they went anyway. Orders were orders.

Samantha hurriedly put her weapon away and wrapped herself in the blind, not trying to evade them. They would know it had been a sniper, but hopefully they would think that person had fled after wounding the Major.

Samantha didn't let herself gloat over the beautiful shots. It was hard to feel good about letting

him live. She was sure it would come back to haunt them.

When the boot steps came, Samantha had almost dozed off from the stiff adrenaline crash. She stayed in that dream-like state as the two teams of soldiers passed right under her without looking up. She didn't think she could have been spotted anyway, but it was a bit like hiding in that dank basement again, except in her favor this time.

As the soldiers faded from sight, complaining about their chore, Sam let herself sleep. She didn't have to be in the new place until dawn and it had been a long wait to fire those two short shots.

9

“There he is.”

The team of Eagles watched the jeep fly into the large base camp with a clearly wounded passenger. When they saw the soldiers snap to attention and follow the wounded man's orders, it was proof of their target.

Jeff read from the group envelope they'd opened upon arriving half an hour ago. “It says to sit tight and pass communications until they move on Safe Haven.”

Seth stared at the busy camp in frustration. He'd been told Becky would be here at noon, but there wasn't any sight of her. They were waiting on a narrow ledge directly above an enemy camp that

was lined with trees. They were up far enough to be out of sight and sound, but still view their target.

“Hey, there’s something on the other side.” Jeff was still reading the detailed plans. “When the girl gets here, provide an escort, but do not interfere with her duty.”

Seth knew what it was right then, but Becky stepped from the thick trees and he was too relieved to yell at her.

Becky slid into Seth’s arms and let him hold her too tightly, too possessively. She’d deal with it when the time came, but for now, they both needed a little comfort. It had only been a short time apart, but she was exhausted.

Seth could feel her weariness. “You got time to eat and sleep?”

“We don’t leave until dawn.” Tracy smiled at Zack when he pointed at his small tent. “Thanks. I’m beat.”

She ducked inside as Seth took Becky to his own canvas, leaving the others to pass a peaceful shift on duty over the enemy camp.

10

“I’m worried.”

“About the baby.”

Cynthia waited for the words she was scared to hear.

Angela delivered them as gently as she could.
“Yes, it will be a danger to everyone around you.”

“How can I—”

“You can’t.” Angela softened her tone, but it didn’t change the answer. “You’re not a descendant. The baby is. You’ll never be strong enough to control him.”

“And will he be...like his father?”

Angela’s witch blazed through with brutal accusation. “Worse. He will fall into government hands and become a plague upon the earth. Kill him now!”

Cynthia gasped, jerking herself awake. She was glad of the military sleep system she was wrapped in as the dirt shifted. The dream had startled her. She wasn’t sure if she’d been communicating with Angela or blowing off worry during her sleep.

Her hand went to her stomach, where not even a lump proclaimed her child yet. Was her dream the future to come? Any child of Adrian’s would be powerful. Why wasn’t Conner bad or even Jennifer’s offspring?

Only one of them lived. Nothing could be ruled out yet. She needed to talk to Angela

Cynthia felt the breeze stiffen, moving dirt. The leaves rustled as if a giant above her had let out a long-suffering sigh. The hair on her neck stood up as she sensed what was coming.

You have talked with me, Cynthia. I’m sorry.

Still buried in the ground, the reporter cried herself to sleep.

Chapter Thirteen
The Winds are Blowing



1

Kyle took the message from Shane to put it with the others. Once he'd brought Jenny's group out here and dropped them off, he'd made two more stops before coming back. With darkness, exhaustion had returned. He'd never thought he could get so tired just from being behind the wheel. "Do you have my next orders?"

Shane handed him a small envelope, feeling almost as run down as Kyle looked. "She's got a lot of us on break overnight. Maybe you too."

Kyle ripped his envelope open. "Be safe out there."

“You know it.” Shane left the glow stick-marked van to rejoin his group.

Kyle was parked in the center of three zones that held Safe Haven teams. They would be bringing him messages all night, according to his new orders. He was to stay here and sleep between visits. Kyle immediately made sure he was under good cover, got settled, and went to sleep.

He’d only been out a couple minutes when female voices roused him from his weary stupor. “Jenny?”

“Mail for the boss.”

Kyle recognized Tonya’s voice. He forced himself to sit up. “Leave it with me.”

Tonya handed him the two folders, then climbed into the van. She took up a guard position near the rear windows. “I was told to let you sleep between visits.”

Tonya was ready to sleep as well. She would have to work hard to stay awake. She and Kendle had lured small fire teams into ambushes all day, not actually exchanging gunfire, but being seen enough to lead them toward Eagles. Kendle hadn’t been happy with not being directly involved, so Tonya now had blood to scrub out of her hair from the island woman finding her own targets. “Kyle? You hear me?”

Kyle couldn’t answer. His eyes were glued to the group coming out of the darkness. Jennifer led it, once again covered in dried blood and little else.

Kyle felt fresh adrenaline flood his system and stood up. “You sleep first. It’s wasted on me now.”

Jennifer was braced for Kyle’s anger and arguments, but the sight of him swaying on his feet with clenched fists brought out her compassion. She went to him with a smile. “Where can I clean up?”

Kyle blinked. “Don’t you have...”

“After I’m clean and you hold me for a while. Okay?”

Kyle became aware of the fearful gestures he was getting behind her back. “Fine. Come on.”

Jennifer yanked her arm from his light grip, even though he hadn’t tried to pull her. “Tell me where I can clean up!”

Kyle wasn’t sure how to react, except to give her what she wanted. “Behind the van. I’ll get the water.”

Jennifer went that way with her head held high. He wasn’t going to push her around in front of other people. She didn’t like it. She didn’t have to take it.

Kyle watched her go without moving, stunned by the difference. “That’s not Jenny.”

“Yeah,” Zack agreed lowly. “We had the same thought, so we didn’t argue when she wanted to keep the...coating on. Good luck.”

“What happened?” Kyle assumed she’d been hurt and snapped.

Zack filled in what he knew as he got Kyle moving toward the van to get the water. It was making Zack nervous to keep Jennifer waiting.

“When we got to the camp, it was like she didn’t need us again. We never went inside, man.”

Kyle didn’t believe it. “By herself? Against two-dozen armed soldiers? Yeah, sure.”

Zack stopped, growing angry. He was also tired. “You believe what you want, but you keep her calm and happy, or me and the boys will tie your ass up and gag you.”

Zack left Kyle standing there with his mouth open. What the hell?

Zack joined his team as they set up a small perimeter around the van, avoiding Jennifer’s bathing area until she was finished. When she stepped into the van, clean, with only Kyle’s thick jacket wrapped around her, few of them bothered to steal a glimpse. She was too scary to be sexy.

“Incoming.” Zack watched new shadows break away from the trees with tired movements. “Ours.”

Kyle went to meet them.

The two Indians were carrying a struggling bundle, both men panting and grunting with the effort.

Kyle yanked the rear door of the van open when they went in that direction, wincing as a body hit the van floor with a hard thump. *Must not be one of ours.*

The groan that came from under the bag had Kyle reaching out to remove the covering before either of the guards could stop him.

Adrian glared hatefully, gagged and bound.

Kyle recoiled, shocked. He looked around. “Will someone please tell me what the hell is going on?”

2

“Can you talk about your runs?”

Becky wasn't sure that was a good idea, but she didn't want to hurt his feelings. She settled for shrugging. “Some of it.”

They were in Seth's tent, following orders that had implied this might be their last night together. “What do you want to know?”

Seth recognized the moment. He'd used the same tone a few days ago with an Eagle who hadn't cleared Angela's security list yet. Seth didn't think there was a problem, but until the boss gave the okay, Kip would remain outside the loop. He'd been left at Safe Haven, where Tommy had instructions to shoot him if there was reason to. This was the time they were most likely to find out why he'd failed his security check. “I don't like this.”

Becky didn't argue. She hadn't liked it either, but after only a couple days, she was feeling stronger and that did matter to her. Instead, she told him about her first mission.

Seth almost couldn't stand to listen. The fear and doubt he'd expected, but the excitement and eagerness to go out and do it again tomorrow was sickening. And he couldn't even tell her that was how he felt. The Eagles were expected to be fully

supportive of the females who were brave enough to join and tough enough to make the cut. Those who spoke against it were often made outcasts until they switched their views. Seth wasn't sure he could do it.

"I don't know how," Becky said, drawing his attention back without realizing she'd lost it. "But I didn't even get any blood on me."

Seth didn't know what to say. He held her tighter.

"I'll try to figure it out next time."

"You're sure about doing this?"

"Yes." Becky slid a hand under Seth's shirt.

The Eagle understood what had brought on the desire. "Not now, okay?"

Becky didn't mind. She curled up on his chest instead. It didn't take her long to fall asleep.

Seth, however, was still awake come dawn.

3

"I need to sleep now." There was only one bedroll in his gear. Jennifer crawled inside the mammoth Marine bag without showing signs of being afraid.

Kyle was terrified.

Jennifer scrunched into the corner as Kyle climbed in, realizing she should have let him get in first. She tried not to stiffen when he tugged her into a better position. It placed her against his side, and then his back when he immediately rolled over.

Jennifer caught the flash of him thinking about her hard nipples against his arm and understood he was once again resisting temptation. He was a strong man.

Jennifer allowed herself to lean against him, and then to give in and melt against his heat with a soft groan. It had been a long start to her mission. He felt too good to let her fear stop them from sleeping.

A short time later, Jennifer was snoring and Kyle carefully rolled over. As he shifted, she did too, placing herself the way he'd first had them.

Kyle felt her chest against him, relaxed in sleep, and was able to send his mind to calming thoughts that would allow dozing. He couldn't have done that before.

Stop babying her or she'll leave you.

Kyle jumped, instantly aroused and repulsed to have Jennifer's witch standing so blatantly in his mind, where he wasn't always good.

Should I apologize? the witch asked evenly. *I don't know about these things.*

Kyle opened his mouth and then slammed it shut to respond silently. *What do you want?*

The witch began a slow, revolving dance that Kyle turned his back to mentally, lids flying open to stare at the tent ceiling.

She's not the same. Don't treat her like a child.

It was hard to resist the temptation of thinking about treating Jennifer like a woman, but Kyle shoved the witch out of his mind with an effort of

pure will. *I won't betray her that way!* he snarled, big arm blocking the door to keep her out. *And I have nothing at all for you!*

Jennifer's eyes opened. Her head lifted, stunning Kyle with the ugliness he read there.

She is a killer.

Kyle refused to believe that, but the witch shoved by his meager defenses to show him the bloody replay of her day.

Kyle stopped struggling as the awful scenes went on and on, incapable of denial with the proof before him.

The witch continued her assault. *She needs a man to heal her now. She faced Donner and Louis, and came back stronger instead of curling into a corner and begging for mercy. Claim her.*

Why? Kyle demanded. And why now?

She wants you, in ways.

That cryptic answer angered Kyle enough that he closed his eyes and started his sleeping ritual. He didn't have to tolerate this shit.

She has a plan.

That snapped Kyle out of his annoyance and into concern. He'd been watching.

I've shown you proof, the witch intoned. *She is not who you would believe. That arrogance will cost you everything.*

Kyle felt pain, loss, and fear. He unconsciously tightened his hold on the girl sleeping peacefully on his chest. "Jenny." He was hoping she'd wake and

end this conversation before he was told something that he had to react to.

She's remembering the first time she saw you. Leave her be.

Tell me what you've come to say and be gone!

She wants to forget it all and move on. Cesar, her mother, the baby—it's too much. She's torn though, because of you.

She should hate me. If I move in on her now, she will.

Have you noticed that she doesn't need you anymore?

Kyle winced, but didn't deny it.

I see that you have. The place as her protector for the next year is not what she wants. Adulthood came to her over the last months. She wants a future for her child.

We're building that now. After the war, we'll have a home, a fresh start—

The witch flashed an image that forced Kyle to explore one of his biggest fears when it came to Jenny. Her mental state.

The image was of a great victory and a group of females who were bathed in blood. The girl in the front was holding a bloody child, red orbs glowering at the enemy, but when one of her own fighters approached, the girl directed that rage on him. *No more!*

The ground was covered in the dead, in the blood of their fellow American's. Crimson tears

oozed from the girl's eyes as she backed away. "You're like them. So am I. We're the evil."

Before the man could stop her, the girl rushed toward the edge of the cliff with her child clutched tightly...

Kyle jerked himself out of the vision so hard that he shifted Jennifer from his chest and startled them both into uneasy alertness.

Jennifer, exhausted and comfortable with Kyle being close, muttered and shifted back into the warm spot.

Kyle was frozen in agony.

She will see what she has unleashed, what all of you have become, and it will be too much. She needs you.

To do what? Kyle forced out. Manipulate her into thinking I'm the sun and the moon, worth living for?

To heal her wounds, the witch filled in. To work through these things with her before the blood overwhelms her.

Her wounds are from being hurt by men. It takes time—

That you won't have, the witch interrupted, getting aggravated that she couldn't explain it so he could understand. She is not a child. She is a woman, a mother, and she has friends. None of those things will be enough to hold her here once she realizes she is corrupt. Only love can bring her through that darkness.

Kyle was adding up clues. *You're scared. What happens to you if she dies?*

The witch faded at the question, voice a quiver of terror. *I end.*

One-way ticket? Kyle asked without compassion. He blamed the witch for Jenny's deeds.

Yes, but you're wrong. I tried to stop her. She wanted to kill, to be a part of this war in ways she knew would never be forgotten.

She's afraid of dying?

But not like most of you humans are, the witch whispered. And when she realizes how much evil she carries, that end will be the only punishment she feels is suitable. You have to stop her.

From what?

Hating herself. Show her how you feel, how you see her. Bring her back to the light.

And if I don't? She'll jump?

Or pull a trigger, swallow a pill. Once she decides she doesn't deserve to live, she'll take her life. It's why so many of my kind have been absent in the world. With that, the witch left Kyle and Jennifer woke up.

Jennifer had been vaguely aware of voices and emotions flowing around her as she dreamed. It had pulled her from that first night of new ownership with Kyle. So much had changed since then.

"Are you all right?" Kyle's anger was gone. He would have to spend time thinking about things, but he was already sure he would take action. He

doubted it would be the recommended plan, but he wouldn't sit by and lose her.

Jennifer nodded against his chest. "Better after some more sleep. You coming this time?"

Kyle smiled, shifting to hold her more securely. "Yes, ma'am."

Jennifer giggled and let sleep pull her down as Kyle evened out his breathing for slumber. She felt him dozing, but not coming below the surface far enough to join her, though. Jennifer didn't insist. She swam off alone through the murk in her mind, trying to sort and make room for the new horrors tomorrow would bring.

4

"I hate them!" Conner stomped through the woods in a rage that allowed no attention to his surroundings. He didn't care that he might run into soldiers or wild animals. He had to find his dad before Angela handed him over. He knew Adrian was with Marc. He thudded through the woods, mentally screaming for the man. *Show yourself!*

The shadows behind Conner couldn't hear him, but the shadowy form in front of the boy could. Marc winced at another loud blast, signaling to Kenn.

Kenn, extremely unhappy with the chore, blew the dart with enough force to send it spiraling toward the angry teenager like an arrow.

Conner slapped at his neck, staggering as the double dose of drugs penetrated his blood stream and began to take immediate effect. He slid to his knees, once again fighting to remain conscious.

Boots appeared in front of him.

With the last of his control, Conner shoved his head up to see Marc standing over him with merciless crimson orbs.

The drugs took over and Conner could only yell silently, trying to protect his secrets. He was terrified that the vet had mentioned him being outside Safe Haven's perimeter while everyone was leaving. The vet was with the other camp members by now, which meant he might have already told Angela. Conner tried to keep it all from his mind as he faced Marc, who could also know of his...deviance.

Marc didn't like Conner's protected thoughts, the glowing door of secrets that was surrounded by spells of pain. He waited until the teenager started to relax before blasting into his mind to yank on the handle.

No! Conner shouted, jerking back, but it was too late. Marc saw everything.

To keep from facing what he'd been doing, Conner let the drugs take him. It would only be a short reprieve, but he wanted it.

"Yeah, that's about right, considering who your dad is." Marc grabbed the boy by his thick jacket and hefted him up and over his shoulder "Come on, son. You've had a long day. Time for a nappy-nap."

Kenn couldn't help the snicker. He didn't care much for Conner, only Adrian's anger at their actions. He didn't have a big problem with the kid, but his attitude was too cocky at times and too sullen at others to allow a real feel for who he was. As a result, Kenn didn't trust him.

"It's Adrian's kid." Marc stomped down a path that unsuspecting soldiers would try to follow later. "Of course, you can't trust him."

Kenn got closer, keeping track of their Indian escorts. Grendin made him nervous. He wasn't sure why, but the feeling of unease was clear. "You gonna fill in my blanks at some point? I told you I won't interfere."

"Adrian has one more shot to come clean." Marc shifted Conner's dead weight for better balance. "You'll get to hear it, along with everyone else."

Kenn realized Marc had been lying when he said he didn't know the plan. Kenn's eyes widened. "It's your plan, isn't it?"

Marc didn't confirm or deny. Keeping Kenn out of the loop was still important. The Marine had a habit of sticking his nose in at the wrong time. Marc hadn't forgotten that. They had a deal in place because Kenn had agreed to follow orders, but that didn't mean he could be trusted either.

Kenn withdrew a little to provide better coverage. His mind was spinning in too many directions and he shut it down, telling himself he

would get into it when he had a few minutes of peace and quiet.

The Indians providing Marc's escort kept their eyes and ears on the cliffs and trees around them. The winds were blowing gently, but they were not friendly. For the natives, it was easy to hear that something wasn't right with nature. Safe Haven refugees had figured that out after enough death, but the Indians had known it since before the war. As they walked, they started to hum a soothing lullaby that brought a peaceful feeling to keep them company.

Marc found himself humming along with them. He'd learned that one while they fought together. It called to him in a way that made him feel like he'd known it for years. It was a deep, rumbling range that reached inside and reminded him this was how he was meant to live. He'd never felt more spiritually fulfilled than the weeks he'd spent with the Indians. It was something he would have to talk to Angela about, if their attempt to live in the mountains after this war failed. He knew she could leave, though it would hurt her, but Marc wasn't sure he could even step onto the boat, let alone sail away. It was the one thing that might actually come between them.

Chapter Fourteen
Time to Go



1

Samantha watched the new base from the fork of another tree; this one was covered in slimy mold. She assumed the soldiers wouldn't expect her to pick a contaminated tree over the healthy ones. She'd set up her blind with that in mind. The soldiers below her had cook fires burning, and were enjoying the end of a day.

Offended by their lack of concern, Sam waited impatiently for her next scheduled part in the plan. She wanted to change their perception of safety right now. She hated only wounding her targets. Not killing Donner was going to be a mistake. In the hours since, Sam had almost decided that when she

took aim again, it wouldn't be to follow orders. She could feel the waves of menace from the Major even when he was miles away and under the thick cover of his plentiful men. Angela might have him on the run because she'd attacked first and so quickly, but Samantha felt strongly that Major Donner was a major downer. He would have his revenge.

Sam also agreed that Angela needed him alive to keep his men together while they were slaughtered. One thousand soldiers roaming around these mountains with no clear leader would have been as bad as the war, if not worse. An army would negotiate. A large group of AWOL soldiers would be a nightmare for anyone they caught. To keep them together, Donner had to be wounded, not killed. Samantha had done that and enjoyed it immensely, but she was torn on a repeat.

Samantha carefully took the thermos from her pack and twisted off the lid. The still warm vegetable soup was a satisfying reminder of the harvest she'd help to provide, the skills she'd learned. She enjoyed what would probably be the best meal she had for a while. From here on out, she was scavenging her food from the land, as she'd been taught. Angela hadn't wanted to agree to that, but Sam needed to do it to know that she would survive on her own, that she'd changed from the weak person she'd been before the war.

And all without my help, the demon praised sadly. I'm not needed. I understand that's why you don't want me.

It was said just right, bringing guilt that caused Samantha to sigh heavily. *Let's get through the next week and then maybe we'll talk, okay?*

The demon's mood lift from receiving that answer gave Samantha an immediate rush of adrenaline that would help keep her alert. She noted that reaction. She might need it later.

Yes, master!

Samantha frowned, but didn't correct the wording. She had no idea what she might unleash by a name change. When this was all over, she and Adrian or Angela would have to sit down and discuss a few hundred things.

The storm tracker finished her meal and washed it down with a few sips from her canteen. In a bit, she would climb down for a bathroom break, scout her immediate surroundings, and then return for a few hours of cold sleep while the base camp below dreamed of happier times. When the signal came, she would remind the enemy that world was gone forever.

Pausing in her scan, Sam paid particular attention to the wind. It carried smells and feels, and the occasional scream, but she was too conflicted for true concentration. She didn't try to force more.

Snap!

A breaking twig told Sam she wasn't alone. She went still except for the hand sliding toward her gun.

Sam heard a deep sigh in the darkness. Unlike the morons in the slasher films, she clamped her lips together and stayed motionless.

That deep sound of misery came again.

Sam peered into the night, trying to see who it was she was about to kill.

“It’s us, Sam.”

“What are you doing?”

“We freaked her out. Shut up, will you?”

Tonya and Kendle came through the trees.

Sam grinned in relief.

“Damn twig, right?” Tonya flushed. “I know it was.”

Samantha snickered. She kept watch as Tonya flipped on a pen light long enough to see by while they climbed the two trees adjacent to the one Samantha was hidden in. In the morning, Kendle and Tonya would go their own way. Shortly after that, all of Angela’s teams would start their full assault on the enemy.

The three hens settled into their high perches for the night without the expected chatter, but they were all secretly glad they weren’t alone. Even Sam was okay with it when the predawn hours brought thick, slick fog. Alone, she wouldn’t even have been able to doze deeply, but with a teammate on each side, she had no trouble resting.

Tony struggled violently when he woke, straining to scream through the gag as he tossed his body around. He'd tried to take Tommy's gun.

Peggy darted him. When he hit the side of the cliff wall and knocked himself out, Peggy was relieved. Kyle had just dropped him off, along with a couple others they were having issues with, but Peggy was tired of playing double agent. Now that the cameras and constant observation was gone, the mood of these cave dwellers wasn't bad. However, Peggy had been with them for the mini-riots. She knew it never took much to bring out the ugliness in people. If her instructions tomorrow were the same as today's had been, Peggy planned to get in touch with Angela and complain. If the camp members in here found out she was helping to hold their own people captive in the deeper parts of this cave, she might be killed. At the least, Angela's plan would be shot.

"You back here?"

Peggy paled, dropping the curtain just as Doug came around the stack of crates.

"Stealin' a few minutes for yourself?" Doug accused. "Them babies is cryin' for you again. Hilda wants a break. She's working doubles now, taking up that new doctor's slack, you know?"

Peggy tossed him the towel from her shoulders. "Take a turn, will ya? I'm not done being selfish yet."

Doug returned to the baby area with a huge scowl that made Hilda reluctant to let him help. He

didn't look like he could handle something so fragile.

Peggy took another minute for herself and then she too rejoined Safe Haven. Angela had made it clear that the camp had to be kept in the dark until the fighting began. Once the blood was spilling, they wouldn't be staying here. Peggy might be able to cover it a bit longer. However, if this peaceful calm held much longer, someone was bound to stumble onto their captive members and then things would get nasty.

Peggy gave a nod to the Eagles on duty, glad of them, and went to help with the infants who didn't like being away from their parents.

3

Safe Haven wasn't alone.

Angela had sent camp after camp to surround hers, to fight and die for the offspring hidden there if needed. Those brave men and women kept guard while the fog rolled down the mountain like a waterfall.

As the fog came in, covering everything known and foreign, another small group joined the others. These new men were accepted simply because they'd arrived and squatted on the fringes, where the fighting would happen first. It was another layer of protection for those in the center; the extra camp wasn't questioned, but welcomed.

Inside this small group, fifteen of Donner's men wearing Eagle uniforms put up Safe Haven tents and settled down to wait—wolves among the sheep. Their recon work had told them each team was required to know every member of their group for identification purposes, but no one could know every team that was being sent out, thanks to Angela's grand plan. It was the only slipup so far, but Donner had capitalized on it as soon as he'd heard. His personal team had been sent straight to Safe Haven's fence, before Donner himself had even touched down. It left him vulnerable, but it put his pieces exactly where he wanted them—close enough to grab Angela.

4

“I want that update. Now!”

The startled Corporal began stammering, “We've lost f-five dozen men in two days. We have three missing patrols, and uh, we found this message... It's written in blood, sir.”

The Corporal handed Donner the message over the trembling medic kneeling at his bloody boots.

You should have gone south.

Donner sneered at Angela's blood warning. “What else?”

The Corporal pulled himself together, staring at the tent wall instead of the blood. He'd never been in combat. “No word from either base you... exited.”

Donner glared at the near implication of cowardice. “Get out.”

The man did, leaving the tent flap open for the soldiers outside to hear the screams that they were all hoping for as the slug was removed. Donner hadn’t earned any friends.

Donner shouted as the medic pulled the slug from his leg. Blood was everywhere, with gauze and tubes of medicine spread out on the canvas floor.

“Hold still, sir. This will sting.” The medic dumped the antiseptic over the wound, flinching when Donner’s eyes began to glow a bright, menacing green. He tried to make himself keep working, but that glare was too hungry. The medic fled the room.

Donner was used to that reaction. He finished the chore himself, cauterizing the wound with the handle of the knife the medic had put on the small burner when he’d first come in.

“Ahhh!”

Donner wiped the sweat away with bloody hands and reapplied the hot blade a second time to fully close the wound. The first bullet had gone straight through. The hole had been filled with a clotting agent. The second had struck his bone, shattering off a piece of it. He might not be able to walk if the fragment shifted, according to the medic, but Donner wasn’t worried. He’d told the boy he healed quickly. That hadn’t been a lie. The wounds were already starting to redden, but he had clearly underestimated this group of descendants.

“Never fought one who fought like me!” He took another big swig of the whiskey that was already half gone.

Donner began laughing wildly, thinking of the men he’d sent in. There was a chance they’d succeed and survive where he wouldn’t. That possibility was always there when he split up his team. Donner knew his protection was in his men and their loyalty to him, but he needed them out there to grab the bitch. Two gunshot wounds were a small price to pay for eventual domination over the world.

Donner cackled again, feeding the evil inside with his pain.

The soldiers listening outside the tent withdrew in concern.

“He’s not right.” Private Benson frowned toward his partner as they stood atop a rickety shed. “We should hit the redline.”

Private Trister shrugged, thinking of the girl they’d chased most of the day before returning empty handed to a destroyed camp. It had taken them all night to reach Donner. “Maybe tomorrow, after we pay a visit to their camp.”

Benson understood what drove his friend, but he liked living more than he needed a woman. He watched the fog line of their camp with a churning stomach. “None of us are coming out of this.”

Trister snorted, waving off the worry.

The two men continued their shift in silence that was broken by animals moving, wind howling, and their commanding officer laughing like a loon.

5

“Everyone ready?” Neil glanced around the small group of men waiting with him.

There were nods and hand signals, but no one spoke except Neil.

“Remember, we’re herding, not killing. Be careful with your aim.”

Busy checking his gear to get set for the next part of their mission, Jeremy ran a hand over the lump that was his notebook and felt relieved. A laptop he could put together from anything. The record of the codes he’d already tried was now irreplaceable. Adrian’s advice of keeping it close was one he intended to follow.

His computer was currently in Kyle’s van. Jeremy hoped to work on it each time he got a chance to rest, but he didn’t expect much of that. Things were about to ramp up in Angela’s plans and his team had a front row role. Few of the Eagles liked the orders, but once the shooting started, they each planned to kill anyone they thought might be a threat later. It was how Marc and Adrian had been training them. They assumed Angela didn’t understand that this was war. Wound-only orders made little sense to them.

Neil knew what their plans were, but instead of arguing, he kept quiet and followed his orders. He was supposed to accidentally slip up himself, though how anyone would believe that, Neil didn't know. He was too good to make so simple a mistake, but he didn't think it would trigger the fight anyway. He also didn't understand why they couldn't attack this camp openly. He hoped Angela knew what she was doing.

The ten Eagles came down the cliffs toward the enemy camp that was sprawled out across half a mile. Donner wasn't here, or so Zack's update had stated, but everyone would keep an eye out for him. The bounty for putting a bullet into Donner was an immediate promotion and the chance to lead a team. Angela didn't care about these soldiers, only their boss.

The sleeping, snoozing soldiers didn't notice the shadows in the fog as the Eagles settled themselves on the ground behind the banks of white fog, waiting for the signal. When it came, they were supposed to flush the entire camp into the woods, killing as few as possible. Neil wondered if Angela wanted to recruit these men later; he wasn't sure that was a good idea.

The fog thickened until the soldiers sounded muffled despite only being a dozen feet away. Jeremy rolled onto his back to watch for their signal. He spotted Crista in the tree above them and froze in shock.

"I'm the signal." Crista gestured. "Open fire."

Neil gave the men a few seconds to recover from finding Crista above them with a rifle, then whistled as loudly as he could. “Now, Eagles!”

The night came alive with chaos an instant later. Grenade launchers and smoke bombs sent barely awake soldiers fleeing in every direction.

“Herd them, goddamn it!”

His team began hitting the ground by feet and walls by shoulders, and slowly, the soldiers began to flee in the correct direction. Few of them thought to return fire. Those who did were unaccustomed to the noise and smoke, and mostly missed their targets. The others simply fired blindly into the fogbank until they were out of ammunition or were cut down by Eagle rounds. Drafting citizens but not training them had backfired.

As their side cleared of all but the occasional moving target, the Eagles became aware of gunfire and screams coming from the other side of the too-spread out camp. They ran straight through the burning debris, arriving to discover a large group of Indians fighting the enemy. Except there weren't many soldiers left to kill. The scene was gruesome—men impaled, throats slit, some even scalped.

Recognizing Grendin, Neil whistled and spun his hand in the air.

His team didn't argue with the order to leave early. The Indians didn't look friendly at any time, but here, they were intimidating. The Eagles got out of sight with feelings of relief. They were killers and hunters too, but the Indians were more and it

showed. All the strength and power that had been stolen from them was returning. Jeremy thought if they won this war, the Indians would become a force again, one to be taken seriously. Their days of assuming the government's ways were over. Now, they would help set the standard for survival.

Crista was forgotten about, like her orders had said she would be. She stayed in the tree, waiting as the others left. Angela hadn't been sure which base Donner would flee to next. Two of them were close by, equally dangerous under an evacuation, so Crista was supposed to stay close in case he chose to stop at this one. If he did, he would discover the carnage and keep going, but not before she tried to put a bullet into him somewhere. She had a perfect view of all the nearest roads from her perch. Angela had promised a level jump for two in the leg or arm, but Crista was aiming for one in the throat. "One shot, one kill. Anything more is a mistake."

6

Cynthia woke as the ground around her began to rumble. She was still buried, waiting... Her heart kicked into high gear as the engine came closer. *Friend or foe?* She almost hoped it were the latter. She was bored enough to cry. And starving.

The vehicle stopped on the road, near where she was. Cynthia wondered what the odds were on her

being run over. She hadn't considered that part of this crazy plan.

"Cynthia?"

The sound of a familiar voice sent relief through the reporter and brought out her happiness to be alive. She decided Daryl sounded sleepy. She moaned loudly to bring him closer.

Daryl pulled his gun. That hadn't sounded right. "Where are you? I have supplies."

Cynthia groaned again, stretching it into a breathy whisper.

Daryl paled, slowing. He didn't know where she was, only that he was to actually see her and verify she was okay.

"Cynthia?"

Daryl shouted as a hand closed around his ankle.

Cynthia dissolved in laughter, giving away her hiding place.

Daryl gasped, staring. "I almost shot you!"

Cynthia laughed harder at his expression. "You...should see your face!"

Daryl wanted to be angry, but the feel of her amusement was catching. He grinned. "Damn woman."

"That's me." She pointed, still snickering. "Put the stuff behind those bushes. Set it up if you want to."

Cold, Daryl was reluctant to agree until he saw what he'd delivered. The ammunition coils gleamed under his penlight.

He found himself still there an hour later, admiring the assembled toy.

Cynthia had joined him shortly after he started, thinking Angela had been right.

“I can take needed time and teach you to set it up, or I can send you a man who will get a hard-on just for being allowed to touch it and have it together in half the time you can anyway. No brainer.”

Cynthia grinned at Daryl’s expression. It was better than her prank. He actually had his tongue sticking from his mouth in concentration.

Daryl flushed, yanking his tongue in. “What?”

“Damn man.”

Daryl smiled intently, flipping on the charm. “That’s me.” He held her eyes, sending out a vibe she couldn’t miss or ignore.

“I see.”

Daryl shrugged, smile turning into a shy, hopeful smirk. “I always have, you know. Even when you were *that bitch* to him.”

She scowled, but Daryl didn’t stop. “I was afraid of you.”

Cynthia gaped. “Of me? Right.”

Daryl shrugged again. “Imagine that I was a reporter and you were an Eagle. Would you date me?”

Cynthia thought about it. “No. You’re not my type, honestly, but no. That’s too invasive. I don’t know how anyone dates a reporter.”

“Exactly. So I stayed away from you.”

She could see his point, but she knew that possibly also being an outcast with her had been a big fear. Until he admitted that, she didn't have a date for him or anything else. Not to mention he was providing relief for a few of the camp's older females. "I have to get back in my grave now." The joy was gone. "Cover that thing up when you leave."

"I'm sorry for it." He suddenly wondered if no perfume had been an order from Angela. He didn't smell any flowers except the wild ones growing near them. It was one thing he'd always disliked about the reporter.

Cynthia's brows drew together. "For not wanting me digging into your private life?"

Daryl chose open honesty. "For worrying over my place instead of reaching out to you."

With that, he made it onto her list. Cynthia sighed, rolling her eyes. "You guys need to quit ambushing me. Kevin hasn't made a choice and I won't either until he does, if at all. I *can* raise a child alone."

Daryl let her go. He knew not to push a woman, especially one as stubborn as Cynthia. Daryl had spent too many nights dreaming about her to ignore this opportunity. He knew she'd pick Kevin in a heartbeat, but if Kevin didn't want her, then Daryl had a shot that he intended to take. Tonight had been a perfect way to let her know and leave her thinking. Until the action started, there was little else to do anyway.

Daryl vowed to show Angela his gratitude somehow. It was almost as if she'd known and had been giving Cynthia a chance to sniff through other offers without Kevin or Adrian around. It didn't bother Daryl that the baby wouldn't be his. He wasn't in it for the kid, though he did like children. He wanted Cynthia. He planned to have her eating from the palm of his hand not too long after Kevin showed his yellow streak and backed out.

Daryl settled down nearby to keep watch while Cynthia's other guard slept. He felt the menace hitting him now and began to suspect who he would be relieved by come dawn. Daryl smirked, scanning the dark trees and quiet mountain landscape. He was looking forward to it.

It was hard for Kevin to stay in the cliffs and watch. He could feel the sparks between the couple; the jealousy was frustrating. He wanted to be down there gazing at her like that. But he couldn't and it had more to do with his own mind than it did with Angela's orders. If he went down there, all they would do was fight and she would be unprotected.

Kevin had been watching supply men come in and out of here since just after he'd arrived and all of them were rivals, though Daryl was the most serious competition. He was also the biggest surprise. Kevin hadn't known. He had a lot to thank Angela for. She'd intentionally put him out here so he would understand how many other Eagles were interested in his woman.

“Come on, Boss. Time to go.”

Angela acknowledged Shawn’s words, but she didn’t move. They were still in the old location and not all of the tents and fence parts they still needed had been loaded. She’d spent the day here, against Marc’s wishes, insisting that she be brought back at dusk. She hadn’t been able to stay away from her command center any longer, despite the odds creeping steadily up on assassins making their way in.

“Leave it for our crews.” Shawn used a firm tone. “We have to go.”

Angela let him guide her over the mess left behind by the exodus. Shawn was her right hand through this. He would stay with her until the end. He knew more of the plan than anyone else, except Marc.

Shawn put her in the passenger seat and then climbed in behind her as he tapped the roof. Their driver, Greg, would also stay with her until the end.

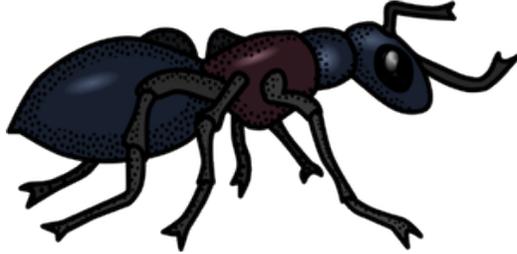
Shawn and Greg were her guards now and while she felt a bit exposed without the usual clan that Marc had assigned, Angela was glad of the privacy when they stopped for the night. She wasn’t joining any of the camps. She’d chosen to spend this night alone, to be sure that she had her mind fully in the role. To do anything less would be disastrous.

Angela and Shawn went inside the small cave, while Greg found a place to hide the jeep. They all got settled with food and drinks, removing boots for a little comfort, but the trio didn't speak much. The things they were being forced to do were awful. They were all aware that some of it was going on right now, while they weren't in danger. The guilt kept all of them up until dawn was nearly lighting the sky.

Angela passed the time by going over every inch of her plan, comparing it to what had happened so far, searching for problems. She found too many things that could go wrong, things that it was too late to change, and suffered through the hours until her next update. Adrian or Conner might pick anything sent mentally up right now. That meant radio silence had been extended to that form of communication as well.

By morning, Angela was a nervous wreck that still found a way to greet her escorts cheerfully when they woke. She would fake it until the end. *I'm female. We excel at faking. It's honesty we struggle with.*

Chapter Fifteen
That Bitch!



1

“**T**here goes Bozo.”

Benson and Trister watched Donner and Sergeant Wallz climb onto the chopper with relief. Having that pale lunatic gone would be the best part of the day.

They both saluted smartly, but the second the chopper was out of sight, all the soldiers in the campsite began cheering. Without Donner here, they could sit back and relax without worry about...

Crack!

Gunfire from the rear of their camp sent many of the men fleeing toward the front. They drew up in shock at the sight of an army of ants invading their campsite.

The ants moved forward in an unstoppable wave that didn't pause or flinch from the shots the

soldiers fired. For each ant the freaked out men killed, no less than five came out of the tree line to take their place. In a matter of minutes, the ants were all over the camp; soldiers fled into the woods with whatever they had on them. When men around them began to fall, snatched under the fog by powerful teeth and glowing red eyes, they ran faster.

Those Dog missed hit the next base camp screaming about a ghost in the fog, but with Donner's radio silence order, they couldn't warn anyone else that the colony of ants was coming north.

The camp of soldiers they'd taken shelter with didn't believe the stories, though they saw the injuries. They assumed their fellow soldiers had drunk too much the night before and lost a fight against human targets. They didn't take the requests for guns seriously.

When the ants and Dog arrived, it took those soldiers too long to recover from the shock. Another enemy camp fell. Fourteen camps were now down and the legend of the Ghost had new life.

Hidden by brush, Dog waited for the fleeing soldiers to come along, then lunged. He opened gouges in legs, snapped bones, and bit off fingers reaching for guns. Bullets grazed him and fists landed, but Dog was determined to help drive out the invaders to secure Marc's safety.

Dog lunged at a trio who thought they'd cleared the killing field.

“Lookout!”

“No!”

“Ahh!”

Dog brought two of them down with his weight, jaws clamping around a throat. He felt the spray of blood and then rose to lunge again, this time biting the hand raising a gun.

The third man fled.

Dog followed the man’s sobs. As the battle fell behind him, Dog realized he wasn’t alone, but it was too late to stop the attack. He dove on the soldier, teeth going into the screaming man’s neck.

Crunch!

A howl drew him around to discover a small pack of thin, hungry wolves that were much smaller than he was. Except for the pack leader. She was a huge, brilliant white that beckoned like sizzling meat.

Dog whined at the female, smelling her heat now. He sat down, making hopeful contact.

The female howled again, in clear warning.

Disappointed, Dog watched the pack trot down the mountain, going west, away from the battles. *Too bad I’m on a run.* If he had time, he would run that bitch down and beg a little. *She was stinky!* Dog returned to work as he heard the stomping boots of another panicked duo coming in his direction. *I have places to be and soldiers to make pee.*

There was still a small list of things to do before he could be with Marc. Dog was eager for that. Good at it or not, the wolf didn’t like attacking the men in the funny uniforms.

The ants did, though. Dog padded over to them as the insects swarmed his latest kill to drag it to their own hidden den. With the limited communication, Dog had tried to explain that only those wearing green clothes were to be treated that way, but the wolf wasn't sure the ants understood. He'd mentioned that to Marc, who'd told him not to say anything to Angela about it.

Dog didn't intend to. Unless she was right about all of this and won the war, the wolf didn't expect to ever talk to her again. She would be taken away and his master would never recover. Dog would do anything to keep that from happening. He lunged at the next shadows with an ugly growl.

2

Kyle pulled the van through what was left of Safe Haven's gates as the chopper flew overhead. He rushed his cargo straight to the holding cell they'd left for this moment. They hadn't known it at the time, of course. Angela had; she was the one to slam the door shut and twist the key after Adrian was dumped inside.

Angela didn't ask why he'd been drugged. Her men had followed orders and that was enough. "Everything else set?"

Kyle wanted to confront Angela over the use of magic to cause pain, and over the safety net that she had convinced Jennifer they needed to take, but the

hard set of her jaw and the deep misery in her eyes stopped the words. He would complain later.

“It’s all set.” Kyle watched the chopper circle for a landing. There was one place cleared for it—right in the center. Kyle could feel the pilot’s wariness.

“You know what to do now?” Angela sighed. “I wasn’t very clear on this part in my messages.”

“After what I’ve heard, it won’t be a problem.” Kyle was furious with Adrian.

Angela was glad it had worked out the way she’d foreseen. “And Kenn?”

“Yes, he wants the rest of it too.”

“Good. You’ll both get the answers you need, I promise.”

Kyle had more questions, but the chopper landing swallowed all other sounds into those huge whirling blades.

The chopper came down in a noisy series of whines and pops as the Eagles below spread out to have enough room to fight if it was needed. This was supposed to be a negotiation, but their enemy couldn’t be trusted.

The chopper blades continued to spin as a pair of camo-wearing soldiers exited and moved toward Angela.

Dog, who arrived only minutes ago, spotted the men getting off the chopper and bristled. His chore had been to escort the ants here, taking out soldiers along the way. He padded to the corner of the only tent in use, lurking in the shadows.

“Shut it down!” Angela stayed back while Kyle and his team checked for weapons and took what they found. The soldiers didn’t like it, but with two teams of Eagles around them, they couldn’t argue.

“Our pilot will stay ready to leave.” Trey didn’t like going into the enemy’s camp unarmed, but he wasn’t intimidated. He’d been with Donner for a long time. Trey knew how to play this situation. So did Sergeant Wallz.

Angela gestured to Shawn, who slid into the chopper and put his gun to the pilot’s exposed neck.

A few seconds later, the large blades slowed and the noise faded.

Angela smiled thinly at Trey’s angry face. “Your pilot will stay with you. Your ride will stay with us.”

Trey returned her mocking tone, gently patting his chest. “I’ll kill all of us in one shot if you try to keep us here. I’m wired.”

Angela raked the short man with a knowing sneer. “You’re too small to keep.”

Trey flushed as those around them snickered openly.

Angela took a quick glance to verify things were as she wanted them, and found her fighters eager. That would change, but for now, she would enjoy it.

“I’m ready to take a seat and hand out the Major’s terms.” Trey tried to regain control. “He wants this wrapped up quickly.”

Angela motioned toward the mess.

Trey turned that way without waiting for her. It was obvious that he expected a man to appear soon to exchange terms with. The insult didn't sit well with the Eagles. Both of Angela's personal guards blocked his way.

Trey drew up, hand floating over his chest. "If I rip off this monitor, they'll send bombs!"

"We thought of that." Angela smiled sweetly. "Greg?"

Greg rushed forward and ripped Trey's coat and shirt open as three Eagles came in to hold him.

Sergeant Wallz stayed still, observing. With multiple weapons aimed at him, there was little else that he could do.

Greg quickly slapped the monitor against his own chest.

Angela sneered at Trey's stunned expression. "Simple, right? Who would have thought?"

"You bitch!"

Angela waved her offended Eagles back. "You said you wanted to sit down and talk." Angela led the way to the mess this time. "Let's talk."

Trey jerked loose of the Eagles and followed her with a hand on his belt, telling them he had another weapon.

Angela sat down, waving a hand at the drinks on the small table.

Trey snorted. "Like I'd fall for that. Let's get this over with."

Angela poured herself a cup of the warm tea. “Fine. Pull out. Leave for your bunker and I won’t kill any more of your men.”

Trey was used to bravado. “I don’t deal. I deliver the orders. Where’s Mitchel?”

Angela jerked a thumb over her shoulder. “In a cell behind us. He can probably hear this conversation. He can’t respond.”

“I want him put on the chopper.”

Angela sipped her drink.

Trey felt a shard of concern as she continued to stare. “Load him up.”

“We haven’t finished negotiating.” Angela was busy digging into his mind. “Ready to hear the terms?”

Trey was quickly tiring of the game. “What do you want, lady?”

“Angela.”

Trey’s eyes widened; eager lights flooded them. “Really.” Donner had expected her to use someone else during these negotiations, not to risk being in the open this way.

Trey’s pilot and guard exchanged glances that gave them away as information collectors. Angela waved them both into chairs by Trey.

The men sat down warily, but they didn’t scorn her offer of a drink as Trey had.

Angela studied the man Donner had sent. Trey’s mind was a lot like Kenn’s, dark, but she was picking up enough to make the connections she needed. Trey was a minor talent at best, a hack who

thought he was better than he really was. Donner kept Trey around because he was hard for their kind to read, which meant he could keep secrets. She had no doubt that he held many of those. “But you’re expendable to him. That’s why he sent you.”

Trey started to protest, but Angela wasn’t finished.

“You pretend you’re his right hand, but something happened on your last run to...Canada. He’s wanted you gone since then.”

“You’re using my secrets, not Donner’s.” Trey watched her uneasily. “You haven’t even met Donner, and our kind can’t—”

“Our kind.” Angela grinned. “Really.”

Trey snapped his mouth shut.

Angela leaned forward. “He called me. I can access him now, any time I want to, from any place.”

“Nice try. No one can do that.”

“Why do you think they’d murder thousands of men for me?” Angela planted the idea, sure it would take root. Donner had made a mistake by sending his weakest link. Trey’s walls were incredibly thick, but she was busting right through them now and he still hadn’t noticed. “My child will be stronger.”

Trey hadn’t known she was pregnant. Donner hadn’t mentioned it when he’d told them about this run. The Butcher had sent them in early, blind. They’d been in place before the first base fell. When Garret had called the last time, Donner had been on his way back from Canada.

Canada. It went wrong there.

What happened in Canada?

Donner made us kill them.

Trey snapped his mind back to the sexy woman watching him knowingly. “Stay outta my head!”

“Fine.” Angela sighed regretfully. “Would you like something to eat or maybe a shave?”

Trey frowned. “I’m not staying that long. Are we done?”

“Not yet.” Angela dug deeper. “I need to know that my people will be safe once Adrian and I are gone. Can you promise that?”

Trey slowly took out a paper and placed it on the table. “We only want these people. The rest are free to go as soon as they sign a loyalty form.” Trey stared at the corner of the tent, at the enormous shadow of a wolf. Trey couldn’t see the animal through the canvas, but he knew who it was. Dog’s legend was still growing.

Angela kept tight control of her rage at the thought of her people having to declare loyalty to the people who had caused all this hell. “Will the trials be held here?”

“Utah.” Trey confirmed the location of the big bunker without knowing he was doing it.

“I see.” Angela kept pushing. “And when that chopper leaves with Adrian, it will also go west to the bunker?”

Trey shrugged, not seeing any reason to lie to someone who would be dead or in custody soon. “Could be. Could also be that Donner has other

plans, but that won't affect the deal you make. The government will hunt him, not you."

"He's gone rogue."

Trey had assumed she and her spies already knew. He frowned. "We haven't talked to base since he landed. The radio silence is for *his* sheep, not yours."

Angela stared at him in dawning comprehension. "He wasn't going to attack us?"

Trey leered. "Nope. He was about to abscond with a thousand of Uncle Sam's men and all that gear. You didn't mean anything to him."

Angela wanted to call him a liar, but she didn't read one in his mind. He believed Donner had been about to take them south to fight the Mexicans. He hadn't been aiming for Safe Haven. "Until I pointed him here." Angela tried to sound stunned by what she'd done, by the mistake. "Oh, shit."

"Exactly." Trey smiled coldly. "But now that you've drawn blood, he'll have his turn."

"Why take Adrian?" Angela asked, trying to recover.

"Safety, I assume." Trey shrugged. "You know how handy that drawing power can be and not all of us have it."

"Have you been with Donner long?"

Trey knew what she was doing, but he couldn't stop it from working. Her voice was in his mind now, whispering things that he normally wouldn't have put together. He shook his head to clear the

buzzing. “Years.” Trey glanced at his watch. “I have orders to keep it moving. We done here?”

“You’d like to examine the prisoner, I’d bet.” Angela stood up. “Step this way.”

“I’d like him loaded and to be on my way!” Trey leered. “I’ll be back for *you* later.”

Angela led them outside, around the sentries to the rear of the tent, where three small cells waited. Adrian was in the center, still bound and gagged, but bright eyed and alertly listening.

As they went outside, Dog moved around the corner of the canvas, staring in menace at Trey.

The mercenary turned to find the wolf feet away and flinched. “Damn!”

Angela snickered. “Say hi to Dog.”

The wolf growled softly. *Get out. While you still can.*

“Now, Dog, this man is our guest,” Angela mock scolded.

The wolf snorted, shaking his head.

Shocked, Trey quickly switched to Angela’s left, putting her and Adrian’s cage between them. “He’s a descendant!”

Angela didn’t correct him. Dog’s legend would be as infamous as Marc’s was.

“I see Adrian. Let’s go.”

“Go?” Angela smiled as a mixed team of Eagles came from behind the shed and stepped toward them. “You can’t go. We’re just getting to know you.”

Trey started to reach for the spare firearm he kept in his waistband, but Kyle was there to tackle him. Both men went to the ground, wrestling for control.

Kyle was stronger than Trey, but he fought fairly. Trey slammed his head against Kyle's in a hard thud and kicked him in the balls.

Kyle staggered, hands going down defensively.

Angela waved at Shawn to help subdue the man.

Shawn motioned Greg along. As they rushed him, Angela shoved into Trey's mind. *Baby killerrrr!*

Trey was shocked into stillness at having his worst secret exposed. Even Donner didn't know that one.

The Eagles captured him without any more fighting. Trey had been a boxer, was in excellent health, and was carrying guilt for wartime sins committed during peace. It had taken Angela a minute to break through his melodies and waves, but she had him now. "They were your neighbors! You harmed them knowingly! You'll burn forever!"

With each accusation, Trey shrank down until he was lying on the ground.

Angela stopped suddenly. She straightened up as if insane and flipping personalities. "Get him out of my sight for now. We'll kill him in some special way when it's all over."

The Eagles dragged Trey, who was now pleading for his life, to the chopper and tossed him on.

Angela motioned to his pilot. “Get him out of here.”

When the guard would have gone too, Angela placed a light hand on his arm. “Why don’t you stay for a while, David?”

Neither he nor the pilot had moved an inch when Trey was grabbed. After witnessing what she’d done to Trey, so fast, Sergeant Wallz didn’t want any part of it. They’d never faced descendants who were like them—ruthless. David didn’t like the odds.

“Good man. But not good enough to absolve you. You’ll be my guest.” Angela made a short motion to Kyle.

The top Eagle shoved Trey and the pilot onto the chopper.

Dog padding alongside his escorts kept Trey from triggering another battle. He was glad of it when the chopper began to rise and give a clear view of all the armed men who’d been hiding around Angela’s camp. He wouldn’t have gotten out alive. “You promised to give us Adrian!”

Angela shrugged as the chopper lifted off.

Trey punched the side of the bird in frustration. How had that happened?

You underestimated me. You saw a woman and dismissed her. Big mistake. She shut the mental door between them. She didn’t need to listen to know how Donner would react to the news. It would be typical bad guy storms around and maybe even kills the messenger. It would stir him up and force him to honor his words of executing their hostages.

He would do it out in the open, hoping her people would see it.

Then the waiting Eagle teams could move in. Knowing which camp or building their people were in was important during a firefight. Angela had sent out a number of spies and saboteurs, but not all of them were accounted for yet. Her plan to flush Donner west had worked, according to the reports that were dripping in, but she didn't have the first injury lists yet to know if it had saved lives or cost them. "Put the Sergeant somewhere safe."

David didn't resist. He knew better, but he was also curious. Was she worth all the lives Donner was sacrificing?

Angela turned to discover Adrian had managed to remove his gag and his bonds. He was sitting on the dusty ground, lighting a crumbled cigarette.

Angela frowned, ignoring the prisoner in the cell to Adrian's right. "They forgot to search you."

"You'd deny me a smoke?" Adrian frowned. "Small potatoes compared to denying the Major his prizes."

Angela shrugged, lighting her own cigarette. "It's how negotiations work, right?"

"Sure." Adrian snorted. "It was textbook, if you want to get your people killed."

"Do you believe him? About Donner not attacking us."

Adrian didn't want to help her—it was in his tone and on his face—but he couldn't deny her, not even

now. “No. We’re big fish. Lot of gifts to the fisherman who reels us in.”

“And going rogue? That’s happening with the bases. Has been all along, I’d think.”

“Common story. You read my notes.”

“Yes, more than once. It told me how to get under their skin, but why haven’t they gone against any bad descendants? There has to be more than *you* out there.”

Adrian glared. “Most of them were already employed by the government. No need to fight with your own team.”

Angela waited for more, but Adrian leaned against the bars and shut his eyes. The misery was a veil that swallowed them both for a minute.

Angela was unable to help being flashed to their first meeting. Their contact had been earth shattering, consuming, and she hadn’t forgotten what she’d seen. For an instant, her shell cracked; she stared at Adrian openly.

Adrian felt it. He needed all of his control not to respond. “Go away or kill me.”

Angela blinked at the hostile tone and then turned away. She called Kyle over with an expression that didn’t show her inner struggles. “Give the signal and get out of here.”

Kyle raised a hand and spun it.

A group of Eagles rushed to light the fuses on the line of fireworks that had been waiting under tarps for days. As the rockets burst overhead, vivid

colors and sharp sounds echoed for miles; the final war was beginning.

3

Donner waited for the chopper to land, noting the lack of a prisoner and the absence of one man. Seeing that it had been David, who he considered valuable, Donner slammed the door to the small cabin and went to the desk.

“She read him.” That was the only way she’d been able to do it. Donner didn’t need Trey to tell him that he’d lost control and had no idea how it had happened. Unlike the rest of his team, Trey had the ability to block his thoughts, which meant he had no control when that gift was taken away.

“She’s stronger than they estimated. And corrupt or she would have honored our deal and sent Mitchel.”

Donner ignored Trey when he reluctantly pushed the door open and came inside. Donner had never heard of descendants who were corrupt, but still saved their followers or fought for them—not without payment, and that clearly wasn’t the case here. How had those weak survivors convinced Adrian and Angela to care for them? Once descendants became corrupt, they never went back. It was documented. The scientists had tried to reverse the process and failed every time.

It meant the plan Donner had planned to use—threatening other descendants like those she was

hiding—wouldn't work. He could kill them all and she still wouldn't cave. "What does she care about?"

Trey was trying desperately to think of anything he could do that would put him in the clear with the boss. He gestured toward the camp he'd just left. "No kids or elderly at the site, and no animals or living setups. She's got them all stashed somewhere."

"In the mountain. We have satellite images, heat signatures."

"Let's bomb them, Donner. Please don't play with her. She's...you!"

Donner chuckled at the assessment. No woman was his equal, no matter how strong her powers were.

Trey spotted movement outside the window and drifted that way while Donner laughed at him. He hated this run... What was that? "Uh, Major?"

"What is it now, Trey? You know, you haven't been the same since Canada."

Trey was too surprised to register the sore topic. "I've never seen so many."

Donner came to the window in time to watch the thickest part of the flock of birds going over the small cabin he'd chosen as his newest headquarters. He was quickly running through alternate sites.

The birds were large and noisy, screaming at each other as they stripped the area of everything alive. A rabbit fell to the horde; the two men

watched in shock as the birds covered the bunny and then the chopper.

The pilot, who'd been eating and not paying attention, was also quickly covered. He collapsed under the vicious pecking and scratching, blood running down his arms as he tried to pull them off.

“Help him?”

Donner nodded, mind going to the coming battle. “Yes.”

Trey shoved the window up and took aim with the AWS rifle that he'd had a long time. He fired once; the pilot stopped screaming.

Angry, the birds flew away in disappointed rage, taking the rest of the flock with them.

Trey looked at Donner in a daze. “She sent them.”

Donner snorted, going to his desk. “None of us can do that. There hasn't been a descendant who can control nature or even communicate with it in a hundred years. Stop being paranoid. And get out. Now.”

Trey didn't bother to slam the door. He was afraid of drawing the big crows back to them. He detoured around the pilot's body with a grimace. “I hate birds!”

Donner heard his newest guards arrive a few minutes later, and let himself fall deeper into planning something that would not only draw blood, but splash it over these cliffs like a canvas. So far, he'd been working with the army soldiers, but he

needed more of his team. Four of them should be enough. The rest could continue the mission he'd given them. Once they captured Safe Haven's members, Angela and Adrian would have no choice but to surrender.

If they didn't and all those people died, their own kind would never forgive them, which would be worse than being dead for a descendant. They'd give themselves up. Donner would toss one of them to the government and be free to flee south with his reward and whatever little part of their army that survived. Donner didn't think many of the soldiers would come through the fight. Angela had shown she was smart. The fights had already been vicious, bloody battles.

Donner glanced down at the file he'd brought along. The last of nearly thirty, he hoped this file held the details he needed to conquer Angela. The cute kid in the photo looked like her. Donner started sorting through the pages with the thought of what he could do to Angela once his team captured her stashing place and brought him Charlie. She would do anything to save her child, as would any good parent.

Donner mentally made a list of everything he would need to pull it off. The reward he was offering would keep his men searching for the boy, but that wasn't enough. What he needed was something Charlie cared about. If he found that, he could get Charlie to come to him. Donner hoped there was a girlfriend, but even a pal would work.

Teenagers were notorious for going off halfcocked to save their friends. Angela's boy would be no different. Donner assumed Charlie didn't have much in the way of power or the government would have added him to the *bring in alive* list. That meant Angela's son was expendable.

4

Eighty teams of soldiers had been listening for Donner's chopper. When it came, riders were sent on the few dirt bikes they had to pass the word. It was time.

Four of these teams were buried alive in sudden landslides triggered by nearby Eagles with explosives. The explosions rumbled through the cliffs and hills like a storm. All forty men were killed, leaving a large hole in the center of Donner's offensive battlefield.

On the southern side, the bases being lost and nature overwhelming their camps also weakened the line and gave the Eagles a chance to dig in as the siege began. In the east, however, the enemy was the thickest. More than four hundred soldiers were working on their orders to push in a hundred miles a week. They ran into Safe Haven people almost immediately.

Tonya and Kendle stayed still and quiet as the large group of soldiers came toward their hiding place.

Grace wasn't prepared for battle. She was panicking. The former slave had only joined them an hour ago, looking like she'd fallen down a lot.

"We have to run! We gotta go!"

The other two women knew she was right, but as soon as they fled, the soldiers would start shooting. They had no hopes of escaping so many. Angela had led them into a trap by waiting until after the negotiations to start attacking.

Fireworks burst overhead, signaling Safe Haven's offensive beginning.

Tonya rolled her eyes. "Little late."

"I saw something!" one of the soldiers shouted excitedly.

Tonya and Grace exchanged panicked glances.

Kendle pointed toward the rope bridge they had been instructed to stay near. "Stay down and get to the bridge. Ready? Go!"

All three females took off running through the high brush, trying to stay under cover even though they knew it was a lost cause.

More fireworks exploded overhead, giving them a few second's cover. Then the soldiers saw their prey.

"There they are!"

Gunfire echoed to the females as they ran. Slugs caught up, slamming into the trees, ground, and stone around them.

Grace grunted, falling.

Tonya kept going, lungs starting to burn.

Kendle swung around to help and spotted the gore on the tree. No one could help Grace now. She turned to run and felt a bullet go into her arm and fly out the other side.

Kendle screamed, holding her arm as she ran.

Kendle's scream got Tonya to turn. She hesitated before returning to grab Kendle's good arm and drag her faster.

When they reached the bridge, Tonya surprised Kendle by going under it.

"What are you—?"

"Hold your breath!"

Kendle sucked in air as she was dragged under the water, and felt her mind go to where it had been when Marc had forced her to endure this.

Tonya registered the slack arm under her hand and shoved them deeper to avoid the bullets now flying their way. She felt the bridge support smack her hip and clawed for purchase, pulling them both above the waterline enough to breathe.

The trees and weeds prevented the soldiers from viewing them. Tonya put them behind the supports when the soldiers opened fire angrily.

Kendle jerked awake, filling with alarm when she realized where they were.

Tonya gave her a rough shake. "Get out of here once we're gone. Find Kenny and tell him what happened."

Kendle protested, but Tonya dove under the water and went toward the opening.

“I’m coming out!” she shouted during a lag in the yelling and gunfire that had faded to grunts of angry men.

Tonya shivered as she stepped from the water, short dress clinging to her in ways that she knew could be trouble as the soldiers stopped muttering. The silence spoke too much.

She held up her hands and felt their eyes follow the movement. “Got somewhere I can get these wet things off?”

Kendle listened to Tonya help herself be captured, almost leading the now horny men. The castaway shuddered at the thought of what the red head might have to endure.

“I’ll get her out.” Kendle forced herself to swim through the nasty water to get free. She would follow them and wait for the right moment to do damage. Maybe she could find one of the teams Angela had out roaming.

Kendle remembered her envelope was due to be opened. She pried the wet baggie from her pocket with nearly numb fingers. Maybe she was supposed to meet up with someone who could help...

Kendle snarled in anger when she read it, tossing the paper into the water where it was quickly destroyed. She’d been ordered to save Tonya if her infiltration failed. “It was intentional. That bitch!”

Chapter Sixteen
Not Everyone Can



1

“**G**et the women inside!” Neil shoved Bridget in front of him. The two teams had almost been surrounded near the creek and barely managed to get ahead of their pursuers. They had a minute or so and then the soldiers would be on them again.

Bridget and Tracy were placed in the rear of the cave; the females didn’t argue. Being hunted by soldiers with years of training was terrifying.

Neil and Jeremy stayed at the entrance, both doing a headcount as their team and Seth’s men rushed in. All noise stopped as they waited for the soldiers with fingers near triggers and hearts pounding. There was no way the Army men would

ignore this cave. They would expect their prey to be inside.

“We kill them all.” Jeff was standing in front of the women. “It’s them or us.”

“How?” Neil gestured. “They’ll burn us out if we open fire.”

There was more silence, then the sound of running men came to them, along with shouts of excitement.

“We know you’re in there!”

“Come out now with your hands up!”

They were trapped.

“Use me.” Pushing the fear aside, Tracy stepped forward. “That’s my job, right? Distraction and decoy.”

Neil wanted to say no, but a plan popped into his mind before he could. Once there, it was too good, too simple, not to use.

“You saw them?”

Rusty nodded at Jeremy’s question. He was an excellent scout. “Yep. They met up with that other group. Makes twenty.”

Neil’s face darkened. “Dead even numbers, if we count the girls.”

“Count them for what?” Jeff asked, but everyone was forced to go quiet as the soldiers gathered outside the cave entrance.

“Clear that hole!” a soldier called.

Neil’s lips drew into a thin line as he waved Tracy forward and whispered in her ear. He slid

behind her and made sure Jeremy was in place before giving her the gesture to go ahead.

Tracy unbuttoned her top two buttons and slowly went to the entrance. "Who's out there?"

"It's a woman!"

"Watch out. You know the stories."

"Come out with your hands up!"

Tracy leaned against the cave wall, shading her eyes with her hands. "Ya'll are way out of government territory."

"Get down here!"

"Got time to stay?" Tracy invited. "Girl's gotta make a livin', even in these times."

The soldiers were willing, except for their Captain. That man scowled heavily. "Get out of the way. We're searching that hole."

Tracy stepped to the side. "Make yourself a drink, if you like. I've got whiskey."

The soldier's guns began to lower at the convincing act, along with their levels of alertness.

"You have real whiskey?" That had gotten even the Captain's attention. "Not rotgut?"

"I've been collecting it." Tonya laughed invitingly. "You boys got anything to trade?"

The Captain waved two men forward as Tracy faded back into the throng of Eagles waiting with their knives out.

Even in the dimness, the two men would have noticed the threat immediately, but Tracy bent over to pick up her rifle, making sure the view was good.

They were still staring at her almost bare ass when Neil and Jeremy slit their throats.

Bridget forced herself to giggle so that she didn't scream.

"Bronx? Klevier?" the captain called from outside.

Tracy returned to the entrance, smiling. "They want to stay with me. Just an hour?"

The Captain's face reddened. He stomped toward her. "Get out here!"

He stormed by Tracy, pushing her from his path.

Neil took him out with a vicious swipe that sent blood over his hands and feet.

Feeling like she was about to vomit, Tracy went to the entrance one last time. "He changed his mind! Come on in!"

The remaining seven men knew something was wrong, but not what. The first two were allowed to get all the way inside and view the group of waiting men before the ambush was triggered. It gave those in the rear time to be in place for the attack, but allowed those front men to react. A close-quarters fight exploded.

Bridget ran out of the cave as guns fired and men screamed in agony. At this moment, she had no idea what she was doing here.

The sounds didn't last long.

Bridget was relieved to see all of her people emerge from the cave; when Neil asked her if she was okay, she burst into tears.

Tracy had done her share of shooting and now had a minor trim along one ear. She stayed with the celebrating men. Bridget couldn't fight. She couldn't handle fighting. The noises of fighting freaked her out. She should have been sent with Safe Haven's weaker members, but she'd begged Angela daily to be given a full assignment like the rest of the female fighters. She would have been better off in the den than out here in the wild. Tracy didn't say so. She didn't need to. Everyone knew, including Bridget. She would never be on Angela's team now.

2

“Hey, Doug! Got a minute?”

Doug was glad to be of real use to anyone. He waited outside the gate for Kip to catch up. Doug was finishing his rounds and enjoying the time away from Peggy. Whenever she laid eyes on him, she gave him something to do, as if she was keeping him busy.

“Hey, did you rearrange Angela's pecking order for the camps?”

“Marc made an adjustment.”

“You saw them?” Kip's voice was still rough and sore. “The dozen men in the camp next to Safe Haven's den aren't familiar, but Angela's plan insisted on that. I think we should check it out.”

“I'll get a few Eagles and meet you there.” Doug was sure it was just an oversight on someone's part.

Kip headed for Dexter, their messenger for the day. “Go tell the boss we’ve got something hinky here. Not sure what, but it feels wrong.”

“You got it.” Dexter smiled. “Hey, take something for that cold, all right? You sound harsh.”

Kip forced a nod and kept going.

Dexter hurried off on the small bike that had been refueled as soon as he’d arrived this morning from Angela’s camp.

Kip went over his training as he walked toward the strangers. He was a smart kid with a bright future waiting as he stepped into the strange camp.

“Hi. Who—?”

A bullet entered Kip’s forehead. He fell over, dead before he hit the ground.

The infiltrator who killed him, Sherman, cried out in admiration of his own skill as the rest of his rugged companions ran by, firing at the Eagles.

Doug stared at the advancing strangers in shock. He’d been put here as make-work. Angela hadn’t been able to count on him in a fight. *But we’re under attack!*

Peggy appeared at his hip. “Get inside!” She jerked on Doug’s arm when he didn’t respond. “Get our people inside!”

Doug realized she was calmer than he was and it snapped him back into awareness. He spun toward the shocked Eagles with him as he drew his gun. “Get them inside! Take care of our people!”

Peggy spent another minute watching the fight between the strangers and the Shadow Warriors, judging the time. She saw the other Indian camps rushing to surround the men, then she ran inside the cave, pushing through the panicking people. “Get to the back!” She shoved her way through. “In here!”

Peggy jerked the curtain down and forced them into the narrow opening, glad the detained people had been relocated a few hours ago. She didn’t want to have to explain that right now. “How many?”

The two tall Indians were struggling to keep up with the count as they waited for the thickest part of the crowd to get by them before answering.

“One hundred fifty-seven.”

Another group of camp people stumbled through and they updated the numbers. “Seventy-two... five...eight-one.” The men kept a running count.

Peggy took in a deep breath when they reached two hundred. The rest were not in this camp. She climbed atop the crates that had been placed by the doorway for this purpose, listening to the fighting outside the cave as the camps around them arrived. “I have a message from Angela.”

Tommy, whose sole purpose was the defense of this camp, nodded to Ray.

Ray leaned down and uncovered the edge of the det-cord as the crowd slowly quieted.

“Angela left an envelope.” Peggy held it up. She had it memorized. “Angela said there’s going to be a big boom. After it’s over, the men chasing us will

be dead and we can get out through the bottom tunnel.”

Peggy saw Ray lighting a fuse and hurried to deliver the rest of the note over the worried mutters. “Go into the tunnel. When you reach the bottom of the stairs, stay by the waterfall.”

“Here they come!” someone shouted from the other side of the entrance.

The camp began moving.

Peggy allowed Doug to take her arm and shelter her against the wall with his big body. He hadn’t known what the plan was until he’d seen the det-cord and then he’d understood too much.

Peggy waited for the blast with her eyes shut and a smile on her face. *So this is what my man feels like. Nice!*

The C-4 detonated exactly like Kenn and Marc had told Angela it would. The open side of the cliff disintegrated into a volcanic rupture that blasted Donner’s team into bits and scattered them with the ashes. It also collapsed the mountain face and started a minor landslide that wiped out another of Donner’s small teams, and an Indian camp trying to join the fight instead of holding their positions as they’d been instructed.

3

Angela heard Dexter’s frantic call—he’d been chosen because he was in the group of people who could both send and receive the mental

communications—and then the field phone provided the sounds of explosions and screams.

Angela left the crowded command tent and went outside, groping through the tears. She leaned against the first frame she found and let the agony flow. She'd killed again.

Adrian slowly reached out and placed his hand over her clenched fist. "I'm sorry."

Angela moaned in misery. "I wish I hadn't been the one. I wish you'd given this role to someone else!"

Adrian sent a wave of strengthening comfort, but didn't say anything. People dying on your watch was an inner horror that liked to surface at the worst possible times for a leader.

"Damn you for it." Angela became aware of his touch and jerked her hand away. She straightened up to glare at him. "And damn me too, right?"

"Yes. You can't ever go back now."

"Then I'll win. Anything else means they've died in vain."

Adrian stared, always impressed with her quick recoveries, but he wasn't sure she would make it to the end. He needed to do something.

Angela caught the thought and left the area immediately. The guilt was crushing. She wanted his comfort, but if she took it, her plan would fail. She would make it until the end and beyond.

Adrian sighed, leaning against the wall of his wooden cell. He was aware of guards glowering at him, making threatening gestures, but he also felt

their concern and their confusion. They couldn't understand why he'd betrayed them or even how. Those were the men and women he would keep close when the final days came, if Angela let him stay. If she lost and surrendered to Donner, then Adrian would be darted and shipped off to the bunker before he could even try to negotiate.

Adrian's mind went to what would happen if Angela won, but he stopped himself from exploring it. That was her call now, not his, but common sense said he didn't have an after. Marc would never allow that.

4

“Is everyone okay?”

“If you're hurt, shout!”

“Shout so we can find you!”

The calls echoed through the pitch-black cave as Doug hurried to get his flashlight on, hoping they'd fared better than all the moans and groans implied.

Peggy, still smashed between him and the wall, didn't move.

Doug stepped back carefully, trying not to trip over anyone.

Peggy slid to the hard floor.

Doug's fear was tangible as he began to scream for their medic.

In the chaos, Ray and Dale managed to get glow sticks passed out and start guiding people further into the cave. “Keep following the tunnel!”

There was little trouble getting the camp members to move, but those who were wounded or knocked out had to be helped. They’d been lucky the attack had come right before dinner, when most of the camp had been inside the front cave, but they’d also been protected by a plan that had foreseen the attack coming and given them an escape.

“I want an update!” Doug bellowed as the medic examined Peggy.

“Three serious shrapnel wounds, no dead in here.” Ray coughed from the dust still shifting down.

“Get them all to the safe spot and open your next orders.” Doug helped their medic lift Peggy to her feet. The smelling salts had brought her around.

“Just knocked out by the pressure change. She’s fine.” The medic went to help the doctor with other patients.

Peggy leaned heavily on Doug, disoriented, as he led her through the darkness.

“Someone go tell the boss what happened.” Tommy wasn’t sure where his team was at now.

No one answered.

Tommy stopped, looking toward the collapsed wall, where there was no noise or movement. As soon as there was time, he and a few of the men would climb around and search for any survivors.

Outside the cave-in, a large pile of rocks and debris blocked the entrance. Bodies lay scattered under this wreckage. Tommy's team had been killed, but not all of the invaders had.

Sherman held his bleeding arm and limped into the trees to get out of sight of surrounding camps that were rushing to the area. He could hear them shouting.

Sherman dug his hand under torn cloth and grunted as he ripped a piece of his own gun from his thigh. Blood gushed down his leg; he fell, swallowing his moans.

The hurting mercenary used his shirt to bind his leg as tightly as he could and then pushed onto his feet to begin the walk of shame down the mountain. He could go to Donner to report his failure and the deaths of his team, or he could keep walking north until he hit Canada. Ugly things had happened to the rest of them there, but Sherman had been happy with the all-female council. They'd put him up in a nice place, fed him, fucked him, resupplied him...and then Donner had come through in the night and slaughtered everyone. The Butcher had blamed it on a neighboring house that was in contention for control. He'd eliminated both groups of would-be leaders, which had enabled the US government to send men to help the surviving council by killing them. Sherman was suddenly filled with fresh hatred. He turned west as the blood poured from his leg. He wasn't finished here yet.

Tonya waited until she had her dry change of clothes before making the switch. She kept herself covered as much as she could. They'd put her in the rear of the jeep with two men who had tugged on her wet clothes, but failed to check her pockets. She was grateful for the orders that had insisted she fill them with basic gear. Tonya slid into the pants first and jerked them up, then let go of her wet clothes to arrange the shirt.

Impatient, the two men clawed at her shirt, ripping it free.

Tonya ignored their hands as she drew on the warm sweater and pried it down between their groping fingers. She didn't act coy or pretend she was willing, but she also didn't cry assault. She wasn't sure which way she would have to play this yet.

Two jeeps behind hers stayed close; the yelling, cheering of those men would have drawn attention if not for the explosions they kept hearing. Somewhere near them, battles were taking place. Tonya was suddenly glad she wasn't a part of that. Though she might be raped tonight when this group stopped, they weren't crazy or evil. They were just horny, lonely men who hadn't been with a woman since the war. If she played it right, she might even be able to set up a *protection equals good sex* type of deal with one or two of them.

Before joining Safe Haven, that's exactly what she would have done with any group that had come through Vegas. That was what she'd tried to establish with Kenn at first. Now, she had a child to protect and a future to save. *I've changed a lot.*

"Can one of you boys do me a favor?" She had just spotted her landmark. There were only so many roads through here and so many places to make a camp or ambush one.

"What's that, baby?" the man on the right asked, rubbing her breast.

"Tell Donner that first explosion was his personal team—the one he sent in because he had no faith that you guys can do the job. The second was your EOD. Good luck getting past all the mines."

The hands slid from her chest in jerky movements.

Tonya smiled coldly. "The next one could either be the tank you brought or the camp you're taking me to. I don't remember which one Angela said she was hitting today."

The men on either side leaned away in fear.

"If you're smart, you'll tell your driver to take me to Safe Haven's gates. You'll surrender, pick up arms on our side, and find a woman to settle down with. Eventually you'll have a kid, join our army, and vote for your future." Tonya was surprised she'd gotten it all out without stumbling over the words. It wasn't her normal conversational topics.

The Captain in the front passenger seat pointed. "Take us to Donner."

The driver turned at the next fork.

Tonya didn't argue. She used their fear to protect herself, as she'd been instructed. She began laughing like a crazy person. "Bet you boys bleed real pretty." She cackled again.

The driver sped up as the two men in the back with her scooted over as far as they could.

The captain glared at her, pretending he wasn't scared. "Shut up!"

Tonya wiped her face of all emotion and sat perfectly still, freaking them out further. Too tense to snicker even mentally, Tonya concentrated. *On my way, boss bitch.*

She yawned, suddenly exhausted. The immediate response made her twitch.

Thank you. Be careful.

Heart warmed, Tonya shook her head. "Don't know how someone so cold can make you want to be so close to her. Absolute bullshit."

The soldiers had little idea what she was talking about and didn't respond. All of them were either wishing they were already safe in a camp or that they'd shot this crazy woman as soon as she climbed from the water.

6

Angela couldn't sleep.

She was wandering the deserted camp in slow circles, checking on people and waiting for updates

that were still likely hours away. She had a third of her army in enemy hands or enemy areas, and it was unnerving. There was no way she could sleep.

Her guards followed in silent concern, exhausted.

Angela found herself behind the mini-mess, where they had Sergeant Wallz in a tent with a guard. She listened to their conversation with guilt and bitterness.

“We’re just trying to survive.”

“And I’m just following orders.”

“They could be wrong.”

“So could yours.”

“She isn’t.”

“Because she’s a descendant?”

“Because our lives matter to her. She’d never throw us away.”

Angela couldn’t take much of that. She moved toward another area of guilt, punishing herself. She ducked into the canvas where they were keeping the other POWs, directing her guards to stay outside.

Shawn ignored the order and stayed on her heels; Greg waited by the flap.

Silence fell among the nine men inside.

“I’m here to set most of you free. One of you is suspected of serious crimes and you’ll eventually stand trial. One of you,” She glared at the man by her boots. “will be leaving on the next chopper.” She looked around the room without caring for their disgruntlement. “Those numbers can change, depending on your choices.”

Adrian's lips thinned as he read more into her words than what she was saying. There was an entire field of walls up in her mind. It didn't take a genius to figure out she was hiding something big.

Angela motioned the gags and ropes to be removed. "There are no camp members here, only enemy troops around us. The first one of you who screams is the traitor I'm searching for. I'll get you before they can get me."

Tension filled the tent as those here for simple rule violations realized they were keeping company with an assassin.

"I still need fighters who obey orders. You've been punished and you're pissed. When I cut you free, you'll either say something nasty to me and then see Shawn for an assignment, or get out of my camp without a single word. You broke the rules, not me." Angela waited as men stood up, moved for the tent flap. She braced for silence.

"I'm taking a piss first."

"I'll be back to get my job in a few minutes, Boss."

"Man, you got some nerve, you bitch."

Angela withstood the nastier comments easily, feeling she deserved every one of them for holding her own people captive. "Half an hour gentlemen, and then get busy with your assignments. We have a war to win."

As men began leaving the tent, rubbing wrists and glowering at their former friends, Angela

frowned. “We have a traitor in this group. Watch out for *him*.”

Satisfied, Angela stared at the remaining captive as she and the witch went to work.

Adrian knew she was tracking each of the men who’d left. It hurt him too when she discovered what she’d been hoping not to.

She gestured.

Greg quickly came to her side.

Angela put her mark on the paper in his hand, one she’d insisted on. “Get both of them, before they can get down the cliff to the first enemy camp they find. Go now. Tony is already outside our gates. His girlfriend killed a sentry to help him escape without being tailed. Due east.”

Greg vanished.

The sound of gunfire echoed shortly after. It was her first official execution. She had insisted on it not being a secret, like Adrian had handled these moments. She’d given the order and she would face her people over it, if the time came.

Exhausted, she swayed on her feet, hand going out to grip Adrian’s cage bars.

Angela was glad they were alone in the tent except for Shawn as Adrian sent his light over her and she accepted it greedily. The stress was nothing compared to the guilt, but even that faded as his warmth surrounded her in a consoling embrace. Angela filled herself from Adrian’s force, the only man she’d drawn from since becoming Marc’s woman in every way.

Adrian controlled his thoughts as she responded to his caring. It didn't matter that it might be only for the baby. The moment was perfect in any form.

Adrian's magic sank down into her and warmed the guts that had felt cold and foreign. The muscles relaxed, the nausea settled. Angela sighed gratefully. "Thank you."

"Come closer. Let me help us both."

Angela didn't move.

Adrian withdrew his force. "I have to touch you for the healing to work in full. You know that."

Angela didn't want Adrian to help her, but she needed this baby as much as she now needed leadership or to win this war. She went by, leaving the tent.

His groan of denial was music to her. What she'd allowed would hold her for a while, but there would come a time when she would beg him for help and he already knew it.

Angela saw the camp lookouts signaling an incoming vehicle. She went to meet the van, not sure who all might be in it at this point. They were about to start the part of the battle where things would be scattered and confusing. She was dreading it.

Kyle stiffly stepped from the van, alone.

Angela waved Shawn over to get his report while she went to open the rear door.

The sight of Conner lying there had been expected, but not crying in fear and remorse as he cowered behind the thickly wrapped crate. Angela

caught enough of his thoughts to understand why he'd been delivered. "Damn."

She signaled for him to be placed with his father. She'd known he was hiding something, just not what. His mind was hard for her to get into when he was being defensive and that was all he'd been lately. Discovering that he was obsessed with a camp member wasn't what she'd thought to handle with Conner.

Angela wasn't sure what to do. She stayed outside the tent, listening to the father-son talk that began as soon as the pair was alone.

"They found out."

"Yeah, I figured."

"Do you want to know what happened?"

"No."

"Well, I do. Why did she give you up?"

"To save her people, this country."

"But she loves you!"

"Yes."

"Then how can she—"

"You're too young to understand the ways a woman will sacrifice herself for her goals."

"What... What will happen to me?"

"She's standing outside. Ask her."

Angela scowled, but she lifted the canvas flap and entered, not about to shirk her duty as leader in this moment either. It came with the blame, as well as the fame. "I don't know yet. When I do, you'll be told."

"And until then, I'm a prisoner?"

“Yes. You’ve been arrested for a moral violation.”

“And my dad?” Conner shoved over to lean against Adrian’s cage. “Is he under arrest for a moral violation too?”

“No.”

“Then let him go.”

“He’s right, Conner. You are too young to understand the sacrifices, but it’s not just the ones that women make. Men give their lives daily for us now. Your father will be one of those heroes.” Angela turned and left the tent before she could lose control of her mouth or her emotions. She had a plan and she was sticking to it.

“Will she really hand you over?”

Adrian nodded resignedly. “There was a time when she would have killed anyone who even suggested it. Here, now, it was her idea.”

Conner stared up at his dad in concern. “What did you do?”

Adrian’s misery filled the drafty tent. “I didn’t find her first.”

7

Angela paused as an early update snared her witch.

We’re okay. Traveling your way. Dad’s coming.

Angela was glad of the warning. Charlie was helping her control Marc’s anger, but apparently, her time had run out on that front.

He'll be there shortly. Becky and I are ahead of him by an hour. She refused to quit when Seth told her to. He stayed with dad. Dog and the ants are with him too.

Angela felt his concern. *Is she okay?*

Uh, yeah.

Charlie's pause said Angela needed to make sure things were going according to plan. She changed her instructions on the fly, like she'd known would happen in places. *Tell your dad that I can't reach Doug. And stay with him. You're not safe here.*

Angela hated it that she couldn't have her family close, but government assassins were sneaking closer even as she was sending these mental messages. The duties she was giving Marc would keep them alive. It was being by her side that was likely to get them both killed. This was a one-day camp she and her two personal guards had entered a short time ago. There were still Eagles at the first site and she would return there, but Marc had insisted she leave each evening for a secure location to sleep. She'd agreed, knowing it wouldn't matter if fate decided to hand her another challenge. It had made Marc feel better and that had been her goal.

Tomorrow or the day after, most of her people would be reunited, with the bulk of the damage done during the next 24-hours. The soldiers currently sneaking up her mountain in the darkness were about to have the roughest day of their lives.

Chapter Seventeen
Make Me Believe It



1

Marc's group was somber as they approached Safe Haven's den in the eerie dusk. The carrion birds circling the gritty sky said they were walking into another scene of death. The ten fighters braced for it to be their loved ones.

Marc had more hope than the others. "They were supposed to leave if this cave was attacked."

Kenn scanned the buried bodies and dried blood. "Were they supposed to blow it up?"

"Yes. And those aren't our people."

"But they're wearing our Eagle..." Kenn trailed off as he realized there were no level patches on the jackets. "Copies!"

“Yes.” Marc led them around the carnage and down the other side of the cliff. “Copied before Adrian chose to show rank. Angie was right.”

“About what?” Kenn stayed on Marc’s right as they moved by the path that led to the buried entrance.

“She said their information will be weeks or even months behind. It will give us the advantage in every trap they try to set, because the details won’t be exactly right.”

Jeff, who had begun to scour the area the instant they topped the cliff, came to Marc’s left in a much better mood. “We lost one back there, down the hill, and all of the other camps are gone—headed the way you are.”

“Who was it?”

“Kip. Shot.”

“Damn.”

Jeff agreed, but silently, out of respect for the dead. Kip had been up for rookie team leader and though he was obnoxious, it had kept Stanley from getting that place. The clumsy medic was unbearable as a boss, worse than Kenn, but he worked tirelessly.

“I’ll take care of that after.” Marc moved faster now that the fresh rush of adrenalin had woken them all up. He was aware of Charlie frowning as he came up between his dad and Kenn.

“Have you guys heard anything from Tracy?”

“No, but we wouldn’t if she was with the rest of the camp.”

“That happened hours ago. She should have gotten here right before us.” Charlie gestured. “So where is she?”

“Already tracking the camp, like we are.” Marc refused to get upset. “If she’s not with them, we’ll go out looking.”

“Can we call mom? Now?”

Marc started to try and was stopped by Jeff handing him an envelope. The brown wrapper was in bad shape, but unopened.

Charlie watched in worry as Marc opened it.

Marc’s face tightened, eyes flashing betrayal.

It told Charlie to prepare himself.

Marc handed him the sheet of paper.

Stay with your dad or you’ll get Tracy killed.

Charlie tried to pry into Marc’s mind, to see if he knew more details, but Marc’s demon shoved him out with the flick of a wrist.

Best grow up first, son.

Enraged, Charlie began screaming at his mom.

Marc wasn’t able to treat his son the way he had the others who’d reacted this way. He nodded curtly to Stanley.

Stanley had orders to tranquilize whomever Marc told him to; he came forward with a syringe.

Charlie felt him and whirled around, swinging.

Stanley fell onto his back as Jeff and Quinn quickly subdued the irate teenager.

Marc grabbed Charlie’s head and forced him to lock eyes. “Look at this, at the future coming for us!”

Charlie couldn't refuse the command of the alpha or the strength of Marc entering his mind with armageddon scenes.

"They're going to bomb us, boy. Between the destruction and the aftermath, we'll lose the entire state. Trust your mom. Trust me."

The boy was in agony at the thought of Tracy being used like the other females had for this terrible plan, but he shook off the men holding him, visibly calming down. "Both of you would sacrifice Tracy to win!"

"Do you think so?" Marc continued down the hill. "Don't you think she knows if Tracy dies, she loses you? Wake up, boy! She's got that type of deal going with every Eagle under her command."

"And there will be losses," Jeff reminded them both gravely. "There already have been. It won't be her fault. She's done the best she could to keep the dreams alive."

"Slam the dreams!" Charlie took the point position to hurry things along.

Marc let him go, not sure if Angela had this covered or if she'd set it up to be sure Charlie experienced this feeling. Either way, Marc wasn't okay with how she was toying with everyone's lives. If they lost, he wouldn't be able to put this many pieces back together for her.

Jeff, following orders, waved a smart salute to Marc and vanished down a narrow path into the weeds.

This is it. Cynthia went over it one last time as the engines rumbled toward her and the sentries on the area began sounding the alarm by triggering her watch. All of the people going in this way had been given special watches with their orders. Hers had gone off once already and she'd slowly unzipped herself to be ready, like her instructions had stated. The cold had seeped into her Military Sleep System setup quickly after that.

Cynthia could see the light from her watch, but she didn't move to shut it off. The dirt protected her shallow grave. She needed the time to let her eyes adjust. Until she rose, she couldn't be sure if it was day or night, though Angela's estimate had said it would be a few hours before dawn when the soldiers broke through the camps of dozing Eagles. The cold air coming in through her air straw said the boss was right, though Cynthia was sure she'd never tasted fog before for the comparison.

The rumbling grew louder; she heard male voices. She waited in terrified excitement.

Start counting when you're sure it's them.

Cynthia blinked rapidly, in time with her new heartbeat. *One. Two Three.*

Get your body set; plan the moves.

Muscles flexed a bit, fingers dug into the dirt for a light coating to grip with. She would kick up to loosen the dirt, lunge from her hole, and pause for a two-count to get her bearings amid the men she

could feel walking overtop of her now. *Four. Five. Six.*

Prepare yourself by imagining exactly what will happen. Hear it, smell it, taste it.

Cynthia saw herself limping to the waiting weapon, jerking the tree cover rope as shouts of spotting her echoed and possible gunfire came. *Seven. Eight. Nine.*

Keep firing until your guards drag you off or the soldiers are all dead.

That was the suicide part of the run. Cynthia saw herself being careful with her aim so she would still be alive when her guards arrived. It was a relief, now that the moment was here, to know she wasn't alone.

Cynthia finished the count with no thoughts of anything except the plan she'd just gone over. *Ten.*

Give them no mercy.

Cynthia sucked in a calming breath and kicked upward with both legs to loosen the dirt.

Daryl and Kevin were running toward the battle side-by-side, aware of the screams, the explosions, but mostly of Cynthia's almost constant firing. She was shouting one long cry of do or die, and the panic was a shared torment. They stayed behind the trees, coming down to where she was firing from as the entire squad of soldiers flooded toward her.

Another explosion echoed, followed by four more in rapid succession.

The first waves of soldiers were killed with the well-aimed grenades. Bodies flew across the battlefield.

Another line of men came over the corpses as Cynthia reloaded. She paused long enough to slam her hand into the box she'd secured to the tree.

The trigger clicked.

She ducked as the branches flew out and hit the soldiers who were still under orders to take hostages. Men and guns flew through the air as Cynthia hurriedly dropped the huge shells into place.

“Come on!”

“Let's go!”

Cynthia heard her escorts arrive, but she wasn't wasting a full load. She jerked the trigger with calculated pauses between, taking out specific targets—the two front vehicles, a rear truck shaped like a tank, a cluster of soldiers trying to get to their radiophones.

In the distance, a much bigger explosion echoed, impossible to pinpoint a direction on.

Kevin and Daryl didn't have time to worry over it. They each grabbed an arm and started dragging Cynthia away from the scene as the remaining dozen men came flooding over the wreckage, firing.

Cynthia kicked out at a second black box on the tree, but missed. She struggled against their tight grips. “Hit that button!”

Daryl slammed a hand against it and then used brute strength to lift Cynthia onto his shoulder.

Cynthia twisted to take the blow with her hip, ducking as another line of branches swung out.

Kevin was hit by the tip of the longest branch, and knocked onto his back as it flew by to smack into the running soldiers.

Kevin scrambled up and began firing at the wounded survivors who were trying to do the same.

Still over Daryl's shoulder, Cynthia also started firing.

Daryl turned so she could get a better aim, raising his own weapon, and the trio stayed face-to-face with their enemy as they killed them. The shock of a dead woman rising from the ground to fire a multi-shot grenade launcher had given Cynthia the advantage.

Trapped in the middle of the convoy, three younger soldiers held up their hands in surrender, begging not to be killed.

Daryl felt Cynthia tense for the next shots and spun her so that the slugs plunged into the ground instead, his ears ringing. The soldiers who were capable of fleeing, did so.

“Hey!”

Daryl swung her down as Kevin came to his side.

Cynthia stopped protesting as she realized what she'd been about to do. She frowned a bit, considering. “I was told no mercy.”

Before either man could stop her, she whirled around and opened fire.

She got all three of the men who had unwisely chosen to run down the middle of the debris-covered street. They made perfect targets among the flames and smoke.

Daryl and Kevin both shouted, but they didn't interfere when she began walking the bloody battlefield, executing the survivors she found. After a minute, both men reluctantly joined her. Their orders had been to keep Cynthia alive and be her support. They had also been told to follow her lead.

Cynthia stopped in the center of the carnage to read the next envelope. She found one sheet of paper.

Stay with Marc until Kenn goes rogue, then get to me at the first campsite.

Cynthia looked up to find Daryl and Kevin on full alert as shadows came in from the north.

Marc stepped over the pile of bodies, impressed and horrified.

Kenn handled the moment, relishing the feel of being in battle. "Donner's biggest camp is two miles from here, which means machine guns, heavy gates, lots of guards. We're staying low and waiting on one more."

Cynthia immediately started searching through the bodies for anything she could use.

Kevin took a place by her side, angry now that she was safe. "Why did you have to do it that way? You could have been hurt! What are you trying—"

“I was supposed to die here, Kevin,” Cynthia interrupted tonelessly. “Please don’t nag me on my Death Day.”

She left him standing there in shocked amusement and revulsion. He’d never been more confused.

Daryl also wanted a word with Cynthia.

She braced for it as he stepped in front of her.

Daryl smiled. “Please don’t kill me for this, okay?” He leaned in, moving slowly, and placed a kiss on her cheek. “Nice job.”

The reporter felt it then, the difference in her attractions, the gaps between all the men she’d ever been attracted to, and then it vanished, leaving Daryl standing knowingly in front of her.

Too enrapt to care about who was watching, Cynthia moved into Daryl’s arms and let him hold her. She’d killed again and loved every second of it. Human contact would help bring her back from the cloud she’d put herself under when she’d been facing her own mortality.

A bit surprised, Daryl wrapped his arms around her. His ears stopped ringing; his stomach began settling. He was aware of Kevin’s outrage and Marc’s approval, but the feel of Cynthia in his arms was too good to miss any part of. He shut them out.

“Thank you.” She snuggled against his big chest.

“My honor.” He refused to let go yet. When she didn’t pull away, Daryl felt his heart shift into a more serious rhythm, one of contentment and

determination. “Can I feed you while they’re working on things?”

“Yeah, my boy may eat you if I don’t feed him soon.”

Daryl chuckled and slid a hand to her hip. His big fingers reached half way around her waist.

Cynthia groaned at the feel of the heat on her skin after being in the ground for days.

“Easy, son. I’ve got her covered.”

Cynthia laughed and then went quiet as her stomach and headache eased.

“Wow.”

Daryl felt her relax and grinned wider. “He likes me. Cool.”

She stared up at him in surprise. “How do you know?”

Daryl steered her toward the tree line, where his kit had been left. “He would have hurt me if he didn’t. That’s why I went slow. Descendant babies are temperamental. I’ve been one of the guards over Jennifer’s baby since she was born. Cute kid. Talks too much.”

“But she can’t...”

Cynthia immediately began pelting Daryl with questions as he led her out of the bloodbath.

Marc and Kevin had stopped to watch the new couple, one thinking Angela was smart and the other thinking she was unbelievably cruel.

“Man, I never even got to be inside that!”

“Maybe the fact that sex is your first grief, is why she never spread her legs for you in the first

place. Good women can sense it when they're about to make a mistake."

"But I didn't get a chance to think it over! It hasn't even been a week."

"She spent days hiding under the ground, waiting to die. She obviously spent the time productively."

"How can you be so unfeeling?" Kevin was hurting and angry.

"I'm not the one who gave up a dream because he couldn't swallow enough pride to raise a fatherless child. That was your choice." Marc joined Kenn for the salvage, leaving Kevin alone to smother his regret.

3

What am I supposed to do now? What did my orders say?

Kendle and Tonya's thoughts were identical, though they were miles apart. Kendle was alone, trudging toward her last known location in hopes of meeting up with any of their people. Her orders said to rescue Tonya, but the only way she could do that was with help, so she was trying to find Kenn. It was what Tonya had wanted, though Kendle was counting on Marc being with the Marine.

Kendle trotted faster, hoping Tonya would be okay. Despite the friction, she liked the redhead.

Tonya, now wedged between uneasy soldiers as their jeep flew toward the last base camp, was being as obnoxious as she'd been ordered to. "So, like, how many of you guys are left? My boss said she'd kill a hundred a day once the real shit hit the fan. Guess that means in a week, you guys could be the last soldiers here." Tonya smiled. "That's something to look forward to, right?"

"Shut up!" The driver was tired of her, but none of the others supported him. Want to or not, they were listening. Being sent out here had been bad, but since Donner had landed, life had become a nightmare.

"You've been promised passes, or women and promotions, or maybe Donner said you'll be with him when he's running things. But I wonder if he can be trusted... Did you know his personal team is dead? They tried to take our den and my boss killed them all. Guess Donner won't have the backup he's counting on." Tonya didn't know if any of these things were fact or not. Her orders had supplied the details to use while manipulating their fears, but it hadn't been hard to imagine it happening. Except for the one she was about to use. It was impossible. "The Ghost will come for me, you know? We're close."

The jeep slowed as the driver turned to look at her, to judge if she was lying. The other men did the same.

"You mean the wolf?"

“I mean Marcus Brady, the Ghost, who you’ve been told is dead.” Tonya enjoyed their stunned expressions, leering. “He’s very...fond of me.”

“Man, this run keeps getting worse.” The driver hit the gas.

“Yeah.” The Captain next to him brightened. “But hey, we can switch with the next team going out and then get clear of this zone.”

“Not sure the next zone is far enough.” The driver glared at Tonya in the mirror.

The Captain scowled. “We won’t get out of there at all if Red here shoots off her mouth.”

“Me?” Tonya smiled cheerfully. “I think you should dart me when we hit your camp. Then that can’t happen.”

The men liked the idea, but they didn’t trust her.

“Why would you help us?”

Tonya’s tone held a genuine note of reckoning. “Because when my man comes, you’ll be bones in the stones. It doesn’t have to be that way.” Tonya had been ordered to get captured during the battle that Kendle was supposed to start. And the island woman had, taking on a team of five soldiers in hand-to-hand combat with her knife. She’d killed three of them while Tonya and Grace had dispatched the other two with rifle shots. That noise had brought the main squad of soldiers, exactly as Angela had predicted. “Do you guys have anything to eat? The baby’s hungry again.”

The men almost whimpered this time.

“She’s carrying the Ghost’s kid!”

“Oh, shit!”

Crackers and water were tossed her way.

Tonya munched contentedly. She was almost enjoying herself now.

The driver suspected the problems they were delivering into Donner’s last standing camp, but the lure of escaping with his life was enough to convince him to agree. “Okay. We’ll dart you, drop you in the cell and go.” Corporal James hesitated, and then forced himself to continue. Once he made a deal, he stuck to it. “Do you need anything?”

The others were staring at the driver as if he was crazy, but Tonya was thankful. She hadn’t quite believed Angela’s note that it would go this way. “Yes, actually, there is. What’s your name? I’ll need it to make sure my boss spares you.”

Tonya got their names and ranks, secured a weapon she didn’t think she would need, and ended up with four new friends—all from the terror instilled by the mere mention of the Ghost. Angela would be proud.

4

Not long after Tonya made her deal, Kendle stumbled across the small team of Eagles who had been told to wait there, but not why. Kendle was grateful to Angela even while hating her. “Hey!”

The men turned her way as Kendle ran to Marc’s side, spewing her anger before she was even

close to him. “That bitch set us up! Who the hell does she think she is?!”

Cynthia, tired and ready for it to end, stuck her foot out and tripped the island woman.

Kendle went down in surprise, smacking into the ground hard enough to stun her. As she struggled to breathe normally, Cynthia leaned down into Kendle’s face. “Shut. Up.”

Kendle thought about fighting, but the reporter’s rage was as great as her own. It was easy to recognize a bloodlust that hadn’t gotten its fill. “Okay. But tell Kenny they have Tonya. She gave herself up to save me.”

Marc knelt down to hear the details that were now being spoken instead of screamed. “What did she say? Exact words.”

Kendle replayed it in her mind, trying not to miss anything while breathing in Marc’s comforting presence. It was hard telling where they would send her after this.

“What are your orders?”

Kendle frowned. “To rescue Tonya. But I can’t do that alone.”

Marc turned to wave Kenn down from guard duty, bracing for a bad reaction from the Marine. Kenn hadn’t wanted Tonya to be involved at all and he would be angry, with every right as far as Marc was concerned.

“She wanted me to tell him,” Kendle stated as Cynthia kept glaring at her, anxious to be out of the reporter’s line of sight. If that challenge didn’t ease,

Kendle would be forced to do something about it and she'd promised Angela to complete her mission before losing control.

Kenn stomped down the hill, dread in his heart and rage in his mind. He knew from the looks on their faces that something was wrong. The only reason Marc would ever be staring at him with sympathy was if Tonya were involved. "Where is she?"

Kendle went to Kenn and told him what had happened, including Angela's orders and Tonya's words. Kenn didn't speak until she was finished.

Kendle wondered if the rage sickness had already made it to the US before she landed, like Carol and Marsha had insisted. These Safe Haven people were always pissed off.

Kenn looked at Marc, then west, toward the camp they'd reconned and skirted around on the way here. He glanced down at the gun in his hand, not sure how it had gotten there.

"Kenn, we'll get our weapons, make a plan—"

Kenn slid his gun into the holster and went west without answering Kendle.

He didn't speak or act angry, but Marc felt the blind rage and sighed. "Whoever has my next orders better give them to me now."

Kenn, only a bit away, took a paper from his pocket and held it up.

Marc shook his head at Angela's cruelty. He ran to catch up and snatched the waving paper from Kenn's grip.

You and Kenn. The others have jobs to do. “That bitch!”

“I know, right?” Kendle had stayed with him.

“I have to go now,” Cynthia called from behind them. “Who has orders for my escorts?”

Marc stopped and tossed an envelope to Cynthia, and then hurried to catch up with Kenn again, forgetting about Kendle.

Hurt, the island woman turned into the trees and disappeared, not waiting for any more orders. She would do what she wanted to from here on out.

Daryl and Kevin read their orders while Cynthia stared after Kendle.

“I’m being sent with Kendle.” Kevin realized Angela had known what would happen between him and Cynthia. She was splitting them up.

“I’m Cynthia’s escort to Angela,” Daryl stated evenly, trying not to make Kevin feel worse.

Kevin left them with a feeling of almost relief. Maybe it was better this way. He hadn’t been sure he was strong enough for a woman like her. After seeing her in action, he knew he wasn’t.

Kevin caught up to Kendle without saying anything.

The island woman grunted. “What?”

“I’m supposed to stay with you. Where are you going?”

“Back to camp.” Kendle dug her next envelope out moodily. “No matter what this says.”

Kevin read it aloud with a frown. *“Until you tell the truth about what happened, Safe Haven has no place for you. Our deal is off.”*

Kendle screamed in outrage at the betrayal.

Kevin kept his distance as the island woman spun around and began punching the nearest tree.

Kevin saw fresh blood roll down her arm and noticed her wounds. While she beat on the tree, he got out his medical kit and set things up. She would calm down at some point and he would try to convince her to tell him whatever it was Angela wanted him to know.

Kevin was sure she’d sent him for a specific reason, but after losing Cynthia, he wasn’t sure he wanted to do this. His thirst for adventure was waning.

5

Billy and Jax ran together as they followed Samantha to her next location before dawn. They’d already scouted it themselves after she marked it. They had no trouble keeping up with her but still staying out of sight.

What they hadn’t counted on was her also being aware of them. After Tonya and Kendle left, Samantha had spent the morning on the move, picking off small teams of soldiers when the opportunity arose. Her senses were sharp right now. She spun around, rifle lowered, but ready in case she

was wrong about who was tailing her. “Come on out.”

Jax and Billy emerged with slight smiles and faces that held no mockery, only respect.

“Very good.” Neil and Jeremy were lucky to be sharing her. Unlike a lot of their members, Billy understood the urge to go against the norm.

“Thanks.”

The trio settled down together behind the blanket of trees that was her next location. She held out her sheet.

Keep your escorts company until your target arrives.

Sam grinned, liking the feel of being an equal more than she could express to even herself.

“How long?” Jax was thinking of snoozing.

Samantha read the rest of this order. “Fifteen minutes or less.” She stowed it in her kit, and got up to explore the weapon already perched above them in the tree line. Samantha hadn’t seen who delivered this one, but she was again aware of how intelligent Angela was. She’d provided a secondary weapon in case Sam had lost hers in the first attack, which she hadn’t. “Man, I wanna be her when I grow up,” Samantha climbed the tree.

When her escorts saw what was waiting, they laughed again, understanding the feeling. Adrian had been good, but Angela was better.

Neither man noticed the false cheer or the distraction technique that had been used on them. Samantha was good at following orders, especially

those she agreed with. If these brave men knew what she was about to do, they would drug her and drag her straight to Neil and Jeremy.

6

Donner's order for the men to push in a hundred miles a week was being followed and then some. These men had heard the rumors of the Ghost being on the outer rings of this invasion, harassing Donner. They'd hurried toward their goal in the center, hoping to reach Safe Haven before Marc caught up to them. It flushed these unsuspecting men directly into the second and third rings of Angela's trap, where they wouldn't be able to call for reinforcements.

Donner had planned to use field phones too, but Angela's mines and det-cord were buried in the only places where teams of men could make camp with heavy gear. All forms of communication, other than smoke and mirrors, or mental, would be gone between teams until the soldiers could replace the lines. By then, it would be too late to matter. Donner and his men would already be too deep into her rings to withdraw.

Zack's team watched from atop the cliff as the squad of soldiers below them began packing up to start the day's trek. Zack waited until the sentries were also inside the damage path, then hit the button on the box in his hand.

The flat area below them immediately exploded. The det-cord running under the feet of the soldiers left little chance for escape.

Zack and his team waited for the dust to clear before going down to strip the area of whatever remained. Another chore on their list was done.

Chapter Eighteen
What Ghosts May Come



1

“Who is that?!”

Every soldier on the base had heard rumors of the Ghost being alive, but the sight of him striding through the blasted gates behind another glowing-eyed devil was enough to send weaker soldiers fleeing without firing a single shot.

“It’s the Ghost!”

“Get out! Get out!”

“He’s here!”

“Kill him!”

The base alarm began to blare, but it was drowned out by the rear gate exploding in two loud pops that sent bodies and debris flying.

Kenn and Marc strode through the smoke, throwing grenades and firing with intent. The nearest soldiers fled as they recognized the Ghost.

Kenn didn't care that they were fleeing, only that they were a threat. He fired from the hip like Adrian had taught him, taking savage pleasure in the headshots and splattering gore.

He heard Marc behind him, taking care of the soldiers trying to come in from the rear, but he didn't turn and help. He knew where Tonya would be, where anyone being interrogated would be on a temporary base like this one. He moved that way without pausing as shadows scattered in front of him.

“Look out!”

Kenn threw two grenades together, causing large blasts that cleared the path. He used his last one to blow open the rickety door, destroying the front of the main building.

“That's the main alarm!”

In the center of the base, Tonya felt the entire structure shudder. She looked at her captors with genuine sympathy. “You don't want to be in this room when he finds me.”

Another round of explosions came, followed by awful screams of men dying.

Her guards fled the room, not bothering to shut the door.

Tonya, hands bound in front of her, picked up the Twinkie one of the soldiers had been teasing her with and tore into it as if she was starving.

Marc guarded the halls as Kenn stepped into the room with Tonya, who was busy swallowing a last bite and grinning happily.

Kenn growled, but the relief at her being unhurt allowed him to start waking from his rage daze. Crashing, he dropped down into the chair across from her and leaned back. “Whenever you’re ready, *dear.*”

Tonya flushed at the sarcasm, but she quickly climbed into his lap and kissed his cheeks until he hugged her tightly in annoyance. “Thank you for coming for me.”

“You are mine, right?” He glared, but his voice didn’t hold the possessive tones that he’d used on Angela. He didn’t feel that way anymore.

Tonya smiled. “Yeah. Thanks for that too.” She snuggled into his arms, stomach quieted as a sense of safety swarmed her with weariness. “You feel good.”

Kenn grunted, becoming aware of her physical state when he lifted her into his arms and stood. “Is this what you’re gonna be like? Cause I can’t take this shit, woman.”

Tonya smiled against his sweaty neck and didn’t make any promises that she couldn’t keep.

Marc led the way out of the nearly deserted base, unable to keep from feeling proud of their talents as he swept the destruction that they'd rained down upon this place in mere minutes. Whatever Angela's reasons for this attack had been, she had accomplished an important feat here; for the first time, Marc had honest hopes that they might win.

2

Donner's convoy turned to the only alternate route left as fresh explosions echoed across the mountains. There was no way to be sure it was their recon teams dying, but Donner knew. He directed his driver to go to his next chosen den, a small, one floor office complex that had once sold cabin rentals to tourists.

His driver sped across the rocky road, trying to get them under cover.

Samantha waved four fingers in the air to indicate how many teams were in this squad and then she took aim. Angela wanted Donner pushed continuously.

Samantha hit the tree in front of the convoy instead of the first jeep. Despite wanting to disobey, she had chosen to trust her leader. She had been able to stay ahead of Donner because of the stops he'd made and the routes Angela had chosen. Donner's vehicles couldn't go where she could and it was costing him.

Samantha fired her rifle with glee, hitting mirrors and trimming shoulders as her escorts did the same from the tree above her, per their orders. Billy, on the new rifle, was in heaven.

“There!” Soldiers rushed toward her.

Samantha acted as if she hadn’t noticed the soldiers coming up on her right.

Her guards noticed them too late. Her body and several large trees were blocking their view.

Samantha waved her panicking guards into hiding and raised her hands as the soldiers spotted her and began shouting orders.

“Get down!”

“Hands up!”

She eased to her knees with her hands out in front of her.

The first thing each soldier noticed about her was the glaring red and white maternity shirt that claimed to love both boys and girls. The second thing they noticed was her glowing red eyes.

“What the hell?!”

Samantha smiled politely, swallowing her sudden case of nerves. “Can I speak with your boss, please? I’d like to register a lengthy complaint.”

“Get up!”

Samantha let them jerk her up by the arm and cuff her, not answering their demands, but obeying every order. The voice inside was saying these men were on the edge, to not provoke them even by accident.

“Donner wants anyone we catch.” The team leader jerked a thumb over his shoulder. “Take her to a jeep while we clear the area.”

“No clearing,” a higher ranked soldier belayed the command. “You heard the explosions. This entire damn mountain might be rigged. Move out.”

A minute later, Samantha was being marched down the small incline. It was hard to keep the satisfaction from her face.

Billy and Jax were on the move the instant the soldiers were out of sight, headed for the center of their zone to contact their teams for a rescue mission. They had no other envelopes.

They flew through the paths and over the stone, not stopping or talking until they were both at their limit and had to slow down. The mountain around them was alive with the noises of life and death, but few of them drew notice from the two worried men. Neither of them said what they were both thinking, but it was obvious what they had to do when their contact van finally came into sight.

The two tense guards sitting on top of the van stood up in concern.

“Together?” Jax paled as Neil jumped from the roof and flew toward them.

Billy grimaced. “Yes. Start talking before he reaches us and we may actually survive.”

“I’m not in a good mood.” Samantha frowned at Donner as he came into the small room and closed the door. “Neither are my sons.”

She’d been shoved into a jeep, but they’d only traveled a few minutes before reaching this office complex.

Donner took that in with delight. “And they have a father who will be arriving shortly?”

“Yeah. Let’s go with that.”

Donner was prepared for lies and deceit, or even attempts at sympathy considering the quick admission of pregnancy, but when she began to control the environment, forcing wind from nothing, he was unable to halt his interest. Few descendants had physical gifts. Mental abilities were common.

Sam let go of the power. The air dropped; the papers on the desk stilled. She wasn’t an alpha. She couldn’t get into Donner’s mind as long as he kept his walls up, but he would have little trouble reading hers. Not that it mattered. She didn’t know Angela’s final plan. No one did.

Donner moved into the opposite chair. “More?”

Samantha indulged him by bringing every object into the air from the desktop and throwing it against the door he’d come in through.

“Excellent.”

He studied her with oddly flickering eyes. Sam realized Angela had been right again about the government sending in their kind.

“Why are you here?” Donner was reading the woman’s thoughts. She was scared and proud, but mostly tired and wanted to go home.

“To kill you.”

Donner chuckled even when he felt the genuine hate behind her words. “Someone’s already been trying to do that.” He gestured at his bandages, glowing orbs peering through her mind, rifling secret doors.

Samantha gave a sweet smile as she pictured pulling the trigger on him. She laughed when Donner flinched. “Sorry, I missed. I am a rookie.”

Donner’s anger rushed out to drive Samantha backwards. She managed to keep from being hurt by landing on her side, but the pain of the blow drew tears to her eyes.

Samantha stayed down. She’d been told not to push him in any way, that he was volatile right now, but she hadn’t been able to resist. As she lay there, she felt him ripping open doors in her mind, but there was nothing for him to find. She had no orders now, no specific plan to follow. She was at the mercy of fate and the man at the table.

“Yes, you are.” Donner was soothed to discover she wasn’t hiding anything. “But even with your gift, you’re still not worth passing up two alphas. You’ll be traded.”

“Good. I’ve wanted to be back in my tent with a mug of hot chocolate for days now.”

Donner read no lie there and frowned. Why would they send in a pregnant woman with orders to kill him, but no plan?

“Good question.” Samantha shrugged. “Ask her when you see her, will you?”

Donner felt the wind rise in the room as Samantha stood up. A cold chill settled onto his shoulders. Had he underestimated their abilities?

“No, easy...” Sam controlled, rubbing her stomach.

Donner didn't miss it, but the goal he had was still larger than unborn twins who could affect nature. “I'm an alpha, Ms. Moore. If they try—”

“They're just hungry.” Samantha leaned against the wall. “They couldn't give a shit less about you.”

Donner snorted and headed for the door. He was gone a minute later, only stopping long enough to order the door guard to bring her something to eat.

Samantha let out the breath she'd been holding the entire time he'd been in the room, but she didn't let her thoughts go to anything more than the immediate care of her children. Donner had been in her head and he was indeed an alpha. She'd had no way to resist his presence in her mind. It had been awful. He would likely monitor her thoughts until something else distracted him.

Samantha stayed back as the door opened and the guard came in with a small pouch. Another soldier stood behind him, gapping at their prisoner.

Samantha smiled at them. “Is it okay if I ask a couple questions?”

“Like what?” The food delivery man set the pouch on the desk.

“If I need to, ah, use the facilities?”

The man rolled his eyes, waving toward a door to the right. “There’s also a couch in there.”

Sam was surprised. Her happiness at not being held in awful conditions flooded the room.

The two men stared at her, dumbfounded. Her happiness was addictive.

Sam went to the rear rooms instead of making a run for it. She wasn’t supposed to escape or bewitch these men onto her side. That was the easiest part of this mission. Samantha had no idea what came next, but after everything she had done over the last few days, it was a relief. She had wounded Donner more than once, flushed him north, and now she was here, in his camp. Angela would bring her home alive if possible, but no matter what happened during Angela’s finale, Sam had accomplished her mission objectives.

She thought about her men, who knew by now that she’d been taken, and controlled her anxiety by forcing her mind to slow for sleeping, like she’d learned in Eagle training. It had been a long run. *I can’t break down now. It’s almost over.*

4

“How did you beat me here?” Kyle had ducked inside the temporary tent to find Jennifer sitting on a bedroll, pulling off her muddy boots. He’d only

been here long enough to give Angela an update on Zack's team, who Kyle had transported multiple times today. They'd been busy beavers.

"I didn't, really." Jennifer gave up on the boots to lie down. "Some of us rode on the back of your van. You never noticed us."

"You did not!"

Jennifer snickered. "Yes, we did." Her smile faded. "Why was Conner brought in?"

"He broke a moral rule." Kyle was shocked that he'd missed her hanging from the rear of the van. He excused it as being tired.

Jennifer was too tired to scan his thoughts or drag it out of him. "Okay."

Kyle knew she wanted answers, but he didn't have them to give. He was glad when she sat up and began fighting with her boots again.

"You look tired." She finally got the first one untied.

"So do you." He was calming down now that they were together. Why did she have that effect on him?

"I have no idea, but it works both ways." Jennifer blushed. "I missed you, too."

"Can I hold you?" Kyle blurted suddenly.

Jennifer knew he meant something different from what they'd already been doing. "What do you mean?"

Kyle swallowed, embarrassed. "Before we sleep I, uh... I'd like to cuddle, with you in my lap. Just for a few minutes."

Jennifer couldn't deny him. He'd never asked for physical contact before and she didn't mind the idea of trying this with him. In fact, they'd already sort-of done this, only lying down. "Um, yeah. Okay."

Kyle removed his boots and jacket, exposing big arms under a black t-shirt.

Jennifer looked away, suddenly scared of herself. Killing Louis and the others had helped her get by a mental block. She wasn't afraid of Kyle hurting her, though she was sure he would without meaning to. Her pain would come when he asked for her to participate, to respond.

Kyle had no idea where Jennifer's thoughts were as he sat on the bedroll beside her and leaned against a tall cooler.

When she jumped, nearly lunging from the cloth, he sighed. "It's okay, Jen. We'll just go to sleep."

"No."

Her sharp tone made Kyle look over, expecting to find the witch, something he wouldn't tolerate when it came to their physical bonding.

Jennifer's beautiful eyes glared at him in fierce determination. "You didn't ask for anything wrong, Reece. Shut up and take it."

Kyle laughed, always surprised when she pulled herself out of a bad moment. Then she slid into his arms and he couldn't breathe.

Forcing herself to face the things she was afraid of, Jennifer straddled his lap and wrapped her long

legs around his hips. She rested her head on his frozen shoulder, aware of how hard her heart was pounding. She wanted to get over her fears of sex and men, but mostly, she wanted to be able to trust herself and repay Kyle. If Kyle's touch lit her up and made her want sex the way Cesar had after he forced his drugs on her, then she would learn to accept that she was a slave to her body's needs, but never to the man she chose to fulfill them.

Kyle held her without moving, as usual. Jennifer quickly tired of the lack of response. It was another sign that she was healing, that she could be bored instead of scared as she nuzzled his neck. "We're alone and I'm not shaking with fear yet. What would you like to do?"

She hadn't thought Kyle could stiffen further, but he did to the point that sitting on his lap became uncomfortable. Jennifer blushed again as she realized why that was.

Kyle chuckled. "Sorry."

Jennifer stayed still. "It, ah...doesn't take much, does it?"

It was one of the few sexual references she'd made. Kyle grinned. "It's all you."

"And it'll, um, stay that way, right?"

Kyle understood what she wanted to know. He chose to turn the tense moment into a lighter one. "I certainly hope so. There's no Viagra anymore unless I ask Angie and that isn't happening."

Jennifer giggled.

Kyle gently gave her the information she was searching for. "I'll always want you. But that doesn't mean I can't control it."

"You didn't before."

Kyle knew he would be hearing that for the rest of their lives and chose to give her more there too. "I'd do it again to keep from raping you, Jenny."

She sighed, still not sure why men felt so strongly about her. "Sometimes I wish you'd go ahead so I can stop worrying over it."

"I won't as long as you feel that way."

"I could push you." She sighed. "I know how."

Kyle grunted. "Is it what you want?"

She shrugged, embarrassed. "I want you to be happy and I want to be normal again."

"And you think consummating our relationship will help you?"

"It has with Becky."

Kyle wasn't so sure, but he didn't argue on that line. "I'm sorry, Jen, but I won't do it. If you twist me up that way intentionally, you'll find me in a whore's tent."

The girl knew she could push it too far for him to walk away from her, but she wasn't ready to do that here and now.

"Can I talk to you about it? Just questions?"

Jennifer shrugged again, very aware of his hard body under her.

Kyle gently lifted her off his lap and felt her immediate relief. He felt some too, though not from

the need for release. He would take care of that when she finally crashed for a few hours.

“What do you want to know?” She lay on her side so that her loose hair would cover her face and make this easier. She’d been avoiding it, but every adult female in Safe Haven that she’d spoken with had recommended talking to him about her fears of intimacy.

“What scares you about it, to start with?”

“Everything.”

“The pain? Humiliation?”

“The lack of control.” Jennifer decided she might as well be honest. “Hilda said if I tied you up, I wouldn’t be scared.”

This time, Kyle turned red. “If you...what?”

Jennifer didn’t look at him, smiling a little at his dazed voice. “She said to take my cuffs, secure you to a real bed in some shitty little town, and stay there exploring your big body until I know it better than my own.”

Kyle was scarlet from the roots of his hair to the tips of his fingers.

Jennifer dissolved in giggles, forcing the rest out between laughs and breaths. “She said you’d walk funny, but I’d be the man of the house after that.”

Kyle gave in and snorted out his amusement, filling their tent with good vibes.

When Kyle began forming his next question, Jennifer grew serious. Hilda had given her a lot of advice while helping her recover from the birth.

“Are there things you liked, that at some point, you might want someone else to do, without the ugliness?” His heart was pounding. He wasn’t supposed to have this conversation with her for another year.

Jennifer slowly shook her head.

Kyle knew she was lying. “It doesn’t mean I’m going to grab you and do it right this minute. But we have to talk about these things. You know that.”

She did, but it wasn’t easy. She chose to show him instead. Unfortunately, she had no other reference than her time with Cesar.

Kyle’s good mood sank through the ground as he watched Cesar shoot her up and then make love to her as if she was a willing woman.

Jennifer ended the memory in shame. *I knew I wasn’t supposed to like any of it!*

“Jenny?”

Kyle’s tone was ugly; she jerked her head up to see if she should brace for blows.

Kyle grunted miserably. “Not at you, honey. At him. You did nothing wrong there.”

“Are you... Are you sure?”

“Yes. He used pleasure to control you. It’s supposed to be used to bond with each other, to express our love.”

His voice lowered into a type of fear that she recognized as him not wanting to say the wrong thing.

“I’ll... I can do those things for you, without the pain or the drugs.”

Jennifer wanted to fight the horrors in her mind with good moments until all the darkness was refilled with light; she stepped bravely into adulthood. “Show me.”

“Uh...” Kyle blinked. “Now?”

Jenny was almost shaking. “Just a little, to see if I can take it.”

Not sure if I can. “I need time to plan it out, but I will when this war is over.”

Jennifer knew her age was still an issue for him. “Promise that you will.”

“My word on it.”

As they settled down to sleep, it was on both their minds enough to keep them from dozing off right away. Their relationship had changed, due to Jennifer pushing herself and Kyle’s patience, but neither of them was sure if they were ready for it.

Kyle was only agreeing because she and the witch were asking for the same thing of him, at the same time. And he wanted to! Kyle had never fought so hard to resist anything in his life. It was a constant struggle for him to remain civilized, but he was able to do it because the prize at the end was worth every second of this torture. *She’s almost willing, almost mine!* Kyle drifted off with her lips on his mind and a hard-on inside his pants.

5

“Send them in at dawn. Throw everything we have.”

Captain Mayberry stared. He had just informed Donner of landmines being discovered near all their forward camps. The teams were waiting along that dangerous barrier for instructions, watching the sun sink with dread.

Mayberry was Donner's official right hand man now, but he understood that position was like playing musical chairs. The fact that they had served together meant little. Coming into the middle of a run like this was always dangerous, but after Canada, the Captain had needed a break. He'd liked those scrappy women. "Did you say send them through anyway, sir?" Mayberry was surprised by the order. Donner didn't usually waste good men.

Donner glowered. "Yes."

Mayberry read the tone, and shrugged. "If that's what you want, that's what you'll get."

Mayberry left the room to spread the word that they were pushing on. As he went, the Captain made a mental note to find Sherman and the rest of their team. The soldiers who survived these orders would no longer be under the control of anyone.

I'm counting on that, Donner sipped his cold coffee. Thanks to Angela filling the area with traps and ambushes, the men would loot or destroy everything they found. The bloodlust would catch on to the remaining half of this battalion and they would take it out on everyone they came into contact with. It would peak tomorrow evening. During the chaos, Donner and his men would drop in on Safe Haven.

Are you there? Donner called, not pushing the radio button. He was testing a theory on her abilities.

Of course, Angela answered cheerfully. *I'm always in your head now.*

Donner reached for the radio to avoid answering her mentally.

Angela laughed in his mind. *Coward.*

"I want Mitchel and my Sergeant ready to go. I'm coming in for them."

Angela's scorn was thick. "This is *my* mountain, *Major*. If I see anything in the air, I'll shoot it down myself and I don't need a missile. I'm locked right onto you."

Donner clicked the mike to stop her words from going through, but Angela simply waited, reading his thoughts across a hundred miles. When he let off the button, she smiled into the radio. "Is that office warm enough?"

Donner became aware of his men chattering outside and hefted himself from the chair, grabbing his kit along the way. He knew trouble when he smelled it. "Get the woman!"

He left the radio, fleeing the sudden fire that had come roaring down the hill for him.

Behind the cabin, Crista stayed still, trying to squeeze off one more shot before her target was out of range. The fire was nothing. The rifle was everything.

The jeep flew through the darkness as Crista waited, exhaling. She pulled the trigger gently.

She saw a soldier slump over, but not the one she wanted... Donner had put someone directly behind him to avoid this. "You bastard!"

Anger brought her rifle back up; she took out everything moving that she had time to hit, showing no mercy to the men Donner had left behind. Crista didn't drop from her spot until the wind swirled the flames her way and even then, she moved with her rifle in hand, longing for another shot.

6

Angela waited a minute and then continued her assault, seeing Donner flip on the radio in the hummer he'd taken. She and the witch were staying close enough to count his nose hairs if they desired. "Did you know you're down to less than five hundred men, *Major*? Is that close to the number you promised them would survive? Because the next mile and a half of landmines should even that difference. Especially since I've eliminated all your EOD teams."

Donner punched the dashboard. "Liar!" He grabbed the mike, brought back into the argument against his will. He couldn't let his men only hear her or they might desert him. "There's no way you had enough mines or time to cover that much ground. I'm calling your bluff!"

Angela's laugh cackled over the waves, sounding like something from a horror show. "I'll prove it, *Butcher*. You have a team of recon men inside my wire, one of your last, by the way. Call surrender or you've killed them."

"I'm coming for you!"

"That's your choice. Listen to what you've caused."

The open radio echoed an explosion and then the sounds of men screaming before Angela took back over. "You also have a tank team waiting inside my wire. Surrender or you've killed them."

Donner quickly realized she was proving she didn't bluff, but he didn't care about any of the things or people she was destroying. "My chopper will be there in one day."

"Major, you're not listening to me and I don't care for that. I have a gun to your Sergeant's head right now. Should I pull the trigger?"

Donner hesitated. Sergeant Wallz had been with him a long time. The man had saved all of them more than once. He felt a kinship to the former blacksmith.

"Well?"

"Yes. And then I'll shoot every hostage I have, including the blonde bitch carrying twin sons."

Now there was silence from Angela.

Donner was satisfied he'd won this one. "That's what I thought. One day. Have them ready."

Angela didn't answer, giving Donner the uneasy win. She pulled out of his head completely

as he directed his convoy to the edge of the outer battlefield, where his chopper was being kept at his final den.

Sitting behind him, Samantha didn't move or speak. All hell was about to break loose.

"Sir, we have a new report about the Ghost. He's been—"

"There is no Ghost!"

Donner's wild shout made Samantha twitch. The dead body slumped next to her wasn't helping with her discomfort.

"He was killed! It's a damn wolf."

"Uh, sir, we have five visual confirmations from the large base camp. And, uh...we don't have a base camp anymore. It's been destroyed."

The private was busy reading the Morse code message as he translated it. He didn't see Donner's gun go to the side of his head.

The report in the jeep was awful, making ears ring and stomach's lurch, but Donner didn't tell them to stop, not even to dump the bodies. "Get me to that cabin!"

"Yes, sir." Mayberry was familiar with this side of Donner. The Major didn't like being argued with.

Samantha avoided making eye contact with her captors. She tried to bring up a wall by thinking of her most hated, annoying song (Don't Worry, Be Happy), and hoped it would be enough to cover her from Donner's prying.

Are you there?

Yes, master

Can you help me?

In many ways. What would you have me do? the demon asked eagerly.

Protect my children.

The demon clucked. *I already am, master, but there are limits. Don't get shot.*

Samantha flinched again, glancing at the shattered hole in the window behind her. *Yeah, that's a concern.*

Chapter Nineteen
The Wildcards



1

It was a relief to find Doug standing outside the torch-lit cave entrance. Marc went straight to the big man. “Did it go okay?”

Doug started to launch into a tirade, but he was interrupted by Charlie’s excited call.

“Tracy! I’m here!”

Doug frowned, drawn from his anger by concern. “She hasn’t been with us at all.”

Charlie heard him and spun to his dad in panic. “I have to go!”

“Try to call your mom, first. She may have this covered.”

Charlie wanted to believe Marc's words, but a minute later, he went striding into the dusky woods, shouting over his shoulder. "She said to stay here, that she would handle it!"

Marc didn't argue or drag the teenager back. He hoped Angela would keep both of them with her. Angela was supposed to join him in this den tonight.

And you believed that? Marc's demon asked suddenly. He'd been absent, searching with the witch for a way out of what was coming. He'd missed most of the fighting.

Marc froze, remembering what Cynthia had told him before they left on their first runs.

She's lying to you, about everything. Don't let her face Donner alone.

He finally connected it; his heart leapt painfully in his chest. "Oh, Angie. What have you done?"

2

"I'm done."

Kyle turned at the words, frowning. Jennifer was reading her final orders. Kyle assumed they were too hard. "What does she want you to do now? Kill Donner?"

Jennifer handed him the paper, not smiling. "That's Samantha's job."

Kyle read the orders in surprise.

You are finished. Take Kyle and go get your daughter. Then head south and stay with Sebastian's people until Kyle can find safe passage

to an island. You have both done your duty by us. Now go live for yourselves.

Jennifer was waiting for Kyle's reaction, expecting him to refuse again now that their safety net decision moment had arrived.

"Do you know where she has Safe Haven holed up now?"

"No, but I can track Autumn and find it."

Kyle nodded. "Do it."

Jennifer gazed at Kyle in reluctant agreement. "She's right. We should go."

Kyle knelt in front of her, hating that this moment had to come here, like this. "I need to know if you want me with you."

"You'd take me south and come back?"

Kyle shrugged. "I doubt I'd return here. Also too many memories for me, you know?"

Jennifer did. Kyle had also lost loved ones here in every member who'd died under his watch.

"Do you, Jen?"

She nodded quickly. "Yes. I need you."

It was enough for him to have hope. "Come on. Let's get our daughter and walk away." His wording was intentional; he braced for anger.

"Okay."

Stunned, he had to be sure she understood. "Are you...?"

Jennifer rose, quickly, and pressed her lips to his. He was willing to give up everything for her.

Kyle had frozen, caught completely off guard. He ended the kiss when he realized she would stay

that way until he did. He would always be the lead there.

Jennifer blushed, catching the thought.

Kyle noticed she didn't seem afraid at the idea, like she had before. "It's because of what she had you do, right?"

"Yes," Jennifer admitted, with gratitude. "By making me Donner's captive, she freed me."

And me, Kyle thought. There was no way he could ever repay the debt.

"Me either." Jennifer was still scared, but now she knew how to handle it and she had Angela to thank for that.

An explosion above them came barreling down the mountain.

Kyle gently took Jennifer's arm and led her away from tomorrow's battlefield. "Time to go."

3

"It's too quiet."

Daryl understood why Cynthia would feel that way. After the constant noises today, the night sounded empty, haunted. "At least the screams have stopped."

As if to prove him wrong, a shriek rang out from somewhere above them.

Daryl sighed. "You warm enough?" He had her stashed in the base of a burnt tree, with his thick bedroll between her and the trunk. He was perched in front of her, scanning their surroundings while

being warmed from her body heat. Once she'd been inside for a few minutes, she had started baking off heat, like most people did in the colder weather. The human body could provide enough warmth for a small room. It was amazing.

"Yes." Cynthia sipped the water, crackers long gone, and stared at Daryl's posterior. He had wide shoulders, with lean hips and glossy hair that needed a gentle wash and brush.

Bet I look like hell. Cynthia wished daylight would hurry up so they could be on the move. Busy trying to smother her true thoughts, she wasn't prepared for Daryl to want to talk about it.

"Do you love Kevin?"

Cynthia grimaced. "Is this the best time?"

"We may not get another chance if we run into a squad on the way."

She was unable to argue that point. "No, I'm not in love with Kevin."

"Were you two...? You know?"

"No, it hadn't gone that far."

He looked over his shoulder. "Why not?"

She shrugged. "Never felt right, I guess, not after Matt being killed."

"Did you blame Kevin for that?"

"I blame the boss. She made the call."

Daryl understood Cynthia was still sore over that topic, but he had to know what he was getting into. "And Adrian?"

That one was easier to answer. "I love him. He doesn't love me. The baby wasn't planned."

“You two could still raise it together.”

“No. I’d never feel secure as long as he’s obsessed with Angie. I won’t put a child through that.”

Daryl slid over until he was leaning against the tree. “So, you wouldn’t tell the baby who its father is?”

“Not for a while.” She tugged the blanket over so Daryl had it between him and the tree for warmth and padding. “Later, it would be hard to hide, but I haven’t gotten that far in the plans.”

“And what if a man wanted to... What if I wanted to be his father?”

Cynthia smiled. “I’d already gotten that impression.”

“It’s not because of the power. It’s important to me that you know that.”

“Time will prove it,” was the best Cynthia could give him.

Daryl understood her trust would have to be earned.

“So how does this work? We’re skipping a lot of levels here.”

Daryl snickered. “Straight to the bedroom, then, right?”

The reporter joined the joke. “Only if you lick me clean first.”

Daryl thought his heart might stop.

Their amusement floated out of their tiny shelter and rolled down the mountain. It was one of the few

good sounds the area had heard since Donner landed.

Cynthia's laugh ended in a yawn.

Daryl took a risk by offering his arms.

Cynthia went without hesitation. It was hard to explain, even to herself, why she seemed so close to the level six Eagle so soon, but she was too tired to question it right now.

Daryl settled back with Cynthia lying on top of his big body. He pulled the tree branch over a bit more to cover the draft flowing through their entrance. He snuggled into the bedroll with her, hands resting on her flat stomach as they drifted off together.

4

“Are you gonna tell me so we can both go home?”

Kendle glared at Kevin across the tree branches they were sheltering in. “No.”

“I'm not giving up what I've earned for you. If you haven't told me by morning, I'm leaving you out here.”

Kendle knew he wasn't bluffing, but the things she would have to admit with that truth were too painful. She settled further into her bag to keep from having to meet his eyes. She hadn't even been able to tell Marc. Kevin, she couldn't care less about. There was no way she could spill her guts to him.

Kevin sipped his hot coffee, loving the solar thermos setups Angela had assigned to everyone. Around them, the trees shook lightly with the cold wind; the occasional animal moved through the underbrush, but that was it for movement. The night was still and quiet. It was an incredible change from the din of earlier. “Is it that bad?”

Kendle grunted, but didn’t give another answer.

Kevin was finished trying to drag it out of her. “I mean it, you know. I will leave you here.” He shut his eyes, intending to snooze...and heard her climbing down from the perch she’d tied herself to.

Kendle was furious again, needing an outlet. She snuck out the way they’d come, searching for someone, anyone, who shouldn’t be here.

Kevin followed reluctantly, feeling like he was responsible for making her mad. He wanted to sleep, but he stayed on her heels, mug still in hand, as she stalked something only she had seen.

Kendle didn’t care about Kevin, only a release. Frustration welled when she couldn’t find an enemy to take it out on. She settled for stabbing at a tree repeatedly, not stopping even when the wound on her arm broke open and bled through the bandage. “Leave. Me. Alone.”

Kevin did. He went back to the trees, wrapped up, and went to sleep.

Kendle continued to roam, mind flying too hard to allow rest. Surely, there was someone around here that she didn’t like?

“This run stinks.”

Trey didn't add his agreement to the complaints going around the fire along with the bottle of Kentucky bourbon. After losing Adrian and Wallz, Trey was at the bottom of Donner's ranks. He'd found out what happened to their team and the anger had been hard to control. Those two-dozen men had been together a long time. Trey now assumed Donner had decided that was too long. He would probably pick replacements from these rage-filled descendants after he conquered them.

That battle was supposed to come tomorrow. Donner was promising that within 24-hours, Safe Haven would be theirs. Trey didn't believe it, though he had to admit Donner had his pieces in the right places. Even now, a large team was clawing their way to the top of Lookout Mountain and another was sneaking closer to Safe Haven's secondary stashing place. An Eagle who surrendered, not wanting to fight anymore, had given them that location. Donner had handed her over to his men after getting all the information he could.

Her screams were currently ringing through the higher-ranked tent area. If there was anything left, she would be passed down, but Trey wasn't interested in seconds or even firsts. He'd met the leader they were up against. The mercenary was sure that Angela wasn't letting her army get out of

control this way. Her prisoners would be safe despite her corruption. “At least until the trade.”

Trey wasn't Donner's brightest man, but he was far from the idiot he was treated like. He knew Donner was underestimating Angela. The urge to walk away was strong.

If you're here come daylight, you will die.

Trey spun around to find Dog standing by the edge of a large tree. He thought of shooting the wolf, but Dog's vicious growl froze him.

Do not stay here for the final battle. An ugly end waits for you.

The wolf was trailing Charlie, who was on his way to Angela, but Dog hadn't been able to resist haunting the mercenary. Angela had asked him to scare as many of the enemy men as he could.

Dog flashed the desire to taste Trey's blood, and then walked slowly into the mist coming down the cliffs.

Trey took deep breaths to calm his rapid heartbeat, mind spinning. *Can I do that? Just walk away?*

“Trey! Get in here!” Donner shouted from his unprotected tent. “I can't find my pipe and I want that update now!”

Dog wasn't far away yet. He shoved into Trey's mind. *You could kill him. My master will reward you greatly.*

Trey considered it, and then reality returned. If he killed Donner now, on the eve of success, these men would rip him apart before he could make it to

Safe Haven's gates. His fate was sealed. "Long before I ever came to this cursed place." He went to answer the Butcher's shout. "No going back now."

Dog increased his pace as he caught Charlie's scent again, relieved that he didn't smell blood, only anger. The long trot would cool the pup down a little before he got to Angela.

Dog swept his huge head from side to side, seeing nature was staying out of this one. Except for him and the ants, and the flock of birds he'd been able to overpower mentally, it was just man against man, as it had always been.

A small band of mostly female survivors that Tucker and Anderson would have recognized were also roaming the night. Using rocks and slingshots, the group of fanatics trudged through the thinnest part of the line of soldiers. They'd voted to join Safe Haven for the fight. On the way, they had picked off stragglers and small teams who didn't expect the showers of stones and sliding boulders. Done while the men were distracted or sleeping, it was a rude call to alertness that helped Angela's plan along. Know it or not, the fanatics were now a part of her war.

6

"It's all set, sir." Trey gave his update from a distance, standing by the door. "They'll move out before dawn. Each man will carry two full loads of

ammunition for the M32s. They'll pop a single illumination flare per team, shoot a smoke grenade for cover, and still have ten shells left to trigger traps and mines ahead of them. After clearing, they'll move in continuously until they reach the summit of Lookout Mountain. Safe Haven will be ours by sundown."

Donner was satisfied with the plan. He waved Trey out to pass the orders. Their men would also be using hellhound rounds, which were incredibly destructive. They would devastate this mountain. Donner was eager for the sounds of battle to fill the air.

The soldiers around him felt the same. They were drinking, dancing, playing music and making use of the few women here. It was common knowledge that many of them wouldn't return; their last night on earth was being spent in drunken debauchery that would continue right up until the fighting started. It would mean that not everyone's aim would be perfect, but it would allow for more ugliness than a composed team would produce.

Donner hit the mike in his hand, voice harsh. "All forward posts, move in!"

Outside, the partying went on for another long minute and then chaos ensued. Across the landscape, small teams of soldiers hurried to clean blood from their hands so they could go dip them in fresh crimson. Very few men were thinking of anything except sharing in the spoils. Most of those who did think of running ended up staying. Only a

few of the ten-man teams vanished into the night and weren't seen or heard from again. A few Eagles also took that way out of the coming battle.

Angela didn't loathe them for it the way Donner did with his men. She valued their lives more than that.

Seventy miles to the east, she heard Donner's order and heaved a painful sigh. There had been a small hope that the Butcher would stick to his deal of coming this evening for Adrian, but that was gone now. There would be another fight.

"Cynthia and Daryl came in. He insisted she get fed first." Shawn nodded to Greg, who had watch duty over the boss.

"Good." Angela was sure if things hadn't gone according to plan, the reporter would have already tried to contact her. Cynthia would stay here and defend this site tomorrow during the final battle. Angela expected it to come to her front door this time.

"The boys are pissed, but they're waiting."

When he didn't receive an answer, Shawn joined Greg on watch. Unlike the others, who were still trying to figure out the next step in Angela's plan, Shawn knew what was coming and agreed completely. If anyone could accomplish such a life-changing goal, she could. He'd never met a smarter woman or man. Even Adrian, with his guiding light, couldn't match Angela in being devious. If not for Marc, Shawn would have tried to get her attention. His respect was immeasurable.

Angela would have loved or hated his devotion on a different day, but now, she only had time for the plan. One wrong step was all it would take to bring them down; she scanned her tensely waiting camp.

Neil and Jeremy, with Jax and Billy, were in a small tent near where the chopper would land. Angela hadn't spoken to either man yet. Nothing was clear when she looked to the final battle, but they would demand answers that she didn't have. To provide a small measure of comfort, she'd had Samantha's last wishes carried out. A letter was being delivered to Neil and Jeremy. It was Samantha's will. Angela was dreading morning, when those two men wouldn't be able to wait any longer without confronting her.

Angela winced at a sharp stomach cramp; she wasn't comforted when the witch delivered a warning.

"A few more days." She ignored the second warning she received. After Hilda's words, it didn't matter. There was no way she could carry this child to term or even close. She couldn't lose the war too. The second miscarriage may or may not make her want to die, but the government taking over Safe Haven would certainly kill her.

Still in his small cell, Adrian caught the thought and finally understood what she planned to do. He started to shout for help, and then snapped his mouth shut as the possibilities buzzed through his mind. If she succeeded, Safe Haven would continue

under Marc's strong leadership and Angela would be free to unleash her fury on the enemy.

It was a hard moment for him. He had to decide to trust her or his own visions. It was seeing Cynthia and Daryl arm-in-arm, coming toward them that made up his mind. She had a grand plan, one bigger than what he and Marc had provided, and he would let her carry it out. Cynthia and Daryl was a match he'd never considered. It told Adrian he had missed things. He would trust her.

"Marc will hate you for that choice." Angela was ready to knock him out with the dart gun on her belt if he started shouting mentally. Marc couldn't come here, not yet.

"He already hates me."

"Not the way he will after this. If I die, so will you, by his hand."

Adrian had heard the threat too many times for it to have an effect. "Will you?"

Angela looked away, voice lowering. "That has not been revealed."

Adrian hated that answer as much as he ever had. He was forced to keep quiet as Cynthia and Daryl came over.

Cynthia didn't look at Adrian. She pushed a cup and snack baggie into Angela's chilly hands, then waited for orders or praise. She wasn't expecting what came.

"You two have a moral violation to judge. I need a solution or punishment before you hit the rack." Angela pointed to the second cell they hadn't

noticed. Both Eagles stared at Conner, who'd woken at the words.

"What has he done?" Cynthia wasn't sure she was the right one to judge people for bad behavior.

"If he has any hopes of remaining in Safe Haven, he'll tell you himself" Angela narrowed in on Adrian, who was now making plans based around what he'd discovered about her mental state. She jerked a hand at the empty tent next to her. "Why don't you three spend some time talking while his father gets some rest?"

Angela motioned again.

Shawn came forward, jerking the dart gun from his belt.

Adrian saw it coming and tried to shout for Marc in revenge, but it was too late. The call died before it went far.

"Sorry, Adrian, but I can't have you changing your mind at the last minute." Angela had seen it happening and was accounting for it. He hadn't expected that because he didn't fight fate, only planned around it. Angela met fate in a life or death battle daily. She wouldn't know how to win any other way.

"Why did you do that?" Conner glowered. "He wasn't going to tell on you!"

Angela didn't reply to Conner, speaking to Daryl instead. "I know you don't understand, but everyone will by this time tomorrow. Can you trust me for one more day?"

Daryl had no hesitation. She'd given him something he hadn't even realized he was missing. He tucked Cynthia against his warm side and turned her toward Conner. "So, what's this all about, boy?"

Now facing the camp's punishment master, Conner floundered in his anger and started spilling his secrets. He didn't want to go back in the labs. This tiny cell was better.

"Hey, what's that?" Greg was staring at the marred cliffs to their southeast that they hadn't been able to see yesterday for the heavy clouds.

Angela didn't need to look to know. "Our den was breached."

A new explosion rolled over the mountains, drawing every head toward the sound.

Angela felt fate slide in to start breathing down her neck. Had Peggy and Doug gotten them all inside in time? It was a struggle not to call out, but there was no way Donner would miss anything flying through the air right now. She dug her nails into her palms as she fought for control. If her army had to stick to the plan, then so did she.

7

Chris moved through the darkness not far from where Angela stood, memorizing every detail of her tired stance and the defeated expression on her beautiful face. He wanted to comfort her, and in the absence of that, he needed to ease her pain. It had

always been this way for him, even before he'd known what to do with such emotions.

Before the first war he'd survived, the vet had often found a woman he could obsess over. He would follow her for weeks or even months before making contact and then the romance ended. His pattern had climaxed in the same graveyard many times. It wasn't only pets buried in the Richardson Animal Cemetery.

When his obsession with Angela had begun, Chris had thought it would end the same way, but since his epiphany, the vet no longer viewed her as a future victim. She was his leader, his master and idol unknown. He would serve her well.

And when she finds out?

Chris slid under cover of the weeds as an Indian patrol came by. When Angela tallied up all the evil he'd removed from her camp, she might give him the job permanently. Then he wouldn't have to hide his true nature anymore. *I will become her dark sword of justice.*

8

Angela saw the two Eagles coming toward her through the dawn fog and waved her guards back, sure this wouldn't be a quiet conversation. She led them to the mini-mess tent, bringing up this part of the plan and her chosen words. Now that the moment was here, it was harder to be indifferent

than she had thought it would be. Their minds were alive with torment.

During the time it had taken to get here, Neil and Jeremy had calmed down some, but both Eagles were angry and scared, wanting answers. They weren't going to leave until they got them.

Angela sank down at the center table with a groan she was sure they wanted to echo.

They took the bench across from her, ignoring the rookie cook who hurriedly put MREs and hot coffee in front of them. They were quickly alone in the tent.

"I'm going to fill you in on most of it and you won't like it, but it's not over yet, so please follow your orders, gentlemen. If you don't, it will go every bit as badly as you've been envisioning." Angela lit a smoke and shut her eyes, exhausted. "I had to push Donner here. That was key. Samantha is the best sniper on my team. She's been flushing him toward Marc and inflicting enough injuries to keep him using his gifts for healing instead of tracking our teams. When he comes tomorrow, all of *my* team will be here—a line of women with a few skills and worlds of determination."

"Why females?" Neil had to know. "The men are better trained, more prepared to deal with the abuses and hardships. Why did it have to be women?"

"Because of what will happen tomorrow." Angela shook her head. "I can't discuss what hasn't happened yet, so don't ask me."

“Will she die?” Jeremy demanded. “Is she dying for your damn plan?”

Angela wanted to reassure them, but there was darkness now when she looked. “I hope not, but I think something’s gone wrong somewhere. I’m searching for it, but I need help.”

“How?”

“What?”

“I need everyone accounted for.” Angela held out a long paper with hundreds of names on it. “When I know who’s missing, I’ll know what’s gone wrong and be able to account for it.”

“When did you lose track?” Neil began scanning the list.

Jeremy handed him a pen. They began to mark off everyone they knew about.

“A little after dark fell. There was chaos yesterday. I knew I wouldn’t be able to monitor everyone, but this feels like a wildcard.”

Both men groaned. They hated wildcards.

“Use the field phones and start contacting each team for an oral check in. Listen for the tone of voice and missing pieces. Shawn has it ready to go, but he needs two hands ASAP.”

They knew she was keeping them busy, but they also believed her about the wildcard. Too many things had gone in their favor. It was past time for something to go wrong.

Tracy moved through the too-still darkness with a cold chill of foreboding. She was supposed to get to Safe Haven now, but these trips through the night were taking a toll on her. She wanted to be almost anywhere but trudging up a mountain path alone.

A shadow moved ahead of her.

Tracy stopped to study it, hoping for one of her own team almost desperately.

“Who’s there?”

The man’s voice wasn’t familiar, but as he stumbled closer, Tracy saw the outfit of an Eagle and rushed forward. “Are you all right?”

“Not really...” The man nearly fell as he wrapped an arm around her shoulders. “But it just got a little better.”

Tracy frowned, staring into an unfamiliar face.

Sherman brought up a dart and plunged it into her neck. “Don’t know which one you are, darlin’.” He hefted her over his wide shoulder. “But if they don’t want you, I do.”

Tracy went under like a rock, not even given time to call out to a protector.

Chapter Twenty
Before the Storm



1

Angela stepped from Shawn's jeep and moved confidently into the site that now held more than a hundred of Safe Haven's top fighters. She'd left a good portion of the leaderless teams with her vulnerable camp members, but concentrated her efforts here.

Angela yawned. This was her last day of freedom; she'd been unable to get enough sleep. She'd insisted her guards sleep in shifts while the witch dream walked to refill the energy she would miss.

"Updates first?" Greg had stayed overnight to make sure it was clear for her return. Shawn hadn't

budged the jeep an inch until Greg had sent the properly colored firework into the air.

“In a minute.” Angela scanned to be sure things were where she needed them to be. Then she looked down the mountain again, doing the same. It was SOP for a commander, but she didn’t know that. Angela’s instincts were hot. She couldn’t see the exact locations of the enemy teams and assassins who’d snuck closer during the night, but she could feel them holding their breath, waiting to see if she would stay, if they would get a shot at her. Whatever Donner had promised them was big.

No worries. Angela had given orders to her front line fighters to trigger this slaughter if the soldiers tried to withdraw. It was an intricate web of pain. The fighters had lured the soldiers into the first ring and done enough damage to cause personal anger and ensure they would be chased.

These Safe Haven fighters had then taken the cleared roads, mining them as they went. When the soldiers tripped the first rounds of mine, a two-mile stretch of these mountains would shatter into mines, various grenades, claymores, spikes, tree branches, stacks of logs, and a dozen other clever killing methods that were all connected to at least one damage zone to keep the chain alive. It would circle the mountain in a spiral that ended at the gates she was lingering inside.

The soldiers were likely using the last reserves of the bunker. They would have some of the newer items that had been saved for need, such as the

Milkor M32s. Cynthia had one of those, but Marc hadn't been able to find many of the coveted destruction-deliverers. Angela had planned around that. She'd known they would be facing superior firepower, but she'd counted on that margin being small. The enemy had handguns, rifles, grenade launchers, and night vision equipment. She assumed they would also be wearing body armor. They would also be weighed down with extra ammunition. The majority would converge where the main roads met, hoping to use pure numbers to breach her final walls. So, she'd denied them targets for that rage and laid the death on thickest right at her front door. They had no idea what she was capable of, but they were learning.

Her people should all be clear of the destruction zone by now, but there were a few teams still unaccounted for. She tried not to worry over their safety as much as the time estimate she'd allotted. If they died, that would be where she'd made the awful mistake. It was hard to judge the length of some emotions and as usual, all of Safe Haven's people were going through something personal. That's the way life worked. It stole concentration right when it was needed the most.

“Down!”

Angela and Shawn ducked and spun in perfect time, drawing and firing at three large mercenaries dropping from the tree near the gate. The men had lain in wait for hours, inching through as the fog slowly lifted.

Shawn rose as they both fired again, already sorry for shooting so close to her.

Angela didn't even notice the ringing in her ears until she verified all three would-be killers were down.

Greg was there to hold out a pair of thick foam earplugs, giving Shawn a light frown. He couldn't be too upset. He'd almost tackled her to be sure she wasn't hit. That would have been worse.

Angela didn't tell them the witch was already healing her eardrum, though the plug would help until it was finished. The demon inside had smothered her in layers of protection, but if a noise had gotten through, what else might?

I'll strengthen it, the witch stated, fading away.

Angela stifled her protest, knowing that was the best place for her demon. Angela had allowed that spirit to see parts of her plan. She didn't need the distraction of inner struggles, but she felt naked without both the witch and Marc.

Angela went through the gates this time without lingering; she didn't wince when they clanged shut. It was worth it, even if she never felt the sun again.

Already terrified of going mad in captivity, Angela scented the sky, raising her face to the vague sun above them. She'd hoped to have three months before the battles reached Safe Haven's front gates, but it had come in two.

The sky opened up, pouring down weak acid rain that drew groans and moans of annoyance.

Angela lowered her head, denied even a last fresh breath of free, warm air. “Let’s all get set.”

Her cold words triggered a flurry of activity.

Angela went to the command center they’d erected overnight. There hadn’t been a need for it until now. She ducked under the awning, seeing the sides were folded now. It was plated to form a safety box for her to work in.

Angela waved at the radios, the lights and alarms that were set to notify them when certain areas had been breached. The Indian and Mexican teams were working on that even now, closing gaps in the paths as they came her way.

Angela was grateful for the brave men Marc had gathered—even Sebastian, who she hadn’t met yet. Marc had flat out refused to have the man anywhere near her. Angela hadn’t argued.

Angela heard her top men gathering under the edges of her command tent and turned to face them without flinching at the accusing looks or their fear. “Updates first.”

Angela paid careful attention to each word they spoke as the rain continued to pour and the silence held.

In a canvas behind Angela’s tent, Adrian, Conner, and a few other prisoners of war were also waiting for the battle to begin. Most of them were dreading the end, no matter how today turned out. A couple of them hoped Angela knew what she was doing; they wished they had made better choices so

they could also be out there fighting for their freedom.

Adrian and Conner were sleeping. Darts at regular intervals had kept the two males under control while Angela left for the safe den that Marc had insisted on each night. Neither of them stirred when Angela arrived and she was glad of it. Adrian had been adding up clues fast. He was smart enough to put those pieces together if given enough time.

That was a feeling Adrian would have recognized and sympathized with immensely.

2

“I have an envelope for you.” Becky was supposed to wait until they were alone and she had. They were camped in the high fork of a double tree.

Seth didn’t want to read it. He wasn’t sure he could agree to whatever they were about to ambush him with. Angela had even sent his team with Marc to make sure he and Becky were alone for this moment. Seth was suddenly sure of it. He thought of the warning she’d given him.

“There’s only one thing that can ruin my plan, Seth. Please don’t be the one to get us killed.”

He glanced at the same words with a stomach tightening into cramps. Like the others who’d had to make these choices, it was almost hard to believe this was all happening.

“This is yours too. Kenn said wear it while you can.”

The outfit had clearly been taken from a dead soldier. There was blood splattered over the legs of the Private uniform.

“And you know about this? What I’m supposed to do?”

“Yes.” Becky braced for an outburst. “There’s a setup like this with every member of her team.”

“Why? Why would she send in untrained women who are pregnant?”

“To win, of course, and to save our men in the process. We’re tired of burying you!”

“And you think I can live if you’re gone?!”

“No.” She tried to calm them both down. “And neither does Angela. We have to trust her. You have to. A lot rides on *our* part in this.”

Seth knew he didn’t have a choice. He gave a curt nod, but his thoughts were a tornado of conflicting emotions and solutions. In the end, he couldn’t be sure which way he would go.

3

“Who isn’t accounted for yet?”

Quinn handed Marc the list and went toward the mini-mess for coffee now that his overnight shift was finished.

She’s in danger.

Marc knew it without Dog’s warning. He could feel fate shifting Angela’s way, determining her future. “She lied to me. Again.”

Yes. To keep you alive. May I go? Dog was worried.

Marc's nod wasn't finished before the wolf took off down the cliff in front of them and vanished into the predawn fog. The wolf hadn't found Charlie the first time through. Marc was sure Dog would find him along the way this time and keep the teenager safe, though he also thought Charlie could handle whatever might come flying out of the darkness to challenge him. His gifts were powerful and he wouldn't hesitate to use them right now.

Feeling damned either way he went, Marc decided to take the hour and care for the camp, then go to Angela's side for the final showdown with Donner. It was still hours away. He would still have time to reach her and not have to see the condemnation in her eyes if he told her the camp was safe and sound.

Marc scanned the small sea of tents on the narrow outcropping, then the two cave entrances. If they had...

An ugly growl split the peaceful silence.

Marc whirled around to discover Dog leaping through the air. The wolf landed on the chest of a man wearing all black.

Everyone froze as they realized they were under attack.

"Get in the cave!" Marc sent out the order mentally as well.

The camp members who heard him ran for cover.

These infiltrators had to climb for hours to reach this spot, telling Marc they had another traitor, as Angela suspected. This attack couldn't have come from Heather. She hadn't known where the second den would be. Dog leaving had spooked the soldiers as they waited for Safe Haven to go to sleep. They'd come over the edge early.

Marc saw Doug and Peggy come from the mini-mess tent and start grabbing people, shoving them toward the second cave they hadn't used yet, then he was forced to bring out the Marine as the enemy reached the edges of the cliff.

Quinn joined Marc as he rushed toward the invaders; other Eagles fell in with them. The two violent groups met each other with hoarse shouts and angry shots.

4

Seth stopped on the rise and knelt down to survey the small enemy camp below. During the walk here, he still hadn't come to terms with the horrible chore Angela had given him. Becky had helped by telling him the rest of Angela's plan that she knew.

"Angela will need you there, Seth. If you're not, she'll die. She has everything pinned on you."

As he considered all the things that could go wrong, Seth didn't think this was a mental game to get him to agree. Becky had sworn she would be protected, that Angela was the one in danger.

“You ready?”

Seth glanced over to see Becky wearing an outfit that brought his male side to alertness and a huge scowl to his face.

Before he could argue, Becky frowned. “They’re already looking for me. I’m the dancing girl. It’ll get you in.”

Seth wasn’t worried about blending in with the men getting set to attack Safe Haven. All he had to do was let the asshole out. Becky’s safety terrified him.

“I’ll be fine.” She hoped he couldn’t hear the tremor in her voice. She actually had no idea if Angela had her covered or not. Adrian hadn’t before. She was scared.

Seth felt her waver and gently put his arms around her. “We could—”

“Don’t.”

Seth met her eyes. “Why do you have to do this? Tell me or I can’t help her.”

“It will give me my life back. I have to do it. I want to.”

“For the power she offered.” Seth understood the allure.

“For my soul.” Becky sent him the image of her flirting with Rick, accepting the vial of drugs to hurt Neil. She ran through the mistakes she’d made, tears pricking her lids. “I have to atone. Then his voice in my brain will go away.”

Seth did the only thing he knew to. He held her close and cursed Adrian. Over the last month, he’d

come to understand how many of their lives Adrian had put in danger during their time with the slavers.

Becky didn't let many of her tears fall. As she grew stronger, the need for justice and retribution had been replaced with the longing for mental control. She didn't like being unstable. Her addition to Angela's plan had been to suggest using a chain reaction. She was happy with being proven right. She was also extremely worried about Seth. He had a dangerous job, more so than hers. Seth could be hit in the crossfire even if his role wasn't discovered. The line they were walking was too thin for comfort.

"Uh, they're about to leave," a voice above them said pointedly. "If you're going in, now is the time."

They looked up to see no one there.

"Who is that?"

Crista had to stick a hand from her blind and wave before they found her location.

"Oh, too good!" Becky was impressed. Blending with the tree trunk cleverly hid the hammock. The hammock was horizontally hung, with branches woven into the straps until it appeared to be a part of the tree.

Even Seth was impressed, but he mostly felt relief. Crista was one of the best snipers in camp. He was suddenly sure she wasn't alone here. Seth glanced around, searching. He was rewarded by Zack's face a few trees away. He was using the same setup as Crista.

Seth realized there were hammocks and fighters all through these trees, watching them in relief that the waiting was over.

“Feel better now?”

Seth nodded at Becky’s breathless question, realizing she’d been scared. “If you keep lying to me, we’re going to have problems, Rebecca.” Seth waited for her anger or a denial.

“I’m an Eagle, Seth. I follow orders. So do you.” She turned toward the camp. In a few seconds, all hell would break loose and Seth would casually join the fleeing soldiers during the chaos, wearing Kenn’s dog tags.

Being a cop was close to being a soldier. Other than terminology, he would have no trouble blending in. Angela had provided close lessons with Marc and Kenn on the guns and gear he was currently carrying, though Seth hadn’t known why he’d been taught those things until now.

“It’s a go!” Becky took off.

Seth controlled himself as he watched Becky vanish into the sudden chaos, covered by Zack’s constant firing and Crista’s careful shots. Those two were a lethal pair.

Seth waited like he was supposed to, even when he saw Becky get grabbed by a huge soldier. The big man dropped her almost immediately, staring down in horror. When he lifted his own gun and put it in his mouth, unnoticed by the other soldiers trying to survive the unexpected assault, Seth realized what Becky had been hiding. She could

take over a person's mind and make them do things.
Bad things.

5

“I'm leaving now.”

Kendle didn't look up from her glower at the small camp of soldiers on the rise below them. She was two minutes from dropping. She didn't need Kevin's distraction.

Kevin went to his team. “Let's go.”

His team had shown up during the night to offer protection and deliver the boss woman's newest orders.

“Your people need you. Leave Kendle.”

Kevin didn't have anything else pulling him away now. He felt a huge weight lift from his shoulders as he chose to return to his goals of being the best Eagle in camp. He would no doubt spend a lot of sleepless nights after this, wondering what had gone wrong with Cynthia, but he would get through it.

Kendle heard them leave, but didn't care. She didn't want the bonds that Angela and her haven were trying to force on her. She wanted blood.

Kendle understood on some level that Angela had sent her over the edge on purpose, but the rage in her mind was constant. She didn't have the strength to fight it anymore.

Kendle jumped down off the edge, knives out and ready. She saw the two other Eagle teams camped under the ledge, but it was too late to go back. Her mind switched off and the animal came out.

Not far away, Kevin and his team stopped, exchanging unsure glances. They didn't like leaving anyone to die, let alone a woman, and it was obvious that that's what they were about to do. The sound of men shouting was proof that Kendle had drawn more trouble than she could handle alone.

"She made her choice. Let's go. The boss needs us."

There was nothing else said, even when a woman's desperate screams echoed across the mountainside.

6

"That's one of ours." Jennifer stopped. She and Kyle were doing a fast hike through the paths, but with so many mined places, it was hard to maintain a steady pace. Being able to recognize the Safe Haven equipment was helping them identify dangerous areas, but there were camps of soldiers to sneak around and rain running down the cliffs in furrows.

"Should we—"

"No." Jennifer knew Angela would have their people covered. If she didn't, there was a reason for it and Jennifer wasn't going to interfere. Add that to

the bad feeling in the pit of her stomach and it came out in a harsh, demanding tone that Kyle associated with the witch. “We have our orders.”

“Down!”

Jennifer dropped to the ground as a branch swung out with spikes meant to impale. She stayed down, catching her breath.

Kyle waited for her to be ready. He’d known she was tough, and she was doing well, but he was still beyond furious that Angela had sent them all out here this way. Surely there had been a better plan!

Jennifer, who was so strong mentally that not even Angela could keep her out if she wanted in, didn’t tell Kyle the result would be worth it. If all of Angela’s team died, it was worth this goal, but it was also one the males would never have allowed, let alone supported. Their leader was a clever, evil, problem-solving bitch. Jennifer was suddenly proud to have served her, no matter for how short a time.

The sounds of battles behind them pushed Kyle and Jennifer back to their trekking. The mobster kept her close, sharp gaze picking out holes, triggers for traps, and other obstacles. He hoped the soldiers coming up the mountain were being as careless as they sounded.

“They might be blowing them before they reach it.” Jennifer didn’t want to get hopes up for a victory. Even if Angela got what she wanted, Safe Haven could still lose enough people to be devastated, including Angela herself.

Jennifer's stomach flipped, hard and fast. She leaned over the faint trail, retching.

Kyle watched their backs nervously, hating the sudden lull in the noise. Jennifer's sounds would carry...

A series of thundering explosions echoed from below them, signaling the onset of Angela's chain.

Kyle grabbed Jennifer by the arm. "Come on!"

They both knew there would only be a short time until the chain caught up with them. They plunged ahead, hoping not to blow themselves up.

Jennifer gagged again, stomach out of control.

Kyle lifted her over his shoulder, ignoring the mess as he hefted them up the last part of this cliff and onto a flatter area. It was covered in tents and soldiers who'd heard the explosions and already started to flee instead of waiting for it to reach them. Until Kyle burst into their campsite.

For one second, none of them moved except Jennifer, who retched over Kyle's shoulder.

Then the soldiers turned to fight, going for their guns.

Kyle ran toward the side of the cliff, knowing he'd never make it.

Jennifer raised her gun, firing wildly as she puked again. Her witch came forward to direct the aim.

Kyle moved faster, picking out the edge. They were almost... Kyle arched as the slug hit him, thrown off his feet. They both fell forward and over

the edge of the cliff, with Jennifer screaming and Kyle not reacting at all.

“Get them!”

The soldiers followed their surprise prey to the edge, but the drop was too far to see the bottom. Rain, mud, and debris were rolling down the cliff. It was impossible to see where the bodies had fallen.

“Go down and get them!” the highest ranked man ordered through the storm and explosions echoing upward.

“No way, sir!” one of the men shouted angrily. “I’m heading away from that noise!”

The other men followed the rebel; the officer was forced to do the same, putting it from his mind. There was no way the couple could have survived the fall even if none of the bullets had hit them.

Kyle lay still at the bottom of the ledge, buried in mud and almost unable to move. Pain, hot and sharp, rushed over his spine as if Angela were punishing him again.

Jennifer had landed further down, rolling with the water. She pushed herself up dizzily, blood running down the side of her face. “Kyle?”

She stood up, shivering, and found him still form lying in the thick mud. “Kyle!”

Jennifer splashed to him, and rolled him over, seeing the red water. She screamed for the witch as her hand found his injury and tried to plug the hole.

Let him die.

Jennifer wanted to shout in denial and managed not to. *Save him!*

You agreed with Angela. You know she's right. Let him die now and save him the pain of later.

Jennifer couldn't do it. Kyle had healed her in too many ways for her to abandon him like this. In all the leaving scenarios she'd foreseen, he'd still been alive.

Save him! Give him my son's life credit.

He isn't injured badly enough to use your credit, the demon confided reluctantly. She'd been hoping Jennifer would leave him here to die in the explosions that were steadily getting closer. The witch sent power through Jennifer's hand.

Kyle arched again, gaining consciousness as the bullet was forced out of his body.

Kyle's scream hurt Jennifer in ways she had no time to examine as shouts of fleeing soldiers came.

"Get up!" She helped Kyle to his feet, aware of his daze, and got them headed up the water. It would be treacherous, but still better than the areas that were mined. At least the pounding water would have cleared out the traps.

Kyle tried to stay on his feet, barely aware of what was happening as the witch continued to heal his wounds. It was a painful, distracting process that left him breathless and groaning.

"Shhh..." Jennifer led them to a small stand of trees for cover as more voices echoed close behind them. "Get down!" She shoved them both down.

Kyle lay still in the mud with Jennifer across his back as the two teams of soldiers came running through.

“Keep moving!”

“Get higher!”

Fleeing the chain of events, the soldiers were on top of Kyle and Jennifer in seconds, and then gone, leaving muddy prints and relieved hearts.

“Let’s go.” Jennifer pulled on his arm.

Kyle stopped her, recognizing the area they were in. “Over here.” He led them to a small cliff and began feeling around on the black wall.

Jennifer grinned in surprise when the blackness fell away to reveal a cave that had been hidden by a simple black sheet.

The pair went inside, replacing the cover, and waited for the explosions to stop. As soon as it was over or at least settled down, they would head out.

Jennifer, stomach rolling again, quickly got a drink from her nearly empty canister and tried to think good thoughts.

Kyle was still too dazed for clear thinking. He spent the time counting explosions and marveling over her gifts. He’d worn a double vest set up, but hadn’t counted on being shot in the small of the back. By all rights, he should be dead.

On the top of Lookout Mountain, Angela and her small group were the only ones remaining.

Everyone else was protected in the dens she'd chosen, or below her, fighting for all their lives.

The morning had come with heavy grit above a layer of nasty black clouds that splattered them with angry drops of acid rain. Weakened by time, the chemicals no longer caught fire, but it still caused discomfort against their skin. The hives and itches spread with the storm, drenching friend and foe alike.

“Anything yet?” Shawn pushed a hot cup of stale coffee into her icy hands. She hadn't slept.

“Give the weather more time to work,” she answered vaguely, ignoring the steaming cup in her hand. She was peering down the mountain, spotting heat clusters and waiting traps—potential disasters that she now had no control over. Once the mines were triggered, other layers of her hell would be activated. From there, hundreds more would die.

Angela had left herself only a single choice in the plan. She peered down the last ridge now with that moment on her shoulder. She saw too many of her fighters who would be trapped to ignore the small twinge of concern. It would lessen the damage she was about to do, but it would save the lives of her front line. Angela keyed her mike, pleased with Jeff's ingenuity. The soldiers would also hear the field radios, but her people had extra batteries and orders not to shut theirs off in case of an emergency.

“Wait.”

Angela let off the button, turning to glare at Adrian. She wasn't sending him anywhere that she couldn't get to him in mere seconds.

"Give it another hour before you call. It'll give away too many positions to do it now."

"Why do you keep trying to help me? I'm handing you over to save the camp."

Adrian shrugged, leaning against the bars. There wasn't room to lie down. "The future. You know about the future, don't you, Baby-cakes."

"Don't call me that!"

Adrian chuckled, shaking his head. "We would have been fire and brimstone together."

Angela was now able to recognize the way he was trying to manipulate her. She hit the mike while staring into his nervous eyes. "The area you are about to enter is dangerous. Safe Haven people are already clear. You will kill more than half of your remaining five hundred men. We will outnumber you. Drop your weapons on a main road and go back to your bunker. Do it now."

Angela let the evil come forward to make sure they understood she wasn't bluffing. "Or I will kill every last one of you. Please consider attacking Donner instead. A high place in *my* army goes to the man or woman who brings me any piece of Major Donner." She cackled a bit. "I prefer a whole head, but even his eyes will work."

"When we take their camp, you can rape any female you want, any age!" Donner's sharp voice echoed across the radios of his men. It gave away

their locations and saved the Safe Haven teams they were sneaking up on.

“He still thinks men can be controlled with sex.” Angela cackled over the radio. “I know it takes blood. I’ll set you to cleaning out our country, cleansing it of the evil that he represents.”

She paused to let Donner reply, not expecting him to as he realized she’d tricked him into triggering radios and locations.

Angela hung up her mike, almost able to feel the blood barreling toward her on the edges of the next black storm cloud. It was about to get ugly. Someone’s group had chosen to go forward. It would trigger the others. “Welcome to the One Day War of the new world.”

Behind her, Adrian was trying desperately to figure out why she was doing everything she could to stir the pot instead of stopping it from boiling. He knew she had to have an ulterior motive, something larger than defeating Donner, who they both knew wasn’t a match for either of them. *What prey are you hunting? And why do you need bait like Donner? And me?*

Angela felt his curiosities and stayed facing the battlefield. She was glad he wasn’t shoving into her mind yet for details. If he discovered her true plans, he would interfere and that would ruin everything she was doing. So far, only he or Seth could do that. She trusted Seth to make the right choice when it mattered. Adrian was the sacrifice.

Chapter Twenty-One
All Day Battle
September 9th



1

“Here they come.”

Theo’s team had been in the field since the alarms sounded. The noise of the explosions was something of a relief. They were ready to go home.

The small group watched the soldiers fleeing toward them with little compassion. It was life or death now.

Theo nodded to Candy, who had worked surprisingly well with them on this run.

Candy felt better with time around a solid group. She pushed the button as she’d been shown.

The land below them exploded in a hail of wooden shrapnel as the trees blew apart. Theo had

timed it to come in stages. As one group ran by and made it, the next was hit. Those who made it through the gauntlet of exploding trees came toward the ledge; Theo and his team were there to open fire. The shots rang between the explosions of the chain that had nearly reached their altitude.

Theo nodded again. “Do it.”

Candy hit the last button with a small measure of satisfaction. “For Lee!”

The bottom of the ledge rumbled as the charges went off. The entire cliff rattled, groaning, and then gave way to roll down and crush the soldiers.

Theo and his group spun around to flee...and found another group of strangers standing behind them with their hands full of stones.

Theo didn't like the look of them, but they clearly weren't soldiers, so he didn't draw his gun.

“Who are you?” Everett stared at the Eagle uniforms. “You from Safe Haven?”

“Yes.” Candy used a soothing tone despite the chaos coming for them. “We are. Are you?”

Everett didn't answer, except to motion toward the faint path that Theo had been leading his team toward.

Theo didn't wait for a second invitation. The stone throwers looked dangerous and he needed to get Candy back to camp before the final battle.

“Tell your boss we'll be hanging out here, catching the strays.”

“I will.” Theo let all of his team go first. When the strangers disappeared behind the trees and

boulders, Theo shuddered a little and got moving faster. The chain would reach this area in the next minute. He had to get them under cover now. “There!” A small cleft of boulders provided a tiny space the five people crammed into. They held onto each other as the mines in their zone started blowing. The ground shook, dirt and mud flew...and then explosions went off right next to them.

The sky went dark with debris.

2

“That’s disgusting.” One of the new female Eagles scowled at the males who were telling dirty jokes.

“What?” Shane had only been back for a few hours, but he was glad Marc had sent him to help keep an eye on the boss.

“Calling it a crotch.”

“What about gap?” Allan grinned from the circle of males.

“No!” Nancy bristled. “Not a gap, slit, hoochie-coochie, or any of those other gross names.”

“What’s your problem with slit?” Shane found the word...erotic.

“It’s so ugly!”

Shane considered it for a second and then gave a slightly embarrassed, half flirting grin. “That’s because you haven’t spent your life trying to get inside one.”

There was a slight pause and then laughter rolled across the group.

Startled, Nancy snickered. “That’s hard for me to argue with.”

Shane took his hat off and stepped forward, hand out. “Hi. I’m Shane.”

Nancy pointed. “I’m not shaking that.”

Shane glanced down to discover he had crushed the cup in his grip and was dripping coffee through his fingers. *How did I miss that?*

Nancy giggled, drawing attention. How could she be happy at a time like this?

Shane wiped his hands down his jeans, chuckling with the witnesses. He looked up to see her walking away, hips swinging in a special rhythm that made his heart thump. “Hey!”

Nancy turned around, brow raised.

“What about sweetspot?!”

The men around him hit the ground laughing, immediately grabbing the term for their jokes.

“He said sweetspot!”

Amusement covered their area.

Nancy and Shane both vanished, going different directions.

The gate spotter waved. “Incoming! More of ours!”

Men in charge of opening and closing rushed over to allow the large group of Indians through.

The returning team was Atolius and his small group of braves, minus Bridget, Angela noted. That was another dark place that had filled itself in as she

watched a pair of lovers vanish into a shower camper. Again, Angela chose to let it play out. Right or wrong, there was no going back now. If she tried, they would only fail and cease to exist.

The hellhound rounds were taking out her traps, destroying everything dangerous and not, but it also made the mountain more unstable. Rockslide noises were starting to echo across the cliffs. The extremely destructive rounds packed twice the normal punch of a grenade and laid waste to anything in their target zone, including the roads these soldiers needed to be able to reach her. Angela was glad Atolius and Natoli had met up on the way back. Any soldiers they'd come across hadn't lived to make it here.

Instead of going to meet them, Angela stepped to the rear of her waterlogged command tent and listened. Her chain reaction was ramping up now, thanks to the ants. The large insects were triggering the final rings of traps, of pipe bombs, claymores, small chemical explosions, and other indiscriminate killers. The ants only had to walk across the trip wires, but they gave their lives knowingly. It had been impossible to get the chain to meet in some places and still allow her fighters to escape through the damage.

Once Jennifer had given her the idea, Angela had recruited the ants. They wanted future protection. Jennifer's plan had been without compassion and the quickly evolving ants had brokered a truce through Dog. They'd promised to

provide soldier ants to die in her plan and in return, the ants would never be hunted in the new society that would come. Angela had made the deal without provisions, but listening to the inner rings blowing sent more horror into her veins. She was killing through other species now. She could never be forgiven.

“The boss looks rough.” Greg frowned as he and Shawn made a long round of the over-guarded perimeter. Angela had sent some of the fighters to help at Safe Haven’s undisclosed dens, but all the others were gathering here, where the final battle would take place when the soldiers made it through her death traps.

“Would you look good right now?” Shawn motioned to the tents of wounded that were full. Angela was only healing the life or death wounds. The moans and screams of the wounded who were under the care of the few team medics was awful to listen to between the explosions. It was too much like a war movie for some of these men, but they wouldn’t ever want to view another one. There was no way a camera and a set could capture the complete lack of normalcy and or the absolute daze of combat and its bloody aftermath.

Neil and Jeremy were protecting a laptop, both men hunched over the blue screen that few of them had seen since the war. Angela went that way before they came to her. She glanced over their shoulders to discover they’d accessed the internet. “Nice work.”

Neither man spoke to her, though both of them stiffened.

Angela didn't have the time or the patience to have this conversation right now. She motioned Shawn closer. "We have two enemy teams moving up in zone four. What can we do about that?"

Shawn stared in surprise at the satellite images Neil and Jeremy were receiving. "Atolius came in. I can send him back down. He won't mind."

Angela nodded. "Do it. We can't let any group sneak up here yet. We're not ready."

All three men had questions, protests, or accusations, but none of them spoke. The sounds of the slaughter going on below them was too real, too important, to distract her.

"This is cruel!"

Both guards stopped at the angry shout, on high alert even though they'd heard the same sentence repeatedly over the last hours.

"Let me out or put me somewhere else!"

Greg and Shawn snickered and kept walking. When the wounded had started coming in, Angela had told them to erect the tents around the cells of their POWs. Their injured men now surrounded Conner. It was killing him to resist healing any of them.

"I hate you!"

A bright light flashed through the camp, one that had every man there turning to protect his loved one.

Angela dropped her personal shields to absorb Conner's healing blast. She'd counted on the boy not being able to resist the pain of others; she groaned as the energy rushed through her parched body.

As the light faded, the first thing the fighters noticed was the silence. The screams and moans were gone, and so was the noise they'd grown accustomed to over the morning and afternoon. Was it over?

Angela used her radiophone. "Brace for it!"

It felt like the mountain exploded. The rumble didn't grow under their feet, but blasted through them and spun out of control, scattering debris into the storm. Cliff walls shifted, dropping. The sounds became distorted as the final part of the chain was reached. Marc's last bomb was bigger than the rest, meant to disable any force sneaking up behind them as it climaxed.

Spotters motioned for them to open the gates again. "Two more groups coming in! Mexicans!"

Angela was behind a wall of Eagles before she could move. She wanted to chuckle at their thoughts, but she couldn't summon the amusement. "After what I've done, and what I'm still set to do, Sebastian doesn't even register." She shoved her way through the guards to meet the small Mexican team.

Theo's team had also come in, but Angela didn't glance at them. Theo's chores weren't finished yet, and he would know it if she spoke with him. Hiding

was almost beyond her now. She was saving the rest of her mental resources for Donner.

Sebastian stayed by his men, respecting the glowers and threatening stances as Angela came toward him, but he couldn't resist staring at the obsession that had cost him a brother.

Angela stopped at a distance her guards would be comfortable with, searching Sebastian's mind with a frown. Like Cesar, he was dark to her, but in a much harder way to penetrate. It was almost as if she was trying to get into a door with no room attached to it.

She stopped prying and rocked back on her heels, as she'd seen Marc do so many times when he was contemplating something unknown. "Are you a threat to me?"

The sound of her voice hit Sebastian like a bell, ringing into his soul and dredging forward the evil within. It wasn't her shape or looks, or even the delicious smell of sweaty vanilla that drifted over him with the mist. She glowed with power. Her entire form was lit up to him like a fountain of youth and magic that could never be emptied. *I will have her or die trying.*

"Yes." His eyes were glazing. "That may be so."

Angela knew what Marc would have done, what her protectors wanted her to do. She glanced to his men. "You'd spare them?"

Sebastian nodded, trying to fight the daze. "I'd leave too."

Knowing what would happen because of her choice, Angela pointed at one of the empty cells. “You will join the others who cannot choose the right line to walk. Your men can go.”

Sentries muttered, but the reaction from the top Eagles was done together, without planning or even eye contact to confirm support.

Shawn and Greg rushed up behind the eight confused Mexicans as Jeff and Neil came in from the front. All of them pulled their guns, locking onto targets as they fired low to minimize crossfire hits.

The Mexicans went down screaming and reaching for weapons they hadn’t known they needed. The four Eagles stepped over them and ended the future threat; they all shot Sebastian.

Angela waited for all of her rule-breakers to glance over before giving a nod of approval. Some of Sebastian’s men hadn’t been guilty of much. She’d needed a group choice on this execution.

To start punishing herself for it, Angela joined the body crew against the wishes of everyone and helped toss the dead men off the cliff. Sebastian’s body went first.

“Hey, wasn’t Lilly supposed to be with them?” Greg’s job was to keep track of the names Angela had given him this morning. He was trying hard to keep up. Lilly had volunteered for that place, saying it was to conquer her fears.

“She didn’t go with them.” Angela swung another set of legs while Shawn swung the torso. “There was nothing about her in his mind.”

Neil scowled, almost out of patience. “When can we start sending out search parties?”

“After Donner comes,” Angela answered tiredly but her rough voice said not to argue. She moved toward the tents of wounded men. A couple of them would be able to get out of these awful smelling canvas coffins soon, but many of the three dozen or so here wouldn’t see morning if she didn’t help them. Conner’s healing bomb had been powerful, but not enough to heal everyone.

And it would drain her to nothing for facing Donner, something they couldn’t have. Their healers were Conner, herself, and Kendle, who there hadn’t been any word from. Kevin’s team was also MIA; the worry had begun to set in for Angela on that link in her chain. She’d counted on the former movie star wanting to live deep, but if she’d been wrong, Kevin and his team were unprotected right now. This was the most dangerous part of her plan for those still outside these gates. The surviving soldiers would be few in number, but they would kill anything that moved without giving time for questions or manipulations.

“Come on, Kendle! Be what I was promised. Rejoin the living and defend your team.”

3

“I was the one who snapped and started hurting people. It was *my* messes they had to clean up.”

Kevin spun around, startled to hear a female voice from the tiny cave they were crammed into.

Kendle stood in the dusty entrance, shoulders slumped “Luke was teaching me to control it when the others began to flip out. We...killed them. And for a little while, it was just us again.”

“And then?” Kevin motioned his team to clear her a place to sit near the dripping water. He was hoping she would use it to scrub off some of the blood and gore that coated her.

“He got sicker, even when I healed him every day. I couldn’t keep up and he was dying, and I was drained...” Kendle’s voice broke. “I took him. He was begging me not to by the end, but I couldn’t stop.”

Kevin was horrified, but still able to find sympathy for her. Others probably wouldn’t, but he now understood why Angela had put Kendle with him. He’d lost Cynthia, a possible girlfriend that he hadn’t even claimed fully, and he’d chosen to act like a child over it. Kendle had lost her life mate through her own inability to control herself, and she’d still summoned the courage to pick being alive and doing her given duty. It was humbling. Kevin was able to put his arm around her to offer comfort when she started sobbing. “I’m sorry for your loss.”

Kendle dissolved in his arms, crying like a baby.

Kevin’s team wasn’t as forgiving. Kendle was clearly a dangerous woman with issues that needed

to be sorted out or handled by a bullet, was the consensus.

Kevin also felt that way, but he vowed right there that he would spend time helping Kendle adjust to living with herself after committing such heinous crimes. Safe Haven was supposed to be a place for second chances and none of it was her fault. She hadn't chosen to be infected, abducted, or any of the other terrible things he'd heard through the grapevine. He would remind people of that.

Kendle didn't miss it, but she was too upset to respond. She didn't try to stifle the flow. She'd already held it back too long. Luke's death had killed something deep inside that she didn't think could be replaced. She would fight for each day from here. She'd made her choice and would now begin the climb, but inside, she'd died with Luke. Nothing would ever change that.

Boot steps echoed; Kevin blanched. "Get down!"

Kendle darted out of the cave and above it, sliding into a narrow space between boulders as a team of soldiers came up the hill.

"In there! We'll wait it out!"

The soldiers rushed toward the hole where Kevin's team was huddled.

Kendle found herself standing up to draw their attention. Kevin's team was out of ammunition.

"Hey! Get her!"

Kendle took off up the mountain, hoping she could avoid the chain when it returned to this side of the cliffs.

The soldiers took off after her, forgetting for a moment that they'd been searching for a place to wait out the destruction, and the castaway found herself running for her life. These men were angry and she'd just given them a target.

"Did she just do that?" Kevin was shocked. He'd expected her to flee while the soldiers killed them. They'd been out of ammunition since shortly after leaving her behind. They'd run into a large squad of soldiers and barely escaped. A lucky explosion was all that had saved them.

The cave shook again as another explosive went off nearby. The men hoped Kendle had found another place to take cover as the mountain continued to explode.

Kendle had found a place to hide, though she was already holding her breath to keep her stomach under control as she crawled under the bodies that had been caught by the stream. They'd begun to stack up near a ledge. Kendle huddled under the corpses, trying not to stare at the dead eyes and gory bodies.

"Where did she go?"

"This way! I found a print!"

"That could be from anyone!"

"It's the one we've been tracking all morning. I'm following it."

The soldiers left together, slowing as the explosions got further away. They continued up the hill toward their goal, sharing stories of near death.

Kendle waited a few minutes to be sure they were gone and then circled back to where she'd left Kevin. She ducked into the cave to find it empty.

“Hello.”

Kendle spun around to find the Eagles behind her with knives, nets, and serious intent.

Kendle chuckled, nodding. “Yeah, you guys will do. Come on. We might make it back to Her Highness before the chain comes around again.”

Map in hand, Kevin took the lead from her.

Kendle brought up the rear, aware of the feeling that was settling over her. She hated it. She didn't want to bond with these people. She wanted Luke!

4

Cameron Storm held up a hand, making sure his braves waited until the right moment. Their arrows would only travel so far through this wind.

Below them, the explosions were getting close enough to feel the rumbles of the angry mountain, to see the dirt and debris flying into the sky. And to hear men screaming, of course. Despite the fact that the noise was from their enemy, Cameron didn't enjoy it. His own turn would come.

“Hold!” Linny was also on the front lines, with her young son at her side.

A few of the Indian children were also here, along with the warriors and a couple of the women, all set to die to keep the soldiers from reaching Safe Haven. It was an honor that not everyone had been chosen for. Cameron hadn't liked leaving half of his tribe in the white man's camp, but the Ghost had insisted it was the safest place for them. Cameron assumed it was meant to make his braves fight harder, but that wasn't needed. If the new government was willing to wipe out a huge camp of white survivors, a few small groups of Indians would mean nothing to them. If they didn't stand together now, they would all fall later.

"Now!"

Linny's shout triggered the fight as the fleeing soldiers rushed over the rise, most of them looking at the threat coming from behind.

Arrows sailed through the air between giant fireballs that slammed into the panicking soldiers to blow them off the cliff. Angela didn't want a single soldier to reach the plateau she was on; the third and fourth ring of her plan was pure death.

"Fire!" Linny blasted three soldiers on the ground. They'd cowered, begging for their lives. It gave her a sadistic pleasure to deny them, as her son's pleas had gone without mercy.

Arrows sailed a third time at Cameron's motion, the leader's lips were drawn back in a savage frown of anger. He felt the power of his ancestors, the strength of being a man, and yet, he felt powerless standing next to Linny and her magic.

Linny, sensing the other men with them were starting to feel the same, slid to her knees as if empty. It gave the braves a renewed sense of purpose. They began firing sharply, hitting their targets the first time.

Linny stayed on the ground, seeing that her young son's magic didn't have the same effect on the braves. They weren't threatened by Ty. *Is it because I'm female or because I'm older and stronger?*

She wasn't prepared to hear an answer.

Both, Cameron sent, still acknowledging his new gifts and his weaknesses. *It is our breeding, our heritage.*

A soldier leapt at Cameron.

Linny quickly lunged, slitting the man's spinal cord through the back of his neck. As the body fell to the ground, Linny raised a hand. *Well?*

It's our pride. Cameron saw the remaining soldiers had chosen to flee back down into the chain of destruction that was slowly winding upward. It would reach this area shortly, but only with nets, not mines. The Ghost had known some of his own would be on these plains and ridges to keep any surviving soldiers from reaching his base. *If you're stronger than we are, you don't need us.*

We don't! Linny rose in a fluid motion, set to throw another fireball to chase away the remaining soldiers. Her boots sank in the mud... She fell forward, smothering the flames and drenching herself from head to toe in goop.

Cameron and his braves burst out laughing, male egos soothed.

Linnny spit out nasty mud as she pushed herself up, ignoring the snickers to concentrate on the lesson she'd just learned. She might not need a man, but she wanted one. Cameron's hearty chuckle was sending chills through her soaked body.

Next to her, Ty glowered at Cameron, little face squished into concentration.

Cameron let the boy into his thoughts, but he was unprepared for what the child wanted to know.

Tyson pulled the images as if he were flipping through a magazine, stopping on one of Cameron's most ruthless moments against his enemy. *You'll teach me?*

Cameron was shocked. *Why? That man raped my daughter and caused my family disgrace. Who do you hate that much?*

Tyson put an image into his head that reached Cameron's stoic heart. The image was of Linnny being hurt. It was ugly, making the Indian chief hate the soldiers even more.

I will kill anyone who hurts my mom, Tyson growled, the warning ringing in Cameron's head.

You'll obey my teachings, my ways? Cameron wasn't afraid of magic. He respected it.

You'll never hurt her, even when she's mean to you?

Cameron frowned. *Mean to me?*

Ty shrugged. *I've heard the soldiers say women are mean to men and they have to be controlled.*

Cameron's anger rose. He knelt in front of the soaked boy, aware of the others staring in surprise. "Women are to be protected, loved, and allowed to grow in any way they chose to. It is what gives a society peace. I *will* teach you. You will be my second son, but just as loved as the first and any who come after."

Tyson held out a hand to shake on it.

Cameron followed his instincts of treating the boy the way he wanted. He grabbed him for a hug. In time, he would blend their traditions. The child would be happy among them.

Ty responded right away, even lingering.

Cameron looked up, expecting to have to convince the boy's mother.

He found Linny waiting submissively at the edge of the flat area. "We should go soon."

Cameron, now grinning from ear to ear, put an arm around the happy boy and led his new family up the cliff.

5

"How many?"

Donner didn't sound worried. Trey made sure to match the casualness. "Three hundred, at best. We can't get into the air until the storm stops."

"Would you like the rain to quit?" Samantha offered from her seat in the corner. Right after the last explosion—the one that had rattled the ground and sent fear into Donner's heart—he'd had her

brought here where he could keep an eye on his prize.

Donner shook his head. "Save your strength, Ms. Moore."

Samantha didn't respond to the slight threat in his tone. According to her guards, he was set to trade her for Adrian, but if Donner was pushed too hard, he would snap early.

Donner gazed at her with thoughtful orbs glowing brightly. "Are you still hiding something from me, Samantha?"

Heart picking up a beat, she shrugged. "I can't block like my boss can. You've seen what's there."

Donner still stared, searching through her doors again to be sure. It was almost over now. He couldn't afford to be careless.

Samantha didn't try to hide or think of something to block him. Donner was an alpha and while she didn't know much about that mysterious word, she knew she couldn't stop him.

Donner finally let go of her, turning to the impatiently waiting man in front of him. "Go on."

"We estimate that half made it to the top, but they'll have no vehicles and little gear."

"Where does your information come from?"

"We've had a few survivors come in. They've described it as hell and refused to go back up."

Donner rolled his eyes. "All of her traps are gone now. When the dust settles, we'll have more men."

Trey didn't argue or tell Donner about the mini-riot he'd quelled this morning among the lower ranks to save Donner's den from his own guards.

"I'm aware of the discontent. What else?"

"We have weak lines, but some are still getting through. When our scouts get to the top, they'll call."

"How long?"

"A few hours."

"We'll be contacted before that." Donner was almost sure now that Samantha was indeed hiding something from him. *But what? And how?*

"Will Angela surrender?"

Donner shrugged. "If not, I'm prepared. Get the chopper set to take us in. We'll be collecting three."

Trey left to carry out the orders.

Donner turned to Samantha. "Let's have that chat now, Ms. Moore."

Samantha's stomach tightened. She didn't fight it, needing the distraction.

Donner flinched back from the spray of vomit, scowling in disgust. "Keep your fluids to yourself!"

Samantha retched again. The MREs they'd been serving her weren't mixing well after Safe Haven's fresh food.

Donner waved a man to take Samantha to her room until they were ready to go, forgetting about that nagging voice saying the blonde woman and her twins were the key to a mystery that he needed to solve.

Samantha was still gagging as she was dragged from the room.

Donner stepped outside while his lackeys cleaned up the mess. He would have to take steps to cover this area. He hadn't yet, hadn't considered the waste products. Donner's mind went to planning how he would hold Angela captive until her child was born. After that, he would head for a different location that was already being stocked with the proper staff. He would add a waste management professional to that crew. He didn't mind blood, snot, or sweat, but puke screwed his guts every time.

6

"You have brought down part of the mountain!" Red Stone stared, stunned as the clouds of thick smoke covered their view of the cliffs.

Marc didn't have time to give credit where it was due. Soldiers had come pouring through the tunnels behind them as they fled into the final den. They were now locked in hand-to-hand combat while their people huddled, terrified, inside Oglethorpe Base. But they weren't helpless by any means. Inside the den, were three more layers of hell waiting for any soldiers who made it through. When Angela had decreed that every portion of their population participate, she hadn't been exaggerating. Only the infants and toddlers had been spared a role in this war.

Red Stone fired his last arrow, hitting a soldier climbing over the fence before turning to Marc in exasperation. “Why did you do that?!”

Marc grunted, throwing his weight into a nasty hit that knocked his opponent out and allowed him to drag his knife across the man’s filthy throat. “Ask the boss when we see her.”

Red Stone stared stupidly. “A woman did that?”

Marc’s grin slipped out, showing his pride at her ruthless intelligence.

Red Stone shook his head and went back to watching his section of the high fence around the base. Marc had the men in a thick line all the way around the main building, using arrows, guns, carefully aimed grenades, and rifles. The noise was constant, echoing into the awful headache Marc had found himself with upon waking.

The next wave of two-dozen soldiers came over the front fence at the same time.

Marc rushed forward, using barrels as steps up to knock these desperate men down. This strategy was only going to work for a little while longer and then he would have to fall back into the actual compound until Angela’s reinforcements arrived. She’d promised him more help than he would know what to do with. As he knocked another surprised man back over the fence and felt his finger break, Marc hoped she would send it soon. He was getting tired.

Marc moved around the wall of his fighters, helping to dislodge stubborn fingers clamped to the

fence in a desperate attempt at survival. Angela's plan had covered the areas around this base well, leaving only one safe path to travel. Outside these fences, traps were springing, shrapnel was flying, and souls were leaving their bodies. He'd helped Angela with these small details; it was sickening to watch even as he celebrated the victory. He hadn't forgotten it was his former fellows-in-arms who were screaming.

"Incoming!"

"Get down! Down!" Marc sent it out mentally too, dropping to the mud as a shell exploded against the fence behind him, raining debris. Wood pierced his leg and his arm, but Marc barely noticed. His ears were ringing too hard to hear anything else. He stayed down, scanning the wall where the soldiers were now coming up faster than he was able to handle.

"Retreat!" Marc was able to send it both ways again, but that command cost him. He crumbled as the pressure in his head increased.

Empty! the demon confirmed, both in terror and ecstasy. *Let me out!*

Eagles and shadow warriors fled for the single door Marc had left unblocked, grabbing friends and companions as they'd been instructed.

During this chaos, Quinn had also been roaming the walls, helping to defend. He found Marc lying on his side, panting. "Help!"

Marc waved him back. "Not safe. Leave me here."

Quinn had heard the tales from Little Rock, and he'd seen some of the things that Marc could do, but leaving the man wasn't allowed even if he'd wanted to. "I'll cover you until you're ready to go inside."

Marc had to hope that would be enough because the door to the base clanged shut just as the front fence blew apart. Dozens of furious soldiers charged into the courtyard.

Jennifer didn't slow at the sound of a huge explosion ahead of them.

Kyle didn't interfere. She was merged with the witch, eyes glowing, body cat-like. Kyle knew better than to get in her way.

They ran into the clearing in front of the base that Jennifer had tracked, but she still didn't pause as they sighted the enemy rushing through the destroyed gates of a base.

Kyle saw a Safe Haven marker in the upper window. "There!"

Jennifer already knew. She brought forth her mother's rage to throw at the soldiers starting to turn their way.

The mental blast was harmful to everything it reached, rupturing the eyes and ears of those closest. Soldiers fell, screaming in agony as blood poured down their faces.

Jennifer sent another blast, this one a bit weaker.

A second line of the now panicking soldiers were injured, blood gushing.

A third blast was too risky as Kyle came to her side. They shoved their way through the soon-to-be corpses and broke through into the courtyard.

“Marc!”

Marc was in a struggle for his Colt against a mammoth Marine wearing a spiky vest.

Jennifer raised a hand, lifting the man into the air.

Marc quickly stabbed his knife through the man’s stunned eye and started reloading as the body fell. Despite being one of them, the moment shocked Marc a bit. He reloaded slower than usual.

Moving away slightly, Jennifer sent out another blast, directly toward the gate this time.

The screams began to fade as the surviving soldiers fled.

Damn. Angie was right again. I’d never know what to do with that power. Marc looked up at Kyle, and took his offered arm, staggering to his feet. He’d taken a hell of a beating by Goliath. Marc spit blood and groaned as a part of his tooth came out with it. “Tats gonna hurt, right?”

“Where is my baby?!” Jennifer’s scream brought a halt to the relief the fighters had started to feel. “Where is she?!”

Marc scanned the camp members inside the base and felt his stomach drop through his boots. “She’s not here.”

Jennifer spun on him.

Kyle grabbed her around the waist as she fought to get to a target.

“Maybe you could clarify!” Kyle grunted as Jennifer’s arm slammed down on his shoulder.

Marc saw Peggy coming from the den with Doug, both wanting an update. He ran toward them. “Who has Autumn?”

Peggy frowned. “She came and got the baby yesterday, said Angela wanted Jennifer to know that she was caring for the baby herself.”

“You didn’t think that was odd?” Kyle held tight to Jennifer, who had started to cry and shake.

“Yes, of course, but the den was attacked and I thought she had to stay here.” Peggy looked around. “I didn’t know she left!”

“Who, woman?” Doug demanded. “Who took the baby?”

“Lilly.”

Jennifer’s scream was the worst sound any of them had heard all day.

Chapter Twenty-Two
Unfinished Chores



1

“**C**an we talk?”

Crista stopped, waiting impatiently. She’d just come in with Zack’s team. She only had a short time to get cleaned up, eat, and head back out to her next site.

They’d all reported to the boss, as much to verify that Angela was okay, as to deliver the news that their missions had been successful. Then she’d been invited to rejoin Zack and his men for a quick meal. Crista had accepted in surprise. Zack was the only one with a full team. Everyone else was split between Angela’s most valued positions.

Jeff swept her, noting the filthy clothes and skin, the hungry expression as she stared at his arms. He felt his remaining resistance give. How bad could it be? “I’m okay with it, I think. The...baby.”

Crista was too tired to give him the hell he deserved for hesitating. “Good. We’ll talk about it later, okay?”

Jeff watched her go toward the farthest shower camp and water tanker and followed, not on duty anywhere. “You, uh, need some help?”

Crista started to shoot him down and then nodded tiredly. “You can do my back.”

Jeff caught up and ran a hand over her cheek. “Wherever you want it, baby.”

Crista giggled as the pair disappeared into the shower camper.

Across the campsite, Zack saw them and tried to control his jealousy.

“That’s the last of our teams!” Greg waved. “Lock us down!”

Activity filled the small area, but Angela tried to give her full attention to the filth-covered Indian coming toward her with careful footing. The mud had made the entire site a slick trap. “I’m glad you’ve made it.” She was unable to force a smile. The death shroud was almost covering her now. How many hundreds had she killed?

Atolius held out a hand, hoping this gift would be more to the demon woman’s liking.

Angela accepted the gift without a protest, too tired to keep up a full act. She pulled out the

machete in surprise, immediately liking the strength it gave her hand. “Thank you.”

Atolius could tell he’d pleased her this time. He inched away respectfully, trying to end the encounter without reoffending her.

Angela turned toward her command tent, sliding the sharp weapon into the pouch. She tossed it to Greg. “Hide that for me, will you? I’ll have Marc show me how to use it.”

Shawn slid the pouch onto his belt, nodding.

Angela continued toward the crowded command canvas.

Satisfied, Atolius raised his chin and spun around to rejoin his men. “My curse has been lifted!”

At that moment, Dog sailed over the gate and landed on Atolius, knocking him backward into the mud.

The wolf, happy with a soft landing, licked the furious man in the mouth and then walked across his chest to avoid the mud.

Angela wanted to join in the laughter she heard, but that was impossible as she stared at the screen Jeremy had just turned her way. It showed their position and the signatures of camps around them. The soldiers had gathered faster than she’d estimated. The final showdown was about to begin, but she wasn’t ready yet.

“I will be.” Angela moved toward the tent that held their POWs. She had a full dozen of those now.

Angela ducked inside the soaked canvas and swept the bound, snoozing men and women. These were traitors, soldiers they'd captured, and Adrian. Conner was still among the wounded, now healing without complaint in exchange for food, water, and a possible second chance at his life.

Angela's attention landed on Heather, noting the woman's nose was still bleeding lightly. She'd been fed and watered with the other prisoners, but she gaped at Angela with fear she was right to have.

"What?" Heather back up against the bars. "Don't look at me that way!"

It got the attention of the sleeping men. They all jerked as Angela came to the stand in front of her former Eagle.

"Tell me why." Angela already knew, but it was important that everyone else did too.

"I'm sick." Heather didn't expect help or sympathy from the enemy.

"I didn't have to be the enemy—"

Heather snarled. "Save it!"

Sighing deeply, Angela knelt in front of Heather's cage. "I could have healed your disease. A weak immune system isn't like cancer."

Heather wasn't going to be swayed by proof of any kind. Her mind raced furiously through escape plans and even murder plots.

Angela reached a hand out. "Let me show you something."

Aware that Angela could force it, Heather slowly extended her hand.

Angela clasped it gently, voice sad. “I find you guilty and sentence you to be reclaimed.”

Heather screamed, jerking back, but Angela’s hold was like steel. She stole Heather’s life with a vicious, regretful mental yank.

The withered corpse fell over, hitting the bars.

Shouts for mercy filled the tent as Angela stood up. Heather had admitted to revealing Safe Haven locations to the government. She’d followed her traitorous orders and trailed the recon teams. Angela had counted on someone doing that, but she’d known the government would have them on the satellites anyway as the only thing moving in this side of the country. Heather had sacrificed herself for information the enemy didn’t even need. It was pathetic.

Ignoring the screams and her dying soul, Angela continued to the next captive.

Adrian watched her take the lives these men and women had wasted. They would have been shot or hung later. It was better that Angela took their energy, and through her, they would remain in a fashion, finally serving the greater good. He had no worries that he was next, despite deserving it. He waited for her to stop in front of his cage before speaking. She’d spared only one of them.

Next to Adrian, Sergeant Wallz remained silent and grateful that Donner wanted him enough to trade for.

Adrian frowned. “Be careful with Donner. He’s not stable.”

“We know.”

The double timbre of both witch and woman was evidence of the merger he'd suggested. Adrian nodded his approval. “You're right on track. The pieces are in place and you're about to end this ugliness forever. How does that feel?”

Angela's face lit up with the first real smile he'd seen from her in a long while. He noted the gray in her hair still standing out in stark contrast, but he didn't comment on it. Donner didn't need to know she'd fed recently. That was intentional.

Angela held out a hand.

Adrian placed his in hers with a twinge of nervousness. She was powerful enough to kill any of them now.

Angela searched his mind for last minute details, always suspicious of tricks, then pulled out. She let go of his hand and left the tent. She'd needed a brief second of human contact before she went out to face her people. After this, she might be dead or a prisoner for the rest of her life. She was unable to see that future because there wasn't a future for them until this moment was decided.

Angela hit the button on her belt as she stepped from the tent that was surrounded by her guards and friends. They'd come running to help her when the prisoners began to scream, but they'd quickly retreated from the canvas when they'd discovered the reason for it. A few of the witnesses had fled to other parts of the campsite, but Shawn stayed close to his boss as she walked through the cold drizzle.

“This is Safe Haven. We are surrounded...Do it now!”

Outside the gates, a massive set of explosions went off, circling the cliff and blasting away chunks of stone. Set by Kenn and Jeff, the detonations had been carefully placed to chip away a large part of the flat area, creating a wide gap the soldiers would have to jump across, exposing themselves. Pieces of debris wouldn't cover it and the enemy no longer had gear or the will to scavenge anything sturdier.

As the dust settled over everything, the radio lit up again.

“That was your last act of defiance. My men will overrun you in less than an hour.”

Angela didn't answer Donner yet, waiting for what she needed to hear.

“End it now and I'll spare them.”

Angela's mind flipped into the fourth ring of her plan. She answered with loathing. “Come on in and we'll settle the terms.”

“On my way.”

Angela knew it wouldn't take long. Donner was ready for this moment.

Angela went to the command tent, waving a few of her closest people along. It was time for the part she'd been dreading.

Neil, Jeremy, Cynthia, and a few others followed her in silent disapproval. Neil and Jeremy were first.

“The last two numbers were in her will.”

“Why did Samantha leave us her will?”

Angela faced them with the truth. “Because she wasn’t sure if she might die today.”

Neil and Jeremy shouted, but Angela lost her patience. She mentally shoved them both onto the damp canvas floor. Her gifts were still growing.

Both men stayed down, but continued to demand answers.

“You had no right!”

“She’s pregnant! How could you use her?!”

Show some respect! the witch bellowed. The mental pain sank in, ringing and silencing every activity across the camp.

Angela brought the witch under control. She slowly went to her chair, sat in it. “Get Adrian. Its time he told everyone the truth.”

There was restless muttering as Shawn went for Adrian; the crowd around the tent grew.

Adrian didn’t resist. He took the chair across from Neil and Jeremy when Angela waved him into it. Adrian met her eye. “You’re sure?”

“We’ll win,” she answered tonelessly. “I’ve seen it.”

That was good enough for Safe Haven’s former leader. He used his un-cuffed hand to push the button. “My name is Adrian Mitchel...and I work for the United States government. I have for most of my life. After the war, I was supposed to take Safe Haven to the nearest bunker and hand them over. The government doesn’t want survivors to gather. They want you to die.”

Donner listened to Adrian's tale with frustration. He was unable to get through until Adrian let off the radio transmit button and that man clearly wasn't going to until the story was finished. The main bunker was controlling the radio waves now, watching and listening. Donner might be able to get one of his fleeing men at the den to cut them off anyway, but by the time it happened, this call would be over.

After a minute, Donner tried to put these newest pieces together for his profile. It was something that nearly everyone listening was doing. The idea that Adrian—their reason for being together—was a traitor and secret agent, was overwhelming.

“When the bunker made contact, they didn't like how long I was taking. They threatened my son. When I refused to hand over Safe Haven, they began hunting him to draw me in. It worked. We went into Little Rock and killed them all.”

Donner put that piece into place with a snap of understanding. Something had delayed Mitchel and the bunker had thought he'd turned on them. “Bad choice, threatening his son. Especially when he was already on your side.”

Adrian's voice had paused. It came again, broken. “I was supposed to die there. I wanted to, for the sins I've committed, the trusts I've destroyed. I'm... I'm sorry for all of it. I'll be

executed knowing I owe a debt that can never be repaid.”

As if they knew Donner wouldn't cut them off now, the radio stopped crackling and then Angela's voice came.

“Why did you work for them?”

“I was born in the lab. I didn't have a choice.”

“You could have refused when you were older.”

“I was already corrupt by then. I didn't have a reason to change.”

“You found one, leading Safe Haven?”

“No. I gathered Safe Haven's flock and guards to watch my ass while I went to Little Rock for my son. They meant nothing to me until *you* came.”

Now Donner understood what the delay had been and how Adrian must have been tortured by trying to earn what he would never have when the truth came out.

“Because with me, you could be free of them?”

“Yes, but not only me. They have our kind enslaved across the planet. I didn't need to change myself. I needed to change the world.”

“Which is why you didn't try to stop the war?”

“Yes. The herd had to be thinned anyway, but the weakened governments would have provided us with that opportunity.”

“I thought you said you were corrupt.”

“I was. Because I had refused my destiny, my purpose, until the war came. I chose not to fight when I couldn't win.”

“So you sided with the enemy until it was convenient to reveal your truth?”

“It’s not just my truth. You all believe in it too or you wouldn’t be here dying for it.”

“But we didn’t help cause the downfall of society and then cover it up!”

“No, *you* would never break that way.”

“No.”

There was silence for a minute where Donner waited eagerly for more, not bothering to look at the destruction below the noisy chopper. He didn’t care.

“What was the master plan?”

“To gather enough descendants to fight them!” Adrian was clearly growing angry that she didn’t understand. “They have no right to hold us! Experiment on us! Take our kids! That world is over now and I’d do it all again!”

The radio went dead.

Donner contemplated it as his pilot flew them closer to his life-long dream. If he could have produced his own children, none of this would be happening, but Donner was suddenly glad it had worked out this way. Using Angela to eliminate the remaining government was perfect justice for their kind, a neat sentence for her becoming a traitor to her rulers. The child would be his reward. Donner’s good mood rose to the surface. He slapped the pilot on the arm, grinning. “Great day for a ride!”

The pilot, nervous, gave a weak chuckle and concentrated on landing where Donner wanted him to. Once he got the crazy Major to the cabin, the

pilot planned to vanish into the night. After witnessing the devastation below, he didn't want any part of Safe Haven and the descendants. They hadn't even used magic to accomplish all that! *What could Angela do if she unleashed her full powers?* The pilot didn't intend to stick around and find out.

3

“Stay away!”

Greg and Shawn were trying to keep the pissed fighters from dragging Adrian from the tent. It took Angela coming to stand behind them to calm the mob down. They had a deep respect for her.

“I'm trading him for our people. He'll be in a government cell before dawn.”

The small crowd frowned and muttered; Angela raised a brow. “Should I put a bullet in him and just try to buy Samantha and Tracy? What about Seth and the others?”

No one had an answer, but everyone was clearly unsatisfied.

“I want our people returned. I may be able to accomplish that without trading him, if you prefer I keep Adrian to face a Safe Haven trial.”

Again, more mutters and grumbles came, and no satisfaction. Angela led them into the option she needed them to pick. “We could trade him, get our people, and then snatch him away at the last minute. Or kill him while he's in their custody.”

“We can’t leave him for them to use anymore,” Greg said lowly. “I say we keep him and then dole out Safe Haven justice when it’s all over.”

There was a feeling of stress easing as Angela glared at Adrian. “My justice, if you like. It isn’t gentle.”

They knew that too well from the last days and even from before that, when she’d brought Adrian out of Little Rock and then kept them alive through nature’s fury.

“I agree. Use him to trade and we’ll do a snatch-n-grab they won’t be ready for. I’ll lead it if you want.”

Hearing Zack would be going along also helped.

“Same here,” Daryl called. Cynthia, under his arm, added her agreement.

Neil and Jeremy were relieved that Angela hadn’t made it all about sacrificing Samantha, but they were still terrified she wasn’t coming home.

“You’ll get another chance for answers. We all will.” She moved into the filthy command tent as the crowd slowly broke up.

Angela couldn’t respond the way she wanted to. That had been one of the hardest parts of this scheme so far, telling them about Adrian. It was right behind the dozens of men and women they were missing and presumed to have lost.

Angela waved her top men to the table, those who’d surrounded her with their bodies as the crowd outside had gone from tired fighters to mob.

“If I had done this any other way, we would have buried our entire camp and those with us. I started the fight. I drew them here. I reduced them down to the same levels we’re at. The playing field is level now. You’ll only have to deal with the threats one at a time. React as I would. After that, they’ll leave us alone for a long time.”

Neil wasn’t sure why she was telling them these things, but the other men had already caught on, including Jeremy, who had noted that same expression on Samantha’s face right before she left for this run.

“Things will go fast once the chopper lands. He won’t spend extra time or let himself be taken. None of you are to interfere.”

“But we could overrun one chopper!” Neil gestured. “And then have Donner to—”

“Do you think the bunker will trade our freedom for Donner’s life?” Angela demanded coldly.

Neil wanted to say yes, but couldn’t. He shook his head.

“Neither do I.” Angela sank further into her depression. “I’m trading for all our lives, including my own. Do as I tell you and let him take us out of here.”

“What does it accomplish?” Shawn knew Marc would want that answer.

“I have several things to try when he gets here, but I expect all of them to fail. Going with him will allow everyone a safe pass off this death zone and give Marc time to convince the soldiers on the other

side of that gate to join us. When that happens, come get me.” Angela waved them out when they would have argued, calling for Cynthia. “I need a few minutes with her, gentlemen.”

The males left the tent grumbling, but satisfied she still had their best interests at heart. As long as they could tell Marc it had been for the good of the camp, he would let them live.

“Something went wrong on Jennifer’s end of the plan,” Angela stated lowly as soon as they were alone. “She won’t be here.”

Cynthia frowned. “Is she okay?”

Angela nodded, packing things into a small kit. “Yes, and so is the baby, though the same can’t be said of Lilly. She planned to take Jennifer’s child to Donner and trade for a pass to the bunker, but Autumn had a better idea.”

Cynthia didn’t ask what would happen to Lilly once Jennifer got her daughter back. That scene would be uglier than what Angela had done here.

“I think that too. We’ll proceed without her.”

“But she’s your guard and escort, and then Marc’s right hand.”

Angela glanced up pointedly.

Cynthia realized the duty was now hers. “Yeah, okay. I can do that.”

“Good. Would you like to go over it with me to be sure we’re together?”

“Yes, that’s a good idea.” Cynthia didn’t let herself worry over the change. Angela had told them adjusting would be necessary in places.

“The hardest part is first.” Angela scribbled on a notepad.

“I have to handle Marc.”

“Yes. He has to read this before he leaves these gates.”

“And if I can’t, then I have to handle his duties.”

“And you can. This isn’t the first time you’ve saved lives.”

Cynthia smiled in pleasant surprise as Angela handed her the note.

“Stay with Marc through this. He’ll have Kendle if he wants her, but he’ll pick anyone else if he has the choice.”

“I will. We’ll have work for her. If she returns.”

“She and Kevin’s team are close. They had to wait out the explosions and it’s not safe for them to come out yet. They’ll be in soon, though. It might trigger a new fight at the gate. Make sure you’re ready for that.”

Cynthia took out her notebook and wrote it down, then placed the message to Marc inside. She’d already memorized it in case her book was damaged, but she was dreading that moment. It wasn’t a nice note.

“It has to be harsh.” Angela shuddered, hearing the rumbling blades of a helicopter. “Our camp surviving depends on it.”

“I don’t want to go. I request sanctuary.”

Those words drew frowns from Adrian and Conner, who were now in a canvas behind the command tent together, cuffed to the table.

Angela had just come in; the Sergeant hadn't wasted a second. "Please."

Angela was aware of time running faster. "Sell me."

"Donner has a secret plan to challenge the government after he claims you and Adrian. I don't want any part of fighting for either side."

Angela saw no lies in David's mind, only concern for his own actions. She was forced to adapt her plan on the fly again.

Angela raised a hand and sent a bolt of red light that slammed into the Sergeant's chest to knock him backwards. He sprawled awkwardly against the bars and didn't move.

Angela left the tent as the sound of a chopper increased to nearly deafening. The chopper could be blown up at any point. It was on the pilot's terrified face and in the jerky movements of his landing in the center of her heavily fortified site. More than a hundred men were here and all of them hated the soldiers.

The door slid open before the chopper had landed, revealing Donner, in full uniform, standing there waiting to be executed.

In time, Angela promised herself. He had the advantage right now. If she killed him, the bunker would bomb them and he knew it. For this meeting, Donner held all the cards.

Angela, with a group of protection, moved toward the chopper and stopped a dozen feet away as Donner came out alone. She couldn't see inside the shadows of the chopper, thanks to his choice of an evening pickup. She stayed still instead of going to meet him.

Donner saw it as an insult and possible trap, but he stepped onto her base with an arrogant flare and salute to the pilot.

It was returned with a shaking arm and a pale face.

Donner spent a few seconds scanning the people, the fierce loyalty he felt, the secrets they held. *The government is right to want you all exterminated. You're too strong.*

"I want to be sure they stay that way."

Donner chuckled at her brave tone, knowing it was for those people who were suddenly face-to-face with a demon from their nightmares and feeling concern for their immediate future.

"I had trouble with Sergeant Wallz," Angela stated, tone regretful. She was sorry.

"Dead?"

"Along with Heather and a few others. They thought they'd be forgotten during the trade, left to rot here. They tried to break out. I had mines in place. It wasn't pretty."

Donner didn't care if she was lying and didn't dig in her mind to verify it. "Where are Mitchel and his son?"

"Conner wasn't part of the deal. He isn't here."

Donner suspected the lie this time, but again, he didn't care enough to pursue it. "Get Mitchel and let's go."

"And in return?" Angela kept her distance.

"We'll pull out and depart the state. Your people are small potatoes. They can go."

Behind Donner, Trey was with Becky and Samantha, knife in one hand, gun in the other. His intentions were clear. If given the order, he would shoot one and gut the other.

"Do I know you'll keep your word?" Angela smiled coldly. "No, I think we'll do this a different way."

Donner tensed to fight, but Angela only held up a small box.

Donner recognized the trigger to what he could only assume was a powerful explosive. He began ripping into her mental walls to discover where it was hidden.

"Not here." Her witch shoved Donner out as if he were nothing. "It's in more than one place, but that's not the part you have to worry about. It's the weaponized Smallpox virus it will spread across this mountain."

Donner laughed. "I've been inoculated for all that shit. Try again."

"I accept that challenge," she intoned, stopping his amusement. "Your vaccinations are decades old and this strain was developed in the good 'ol US of A, a mere two years ago. Wanna bet your vaccination can stand up to it?"

Donner fell into fast-thinking mode.

Angela blew him out of it. "I want Tracy."

Donner gaped in confusion. "Who?"

Angela sneered. "Your man took her and you don't even know? What kind of a leader are you, *Major?*"

Donner's ego wouldn't let him take too many insults. Angela knew that. She would push him carefully.

Donner slowly reached into his pocket and took out a small radio. "Bring this Tracy to the gate. And identify yourself, soldier!"

Awful laughter answered.

Donner scowled. "Sherman."

Angela raised a brow.

Donner shrugged. "A minor player."

"I want her back," Angela repeated. "And then you get Adrian in exchange for letting Safe Haven go."

Donner had decided things had gone too far to change his plans. "No deal. Blow us up or get on that chopper."

It was the moment where time and fate stood still to witness what the choice would be.

"I'm sorry. I didn't want it to be this way." Her finger lowered on the button.

Before Angela could push it, gunfire rang out. They all turned to see Bridget strolling through the camp, shooting at the chopper with a gun in each hand.

"Where is she?!"

Bullets pinged off the chopper, deflected into the crowd. Even Donner flinched at a near miss.

Trey pushed the hostages back, trying to get a clear shot.

Angela grabbed at Bridget as she came by, snatching the gun to club Heart-ass in the temple hard enough to take her straight to the ground.

In the ruckus, the detonation box had been shoved into the hands of the closest person.

Cynthia kept a finger hovering in case Donner tried to grab it, but the Major stayed back. Watching Angela direct Bridget's body to be bound and placed in a cell, he appeared fascinated.

Angela started to take the box and then froze, mind going dark. Something had changed.

“Donner!”

Sherman's drunken shout was ugly and loud, close by. It was a surprise to see that he was inside the camp, next to her command tent. The gun in Tracy's ribs was little compared to her beaten face.

“You want this bitch so bad!” Sherman motioned toward Angela with the gun as he dragged Tracy backward. “I'll kill her for you!”

“If he fires, I'll blow it.” Angela glared at Donner, taking the box back. “You won't make it out. There's a charge under your chopper.”

Now Donner had to step up and prove his leadership, but the situation wasn't under his control anymore.

As he moved toward Sherman, eyes starting to glow, the mercenary shook his head, gun aiming at Angela. “Not me! Her!”

Crack!

Sherman’s body arched. Blood burst from his lips as the bullet went through his chest and out the other side.

Donner stared in anger at the sniper who was no longer under the cover of the overhead tram. Furious to have his man stolen from under his nose, Donner blasted the sniper with all of his pent up frustration.

Angela screamed in denial as the blast went out. She stepped toward the woman falling from the tram as her Eagles pulled Tracy to safety, but it was too late to stop Crista from hitting the jagged cliffs below.

“Die!” Jeff screamed, rifle coming up.

Donner sent a blast over that side of the camp, knocking a dozen fighters into the enraged man. Donner spun around with a kick and sent the box in Angela’s hand flying toward the chopper.

Her guards rushed to get between them as the soldiers outside the gate began climbing.

Angela slipped and let Donner catch her as she fell, delaying. His arm snaked around her throat; the courtyard went quiet again except for the mini-battles along the weakening fence.

“I will kill her,” Donner warned the circle of men around him. “Get Adrian on that chopper. Now!”

During the chaos, Trey had kept Samantha on the chopper. He quickly retreated.

Angela found Theo's eyes in the panic. *Go get her body.*

Theo nodded slowly, stunned. *I will. My word.*

Adrian was rushed roughly onboard the chopper a few seconds later.

Jeff had found the box. He held it up. "You can't have her."

Donner didn't understand how serious Jeff was. "You'll be dead in ten minutes. The bunker will blast this mountain off the map."

"No, they won't. Weaponized Smallpox will spread with explosions. It will decimate the entire country, including the bunker. You won't get any reinforcements while I hunt you down. That was my woman. I'll never sleep again until you're dead."

"While *we all* hunt you down!" Cynthia was also furious over Crista. "You can't hide from us!"

Donner began to understand that striking out at their sniper had been a mistake, but there wasn't a way for him to back down now. He dragged Angela toward the chopper, grip so tight she was almost passing out.

Jeff, grief-stricken, wasn't bluffing. Those who knew him fled toward the gate, hoping to escape the coming conflagration. It started hysteria. The entire camp fled toward the exit that Donner's chopper was blocking.

Donner let go of Angela, lunging for the box as Jeff turned toward Crista's body.

“Stop!” Alarms began sounding from every radio turned on—loud, piercing waves that halted all activity in the effort to make that one sound go away. When it did, the replacement wasn’t better.

“We wish to speak with Angela or Adrian. Please comply immediately.”

Angela, who’d been pulled to safety behind a wall of Eagles, croaked out the obvious. “It’s the bunker, Jeff! Answer them before they bomb us.”

Chapter Twenty-Three
Taken or Infiltrated?



1

Jeff stayed close to Angela as she answered the call, not sure if he might blow it all anyway. Losing Crista was devastating now that he'd accepted the inevitable settling into kids and a wife. He'd almost convinced himself that he wanted it. Jeff couldn't resist swinging on Donner when he walked by to listen to the call.

Donner hit the ground, prepared to brawl, but Jeff stepped back. He would take his rage out one swing at a time if that was the only way he could get it, but his mind was already telling him that after it was all over, Donner could be hunted.

“I’d help with it.” Angela hadn’t foreseen Crista’s death, though she’d had bad feelings and ignored them in favor of more obvious threats. She also hadn’t accounted for Bridget’s growing insanity and it had cost them all.

Donner stayed outside the tent, armed and ready to kill. Trey kept the hostages in the chopper, though the two females weren’t allowed to come to the door, preventing foolish rescue attempts. Trey knew these two women were the only things between him and certain death. The mob in Angela’s camp was as dangerous as the one he’d quelled in Donner’s camp.

“I repeat, put Adrian or Angela on with us. We can see your location, hear your transmissions. Comply now.”

The routine male voice was nearly a computer. It added a sense of calm to the situation.

Angela keyed the radio. “You’ve got me. What?”

The bunker man was startled into a laugh. “Am I bothering you?”

“We are kind of busy right now.” Angela rubbed her throat as her men shot glares of hatred at Donner. Having him here went against everything they’d been trained for.

“Yes, we’ve noticed,” the man replied sardonically. “You will get onto that chopper. All of your people can go free, but you and Mr. Mitchel have things to answer for.”

Angela's response wasn't what her fighters were expecting.

"I accept your terms. Hundreds are witnessing it here and across the country. If you break your word, the war will resume and the bunker will be first on our list."

"We have no intentions of continuing this war. Nor will we allow you to detonate a biological weapon on US soil. Should you do so, we will target your location and use enough force to obliterate the virus and your meddling interference."

Angela didn't have to put a tremor in her voice to indicate being intimidated. The waves of menace were vibrant. "I'll keep my word. You do the same."

"We will. Get on the chopper with no further incidents. We will order our troops to withdraw. When they are gone, your fleeing rats can desert their ship without fear of the big bad wolf."

The mocking was almost too much for Angela. She dropped her head to keep any of them from witnessing her rage. The bunker still had no respect for what she could do. That would change as soon as they betrayed the deal.

"I need a few minutes to collect my things and pass leadership," Angela said over the mutters and protests growing in and around the tent.

Donner wisely and carefully moved toward the chopper, understanding how much danger he was in as the wolf he'd briefly glimpsed padded from the small supply tent to his right. He hadn't fully seen the animal until now.

Dog stopped a few feet from his newest enemy, aware of Angela in his mind. Her warning kept him from lunging. She said Charlie and Marc would be killed if he attacked. It kept the wolf glaring but inactive.

Angela heard the gate opening and feet pounding to get inside. The soldiers who'd survived were regrouping, choosing where to go next. She had little doubt they were being surrounded from multiple directions. She hadn't been able to kill enough of them.

Donner sat on the chopper floor, ready to fire his weapon, but the crowd knew Angela's bluff hadn't worked. She was being taken.

"You have five minutes, then I'm sending the missile. You see, I don't think we should waste our time capturing traitors. And I like explosions. They're so...unstoppable."

Angela clicked the mike in reply and then jerked the wires from the radio. It was the only sign of her anger; no one realized she'd prevented them from easily calling to Marc. The rest of her plan had to have time to work before his vengeance landed.

2

"Faster!" Marc growled. He and Quinn were way ahead of their group.

Marc had left Safe Haven's den right after Jennifer, who had chosen to go straight for Donner's remaining men and threaten their lives to

reveal his secret location. Marc hadn't argued, though he doubted Lilly would have gone to the Major. Her vendetta was personal. It was torturing Marc not to be able to help track down the infant, but he had to get to Angela. He'd sent teams out to start searching for any signs of Lilly, but in that time, the awful whispers Dog had heard had returned to haunt Marc. Something was happening with Angela and it wasn't what they had planned. Dog had already left his side, eager to be involved.

"Over here!" Quinn waved. They'd seen a body fall from the tram, but they hadn't been close enough to tell who it was.

Crista was still breathing when Quinn came into view. She'd been fighting to hold on. She breathed a sigh of pain and relief.

"Marc! Help her!"

Marc was frozen for an instant as he saw who it was. The happy future he'd seen for her and Jeff burst into flames. "What have you done?" Marc rushed to her in desperation and fear. "I can't fix this!"

"I did the only thing I could," Crista whispered, life fading faster than she could get her mind to form sentences. "She's bad now. You have to save her!" Crista's lids shut; she forced out Jeff's name and then gave up the fight.

Marc let the crushed woman be taken from his arms, horrified as the meaning sank in. Angie

thought she'd turned bad. What would have caused that?

It only took a minute to figure it out. Murder was the only thing big enough to crush Angie this way. She'd killed someone and didn't feel it was justified.

Marc felt his stomach churn. She wouldn't want to be around to influence anyone with the darkness it would have brought. That was why she'd stayed away from everyone. She wanted to die, and now, before she got to feel the baby move and became attached to a child she couldn't birth.

Marc felt his anguish from the rest stop return as the other pieces fell into place. She'd become cold and hard, with no encouragement and little hope. She'd used women and children to fight their war with the government. She'd allowed Adrian to live, time after time...

Marc's guts were acid now. She'd fallen into a horrid depression and neither of the men who wanted her the most had recognized it. What would that cost them?

3

"I had to endanger us, to give us a chance to survive." Angela tried to explain things to those around the command tent as she gathered her gear. "The government isn't producing offspring. We are. If I had killed us all or released Smallpox, it would have wiped out any chance at rebuilding civilization

here and in the bunkers, where they have no women.”

“But our country would have been gone!”

“Yes. Anything is better than letting them rebuild their world just to destroy us all over again. We were a free country once. If I can’t return that, I’ll kill us all!”

Neil didn’t know what to say, thinking she’d finally gone crazy, but Jeff could appreciate her point now. They were Eagles, from Safe Haven. Being such avid patriots meant they had to make the ugly choices.

Angela had, and so far, her bluff had worked. Safe Haven was fleeing from the Oglethorpe base to her last location even now and the soldiers who were supposed to stop them were providing an escort instead. Those men would likely join the camp at some point and try to forget they were ever on the other side of it. Others would flee into the shadows of this apocalyptic world and never be seen again. As for the soldiers still outside this site, Angela didn’t envy them the future that waited.

Donner didn’t let her out of his sight, but he found himself thinking Adrian being unconscious had been convenient. “Why did you dart Mitchel?”

Angela glowered at the bound blond that had been dumped near her feet. “He can’t take no for an answer.”

Donner didn’t respond directly to that, but she could feel him running the clues through filters to come up with the same conclusion that everyone

else had. Adrian had come between her and Marc. She had no problem turning him over.

Angela hefted her kit over one shoulder, finally looking at her escorts and guards. “You have to trust me. If you don’t, it still falls.”

“Do what your boss tells you to,” Donner ordered arrogantly from the flap.

He received glowers for his interference, his presence.

Angela let them go, enjoying it when Donner finally tired of the stress and delay he was causing, and turned to talk to Trey. Neither of them was okay with waiting in the middle of the enemy camp like this, but they hadn’t expected the big bunker to intervene. That bunker had the power for this moment, but once Donner was out of here and on his own ground again, that would change.

“I need you to deliver my final words.” Angela looked at Neil and Shawn. “If you don’t, the war will restart. Only this time, we’ll all be bombed to keep us from releasing the virus. The rest of the people across the country will survive if the government can limit the blast radius and they know it. They’re trying hard to find a way to do that right now.”

“What do you need?” Shawn was still willing to trust her after all the positive results and so few losses on their side.

“I need you to escort me out to Donner, then go code Raven.”

“Who has the honor?” Neil tried to pay attention. Jeremy had a place outside the chopper to protect Samantha if something went wrong and the trooper wasn’t going to argue giving Angela up for Sam. He felt awful about it, but in that moment, there was no choice for him.

“I forgive you for that, Neil. I forgive all acts of self-preservation, and command that you do the same for the others.” Angela handed her notebook to Cynthia. “No one but you, ever, for any reason. Read the last page first.”

Cynthia clutched it to her chest. “Be careful.”

Angela continued to the flap without responding, but her grief was strong enough to let her control slip for an instant. She sent out a blast of power that rose into the sky and revealed the deathly shroud around them that had once been a bubble of protection.

As Angela stepped onto the chopper, the bubble popped like a child’s delight and splattered the entire zone with sadness. Rain fell from the sky in a sudden downpour.

“Marc is gonna fuck us up,” Shawn commented as Samantha and Becky were shoved from the chopper that immediately began to take off.

“Yeah. Should we—”

“No. We’ll do what Angela wanted. She has a plan and I think this was all a part of it. Have you ever seen her be taken so easily in anything?”

Greg shook his head, finding a bit of hope in that. Even if she were giving up to save them all,

she still would have fought to stay with them. Angela loved them.

“It was.” Cynthia had been reading the last page instead of watching her boss leaving.

There are exceptions to every rule, even mine, and vengeance will be Marc’s this time. Remember those two things and take control of this mob right now or you’ll lose them. Then give it to Marc and keep him on my line.

It was brief, right to the point. Cynthia felt horror as she stared at the jerky script. Angela’s writing looked terrified.

Cynthia looked up to witness Angela staring at them with tears streaming down her face and turned to Daryl, unable to watch. She buried her head against his chest, wishing for this nightmare to be over.

Daryl held her close and kept an eye out for the only person who mattered now. They had their freedom if the government was to be believed, but the cost was so high that it might destroy them anyway. “What have we allowed?”

Cynthia sucked in her anguish and wiped away the signs of it, but it wasn’t easy. “Get our men on the fence. Angela expected Donner to break his word.”

“But Donner isn’t controlling things now.” Neil wanted this to be over now that Samantha was safe in Jeremy’s arms.

“He is on this site!” Cynthia mirrored Angela’s annoyed tones when her common-sense orders

weren't obeyed fast enough. "If he cuts the radio with the bunker and takes charge of those men, we're dead. The soldiers outside these fences are pissed about their losses, tired and hungry, and there's a dangerous mountain to go down before they can do anything about those needs. Get on it!"

Few of them had thought about that. Cynthia found herself alone with Shawn and Greg as her first order was carried out. It was amazing, awful, addictive. How had Angela given this up?

Survivors across the country had been listening to the epic battles playing out in Georgia. When the chopper rose into the air this time, it was immediately tracked. As news spread, calls began to flood in from refugees using any means of communication they could find.

Daryl wrote it down as fast as he could, trying to catch every word. He made a rookie help.

"Why?" Shane whined. "We only need the last known location."

"Just one, huh?" Daryl snorted, taking a moment to make sure his writing was legible. "Marc should be strolling in here any minute. I plan to tell him I did something productive while I waited. You go stand around and tell jokes."

Paling, Shane quickly began helping copy down the locations and messages, also making sure his print was neat enough to read.

Donner stared at his prize with loathing. Because of Angela's bluff, he had to be a government boy again for a while. "When did you go rogue?"

Angela laughed, a harsh sound that Marc wouldn't have liked. "Little Rock."

"I heard the reports. Also the rumors of the drained corpse. It's part of the reason I was sent out. The government knew if one of your group had gone bad, others would follow."

"And if we weren't on their payroll, we were a threat." Angela sneered. "I know how it works. I planned the whole thing, remember?"

Donner still wasn't sure he believed that. "Then why are you here now?"

Angela looked out the window of the chopper, able to see lines of Safe Haven people leaving the battlefield. "For them. You've got me. Why would you need sheep?"

"Agreed." Donner began to understand some of why she was so wanted. "That strength is rare. The government will want you to hunt."

Angela didn't take her eyes from the scene below, celebrating even as she mourned. "Is your name on their list?"

Donner knew he should be scared. He'd witnessed her power, but he could only feel excited by the challenge. He leaned over to grab her by the jacket, pulling her forward until their faces were inches apart. "Did you know the alpha can force you

to do whatever he wants?” Donner leered down the front of her shirt “Anything.”

Angela’s eyes became fire red as the witch leapt forward. “Yes, we did!”

Donner screamed in pain as the witch shoved into his mind, but he was used to such battles. The syringe plunged into Angela’s neck from his free hand. He’d been prepared.

Angela sobbed as the drugs hit, not fighting as she had the last time. “You could toss me out now. Take a body back. It’s all the same to them.”

Her eyes shut.

Donner frowned at the feeling of utter need and desolation that flooded his mind. How had she gotten in there at all? He didn’t have a weak spot for females. He barely even cared for rape, which was the only type of sex he allowed himself. It prevented bonds from forming.

Angela forced her lids open to beg once more. “You’d be doing me a kindness. Please.”

Donner recognized the broken spirit of a corrupt descendant—he’d been one himself a long time ago—and smothered a curse as she fell forward into his lap.

He hefted her onto the seat next to him, trying to ignore her smell, her allure. He wanted the powerful offspring she carried, not her. After the birth, she would be dropped to the government, who would be told she had become ill, causing the delay that resulted in her being the only survivor. He would keep the child for his future protection, the

government would have what they'd sent him for, and her little group of merry men wouldn't ever know what had happened to her or Adrian. It was almost perfect. Donner looked at Trey. "Send them in."

Trey hit the radio with a leer. "Move in, men! Take them down!"

And that's why it all had to be this way. Angela was unable to move as the drugs coursed through her veins in painful beats. Marc was about to arrive. He would want to come and save her, but she'd left clear instructions. He would need to end this last fight quickly. Her team would help him, and if fate were kind, it would all end tonight. At least for her people. Their new lives could begin come morning. Her own life, well... There was only darkness when she searched.

Angela fled toward it eagerly.

5

"Where is she?!" Marc's fury lashed out, bringing men to their knees.

He stormed through the center of the shocked soldiers blocking the damaged gate. Most of those stunned men retreated in fear. The others froze.

"The Ghost!"

"Get out of here!"

"Where is she?!" Marc screamed, fire blazing behind his eyes. "Where is my baby?!"

Marc now understood Jennifer's rage and vowed to help her as soon as he'd spilled blood.

The soldiers were scattering from in front of the base, but not leaving. Marc used his fury to blow the remaining piece of the burning barrier open.

The chaos inside didn't calm him down. Parts of the fence had failed and an obviously savage battle had just taken place. Men were still bleeding and screaming as smoke rolled across the site.

Marc saw the Safe Haven side had won. He stormed toward the bloody command tent where a dozen quivering masses of wounds and guilt were huddled. "Where is Angie?!"

Greg waved a bloody hand toward the enemy. "Donner took her."

Marc drew back to deliver a vicious hit and spun out of the tent instead. He didn't have time for vengeance. He had to find Angie.

"She gave herself up." Greg groaned, trying to keep his guts inside his stomach. The gas grenades the soldiers were using were almost debilitating. "She saved us...all." Greg collapsed.

Marc turned to scan the chaos. He'd spent a lot of years in situations like this one, but he'd never felt so much panic. Angie and his child were everything.

"Dad!" Charlie and Tracy, both splattered in the same gore that he was, rounded the rubble, shoving kits at him. Charlie had arrived during the thick of the fighting and remained unnoticed as he slipped through one of the fence gaps. He'd found Tracy

fighting with the others and fallen in with their people to win or die. “Get her back.”

Marc snatched the kits and was gone before either of them could say anything else.

Charlie hugged Tracy close, grateful they were now free, but terrified that he wouldn't see his mom or dad again.

Standing by the smoldering gate, Cynthia held out the paper, not making eye contact.

Marc snatched it, reading as he went.

Make sure they're all safe before you come for me. Or don't bother to come for me at all.

Outside the gate, a line of soldiers was lingering, still thinking of trying to claim the rewards on some of the people inside. They watched Marc nervously, waiting for him to cross the smoldering threshold they'd blown open as he arrived.

Marc growled at the soldiers, furious and beyond patience. “Surrender now, while you can!”

It was a moment where Marc wasn't sure how it would go. He flashed a demon's red eyes at them as Dog came to his side. *I see every one of you.* He sent it out mentally, causing men to wince. *No mercy.*

David, in the front and sure to die first, took a slow step forward. “You'll let us leave?”

“You'll be POWs that I'll trade for my wife and child. Or you'll become Safe Haven members. No one else lives past today.”

“What if we want to go our own way?” The Sergeant had gotten free during the chaos, but he

hadn't fought, only gotten to the correct side of the battle line. "Most of us were forced to come here."

Marc saw men waiting for a solution they could live with and realized Angie had been right again. With the need for blood crying in protest, he gave them a way to live. "Fine. Get out of the state, immediately. Soldiers found here in two days will be shot on sight."

That was enough for David. He carefully lowered his weapon, placed it on the ground. "I don't want to die fighting my countrymen. I'm done." And with that, David left, calmly pushing through the shocked soldiers who'd followed him this far.

Marc still didn't think that was enough, but the other frontline fighters started lying down or holstering their weapons and leaving.

Marc sent the news in anger. *It worked, Angie. We're free. Now kill him and come home!*

Silence...

Angie!

6

"Can someone help us for a moment?"

Marc and Cynthia, in the middle of organizing transportation off the mountain for their wounded, turned around to rip heads off at the interruption.

Neither of them spoke for a moment as they took in the four people standing at the gate.

The two women were tall and lean, with bronze skin and glowing red eyes. The men were paler than anyone in Safe Haven and taller, towering over even Marc and Kenn.

The activities taking place slowly came to a halt as a team of Eagles joined Marc.

“There is no need,” the shortest woman stated with a friendly tone. “We were called here by the alphas.”

Marc only understood a little of that. He scanned their minds for trouble. At least, he tried.

“You are too new,” the woman explained. “In time you may be able to read our thoughts. Your gifts are still growing. We have reached our full potential.”

“Why are you here?” Cynthia didn’t like the way the woman was gawking at Marc or Kenn.

“We are answering a call for help.” Dari repeated. “Much has happened here. We are too late?”

Cynthia nodded as Marc resumed loading, letting her handle it. Cynthia was in charge here. Marc agreed with it. The only thing he cared about was getting these people settled with the rest of the camp so he could go.

“They took Angela and Adrian. She gave herself up to let us live.”

Dari considered it for a moment, scanning, seeing how many of their kind were here. “Then we should offer our protection. When you leave on the hunting trip, we shall be your escorts.”

Marc, listening, wanted to deny them out of pride and wariness, but Cynthia's words stopped him.

"We'll take your help and be glad of it. Welcome to Safe Haven Refugee Camp. May it become your home."

Those were Angela's words to use... Marc suddenly didn't care if the entire planet joined their camp or even if Angela shared it with Adrian. He just wanted her back.

7

"Are we set?"

Marc's growl didn't invite extra information.

Kenn hurried to nod. "On your mark, Marc."

Unamused, Marc strode through the shattered gate and started down the mountain.

Some frowning, some happy, the fighters followed, trying to keep their stomachs under control as they went by the drying carnage. All of them were ready for it to be over. As they passed wounded soldiers, quick strikes of mercy were given.

The soldiers who'd gone down the mountain in the last two hours hadn't all fled. Marc led his people by these few groups without speaking or even looking at them. It wasn't required. His reputation had grown larger than Safe Haven's had. These tired, regrouping soldiers wanted no part of a fresh battle with him.

Marc was vaguely aware of the thoughts, of the fear and the respect, or even the small group of soldiers who began to follow them down, watching their six. When he made camp, Marc expected those men to ask to join Safe Haven, but that would be someone else's decision, as he wouldn't be staying there without his heart. "Update me!" Marc needed the distraction.

Kenn opened his notebook while Quinn did the same on Marc's left. "We have four missing people. Everyone else is either accounted for or dead." Kenn didn't have much sympathy for those and it showed in his tone.

Marc thought of punishing him, but realized the Marine had been punished when Tonya was taken. He'd never seen Kenn do that for a woman. "How many did we lose?"

Quinn had those numbers. He consulted the book as they walked. "Um, forty Mexican, twenty-two Indian, fifteen Eagles."

"And how many of theirs?" Marc was already doing the math.

"We estimated five hundred before this final battle. Has to be well over eight hundred now."

Marc was more than satisfied with that. "We outnumber them. Pass it around."

Quinn made a note to do that. Knowing they were the power in their country now would go a long way in getting people to stay together.

"We won't have trouble with that." Marc scanned the new descendants who were walking

with them, listening to the awful tales. “We won and lost less than she promised. They’ll wait for her.”

“And you, right?” Quinn loved Marc being in charge.

Marc shrugged. “They’re scared of me. Without Angie here to balance it, some may leave.”

“Do we send out search parties for our missing?”

“Not yet. Give them time to get off this mountain and find us.”

“What if they’re in trouble?”

“I’d hear them.”

Quinn didn’t say more. There was no denying that Marc was powerful, but Quinn still wanted to know that Kendle was safe. He’d found himself thinking about her far too much on this run.

Marc didn’t tell him that Kendle and Kevin were trailing the camp right now, waiting until they were settled for the night to rejoin. Kendle knew Marc wouldn’t want to see her and be reminded that the one he really wanted wasn’t here. Marc appreciated it.

As for Seth, Marc suspected his run wasn’t over yet. That had almost been confirmed when Becky had told him not to go looking for Seth, that he was fine where he was. Becky’s thoughts had been of Angela. Marc hoped that meant Seth was with her. The thought was definitely comforting.

“You’ll get them settled in when we reach the bottom of the mountain. Cynthia will be in charge.”

Kenn didn't protest. He didn't plan to be there anyway. Adrian was with Angela, and that's where Kenn planned to be as well.

"How many prisoners?"

"None now. Angela's orders were with Neil on those. He...handled it right as we were leaving."

Marc nodded his approval. He hadn't noticed it among the chaos of tending the injured and getting them ready to roll. It was still a surprise that Angela had given the order. He'd expected her to be swinging nothing but mercy by this point in their war.

Not in her true plan, the demon pointed out. The one you didn't want to know about.

Marc sighed heavily, pushing against the guilt. He had known things were different with her, that she was planning something other than what she'd revealed to even him, but he hadn't ever considered that she'd been corrupted. He barely understood it himself. How was he supposed to be on the lookout for it? *Tell me all of it. I'm ready now.*

She will change the world, the demon stated ominously. And we will not allow any interference in that.

Marc understood the demon was firmly behind the scheme and found that he trusted the spirit inside enough to make the promise. "Even if I don't agree, I won't stop her."

Satisfied, the demon began laying it all out while Marc tried to keep walking without falling down.

Behind Marc, Samantha was aware of her men on her heels. Neil and Jeremy had refused to let her out of their sight since Donner had left.

Samantha wasn't going to argue with it. She'd had moments where she wasn't sure if she was going to come back, not the least of which had been during the firefight around the chopper. She hadn't killed Donner as she'd longed to, though. That wasn't sitting well with her. Angela's plan had needed the Major alive, but Sam didn't like it.

"Are you okay?" Jeremy couldn't stop asking.

"I'm fine."

Neil couldn't stop running a hand over her arm or her shoulder as if to verify that she was here.

"It's only been a few days," she pointed out lowly.

Neither man shouted at her, but Sam winced at their thoughts.

"All right. Just quit yelling!" She was instantly irritable. These mood swings were going to kill someone if she wasn't careful.

Neil and Jeremy dropped back a few paces to give her space, frowning. Both of them were thinking that if Bridget's aim had been any better, she might have succeeded in her goals.

"Why did she do it?" Jeremy looked at Neil. "I don't understand."

"Bridget was weaker than a lot of survivors. After being rejected publicly by Neil, beaten by Samantha, and failing on the mission to be bait, she

cracked.” It was the only answer Neil had come up with.

“She wanted my life right then.” Samantha filled them in. She didn’t like the glimpse she’d gotten of Bridget’s thoughts, of how the woman had loathed her enough to pull the trigger. Samantha hadn’t even been scared right then. She’d been too shocked. She had no doubt the babies were the reason she had been able to witness it at all. Samantha hadn’t adjusted to the new gift. “What will happen to her? I don’t know about sharing a camp with her, even if she promises to join our side this time.”

“That won’t be a problem.” Neil blocked the image of pulling the trigger. He’d held no remorse or hesitation about doing it this time. The one he’d lingered over was Conner. That was their only POW now, being dragged along in ropes and cuffs behind a group of merciless Eagles who didn’t care for his whining. They didn’t know exactly what Conner was guilty of—few people did—but he wouldn’t be where he was unless Angela had found proof. In fact, after hearing Adrian’s story, it was almost a welcome sight. The teenager wouldn’t have free run of this camp to betray them as his father had.

“Okay.” Samantha didn’t tell Neil she’d gotten it all crisp and clear. Her gifts were magnified with the babies pushing their desires along. She kept quiet, not wanting him to feel bad. Bridget had been the enemy. Now she was just a bad memory. The solution was simple, though not neat or easy.

“Are you hungry?” Neil held out a mostly empty kit. “Might be crackers or something left.”

Samantha held up a small kit that had half a dozen packs of snacking items. “Donner didn’t want the twins upset. He thought he could win against them, but he wasn’t sure of it.”

“Is that why he let you go?” Jeremy still didn’t understand that.

“Partly, but it was mostly his obsession with Angela that tipped the scales. He’d been studying her case files for a long time.”

“Is she in danger?” Neil knew Marc wanted that information. The man’s shoulders had tensed the instant he’d heard her name.

“I’m not sure,” Sam admitted reluctantly. “He says he’s going to give her to the government after the birth and keep the baby to bargain with, but I doubt he’ll give her up. He’s like...” Samantha’s eyes flicked to Kenn.

Neil understood Angela had put herself into an ugly situation to save them all.

“Yes, she has.” Marc gestured angrily. “Go faster!”

“We’ve got more volunteers for the rescue party than we need.” Shawn was walking a few feet behind Marc. He’d refused to be cowed by Marc’s rage. He, better than anyone, knew controlling Angela was impossible.

“Yes, I do.” Marc sighed, shoving his anger back into the box. “I’m moving hard and quick. I

don't need a big group. This camp needs them to resume their posts."

Shawn knew that wouldn't fly, but he didn't protest. "The calls are still pouring in about the chopper."

"Location?"

"Not a final. Last known was five miles southeast."

"That's where we'll start. You and Daryl help Cynthia keep it all together while we're gone."

Shawn knew Daryl would be happy, but he wouldn't. "I'd rather go along, you know?"

Marc's anger flashed out.

Shawn retreated a step, but he didn't accept the order. "I've been with her the whole time, Marc. I'm going." Shawn went to tell Daryl what he'd be doing.

Marc returned to scanning their surroundings. It wasn't Shawn's fault, nor Greg's. Marc knew that, but the anger was there anyway. Angie had been taken and they weren't dead. Neither of them would ever be her protection again.

Red Stone and Natoli, still wearing their injuries and filth as badges, joined Marc's walk, waiting.

"Go home. I've got this covered." Even though he didn't and he'd never felt more alone without Angela.

"We will send our tribes to the new lands after your woman has been returned." Natoli hated Marc's pain.

“Agreed.” Red Stone stayed on Marc’s right. He ignored Quinn, who still had the left.

“Braves are already tracking her,” Natoli offered in comfort. “She will be found.”

Marc didn’t need their assurances and said nothing. His own grid was already stretched far beyond what he’d done before, searching, sniffing, begging fate to be kind.

“She is a fire walker, your woman.” Red Stone was curious. “The stories are true?”

Marc shrugged. “I suppose she could be called that.”

“But what is she really, that the white man’s government would let all of us go, just to have her?”

That was a question Marc couldn’t answer even though he wanted to. He chose to increase his pace instead. “Go help with the stragglers, both of you”

Red Stone frowned at the insult. “She must be special for her absence to weaken the Ghost so much. May the great spirit give her back to you.”

Red Stone went to do as he’d been instructed. Natoli joined him, both men worried. If the Ghost’s mate were killed, would he stay and lead his camp? Without the Ghost or the fire woman, the Indians had little faith that old wars wouldn’t be restarted.

“The ants are here.” Quinn was glad of a distraction to break the tension. The ants were following, being joined by their own stragglers and small groups who’d been cut off from the colony during the chaos. It looked like over half the ants Dog had led into the fray wouldn’t be coming back.

“Feed them if we can. They’ve earned it.”

“Cool.” Quinn left him.

Marc was relieved to have the minute alone. It was the only time he would let himself feel the pain.
Angie!

8

“We’re going down, sir!”

Donner knew they were close to his cabin and didn’t respond except to reach over and pull Angela onto his lap. Adrian, he left on the floor at his bloody boots.

The chopper had taken damage during the fight with Safe Haven. It whined harshly as it fell to the ground.

The pilot did a fantastic job of manhandling it to a flat area while keeping the blades from hitting anything that would send them rolling. He brought the huge machine to a hard landing near a thicket of moldy trees.

Donner shifted his prize carefully and brought her out of the smoking wreck, nodding for the pilot to bring Adrian.

Trey led the way into the trees after consulting his map and artillery compass. For this landscape, they needed to be sure of not only where they were going, but also the places they’d flown over. Avoiding a rescue party would be easier if everyone didn’t see them.

“This way.” Trey stored his equipment. “Two miles.”

Donner shifted his load again and stayed on Trey’s heels.

The pilot came more slowly, struggling under Adrian’s weight.

Half an hour later, the pilot finally caught up and dumped his burden at Donner’s resting feet.

Donner motioned Trey to take over and they all set off again, almost to their destination. The night was growing around them, swallowing landmarks and causing hallucinations. For Trey, the red eyes of a wolf kept distracting him. For Donner, it was Angela’s witch showing up to battle for her host. The pilot was sure the heavy man over Trey’s shoulder was going to wake any second and kill them all.

Ahead of them, a light came through the trees; all three men increased their pace. Even if it were an enemy camp, it would still be fighting in the light. Out here in this blackness, anything could be stalking them.

“Stand down!” Donner snapped as they entered the firelight around his cabin. He gave Trey a nod of respect for the perfect navigation and stomped up the front steps without addressing the dozen men who’d clearly come here to wait for him. It made Donner nervous despite him wanting the extra muscle on this run. If this many people knew where

his den was, then so did his enemy. “It’s not safe here.”

Trey glanced at his watch. “Just before dawn?”

“Sounds right.” Donner grunted, carefully placing Angela on the narrow couch. “Put sentries up, half inside. Be ready to dart him again.”

“What about her?”

“No. She can’t take another dose yet. It might harm the fetus.” Donner pushed off his boots with a groan. He sank down in the recliner by the couch, leaned it back, and closed his eyes. *It’s been a good day.*

9

“Over here.” Jennifer moved through the shadows as if she was a part of them.

Kyle followed closely, hoping to hear a noise of the woman they were tracking. When Jennifer caught up to her baby’s kidnapper, it would be ugly. Kyle wanted it over. They’d heard Marc on their radios during a break and knew their camp was safe. While that was a relief, there wouldn’t be comfort for them until Autumn was also safe.

Jennifer motioned him down.

Kyle realized they’d found their prey. Kyle frowned. *Is Lilly singing?*

“Hush little baby...”

Kyle felt the desperation in the tone. Sweat broke out on his neck. She didn’t sound good.

Jennifer didn't try to hide as they got closer to the shadow sitting on the log. When the shapes became clearer, Jennifer and Kyle were able to pick out the baby sleeping peacefully and Lilly's boot on top of a blinking landmine.

"I knew you'd find us." Lilly didn't look up. "My arm's falling asleep."

Jennifer gently removed her daughter from the former slave.

"Thank you!" Lilly breathed a sigh of relief. "I can't move my leg. I came over the log and it was too late to stop, and..." Lilly stopped babbling, looking up as she realized Jennifer was walking away. "Hey! What about me?"

Jennifer handed the baby to Kyle and placed a soft kiss to her child's forehead. She then led Kyle into the darkness, mother's heart soothed when Lilly began to shout.

"Wait! She would have been safe inside the bunker! Hey! What about me!"

Kyle stayed close to Jennifer, waiting to see which way she would go now. As for Lilly, he didn't think anything could have been more perfect. She would be tortured with fear and then killed when she couldn't stay awake or stop herself from getting dizzy with hunger and thirst. It was a punishment befitting the crime.

Kyle hadn't counted on Jennifer's rage. He frowned when she stopped not far away and settled down.

I need to hear it!

Kyle didn't argue. "We'll wait together."

10

Angela came to slowly. The first thing she noticed was the splitting headache. The second was the muffled screams from Adrian that were increasing the headache. She raised her head to see he was next to her, though on the floor and still unconscious. *Stop yelling! I'm here now.*

Adrian's relief was blinding.

Angela left him in the darkness alone, unable to take the glare. She groaned as she moved, hurting neck and spine the next pains she became aware of... The immediate crankiness of a rough morning flooded into her. It might be nighttime, but she felt like she'd had the fun night already and was suffering the hangover.

"She's waking up, sir!"

Angela heard the nervous voice and looked around to discover Donner crashed in the chair behind her. A line of grumpy soldiers were guarding the doors and windows outside. "I need to piss. Where?"

One of the men pointed to a pot in the corner.

"Not on your life!" She stood up, making the five men inside with them reach for their weapons.

"Let her go." Donner didn't get up. "She won't leave Mitchel."

Angela shoved by the men in the doorway and moved out into the chill, rubbing her bare arms.

She'd packed her Eagle jacket, but she didn't know where her kit was.

Ignoring the surprised men outside, she went behind a bush and had a minute to herself, but she could feel them staring, waiting for her to try making a run for it despite Donner's words.

He knows us well, the witch stated. *Can this still work?*

Angela didn't answer. The headache had grown in the short time she'd been outside. The cold appeared to be making it worse. Aware of being stared at by more than Donner's men, she went back inside the toasty cabin, shivering slightly.

Donner was there to hold out a long blanket.

Angela took it without comment, sweeping her temporary prison. She'd honestly expected to be bound and kept drugged.

"I planned to, but our scientist said it wouldn't be good for the fetus."

"It's a baby!" She swallowed her annoyance. "Where are we going?"

Donner chuckled. "None of your business. Why don't you sit down and try to eat something?"

One of the soldiers was busy laying out a cold meal on the desk. Angela did as she was told, hoping the food would ease her headache.

Donner took the seat across from her with the satisfied look of a benevolent benefactor.

Angela tore into the juice boxes first, downing all three in a rush that ended with two loud belches. She tossed them into the garbage pile that had

already been started in the corner and moved on to the canned fruit. There wasn't silverware for the pop-top can. Angela took the pocketknife from her bra to eat the peaches.

Donner didn't demand the knife back when she finished, not threatened by such a small poker. Her thoughts were much more dangerous.

"What do you want?"

Donner sensed this might be the only time he could talk to her without the witch guarding her thoughts against the scientists.

"It is." The witch would shut her power down before revealing any secrets to the bunker labs. "What do you want?"

"For you and Mitchel to make the call."

Angela flashed to the call they'd made a month ago, wondering briefly if anything had come of it. Then understanding fell in place; she gaped as if she hadn't suspected that. "You're crazy."

Donner laughed. "No more than you. Once you've made the call, you'll be turned over to the bunker to answer for your crimes."

"And you'll keep me until then?"

"Yes."

Angela shrugged, going back to the food. "Guess the cell doesn't matter much."

Donner wasn't sure if that was an agreement. "You *will* make the call."

"Fine, whatever." She dismissed that topic, waving a hand. "I need a cigarette, something else

to drink, and for Adrian to be woken up and fed. I can't do it alone, you know."

"He is too dangerous to—"

"He follows my orders."

"No. I won't have both of you awake at the same time until you're in real cells."

Angela belched again, wadding up the wrappers. "Fine. Give me the smoke and drink, and then I'll go to sleep on my own. Sick of smelling you anyway." Angela took the smoke a soldier handed her and used her gift to light it, proving to them that the aftereffects of the drugs were not limiting her power.

"Amazing." Donner stared. "Do you know why you're so strong?"

Angela wasn't alert enough for all the details. She shrugged, inhaling. "Later, okay?"

Donner wasn't offended. "We'll have months together, Ms. Hearne. No hurry."

"Well, then you'd better pick a different name for me. Ms. Hearne doesn't exist anymore. She died in Versailles."

Donner had read that part of her file with interest. In fact, it had been the beginning of his obsession. "Did you know government men were spying on you then? That they have been most of your life?"

"No."

"I'm surprised. Your gifts are impressive."

“Mostly new developments.” Angela blew thick smoke rings over Adrian. She chanted lightly as she did it, offering her protection.

“Why are you so bonded to Mr. Mitchel?”

“None of your business, Major.”

“John, *Angela*.”

She didn’t like the sound of her name on his lips. She turned back around with the witch bleeding through. “I am the leader of Safe Haven refugee camp. I am a descendant, and a coldblooded killer. Do not mistake me for anything less.”

Donner laughed again at the chill from her words.

Angela forced the insulted witch back, entertained by the images of him dying that her demon side was currently exploring. “That one,” Angela chose, enjoying the irony and the poetic justice.

Donner, worried she was plotting an escape, started to order her to keep her word when Adrian groaned, waking.

Angela was at his side before anyone could protest.

Donner waved his men away, curious.

Adrian’s lids fluttered, opening to see her pale face. It was enough to calm him.

Angela didn’t try to communicate with anything other than gentle touches and comforting glances. There was no reason for her to hide anything here among these evil people.

Donner was listening hard and didn't hear anything. It annoyed him. He took Angela by the arm and pulled her up. "Time for bed."

Donner snatched his hand away as flames burst from her skin.

Angela went to the couch on her own, letting the fire walk up her arm in warning. Then she drew the heat into herself and lay down, closing her eyes. "I'll need a pain pill when I wake up. Once the headache quits I won't be as grouchy."

Donner laughed again, delighted by her displays of power. His men had been gifted and able to do some special things, but nothing like this. Donner was now convinced that what he'd risked so much for was indeed possible. He had spent his entire life in pursuit of it and now, the moment of fruition was almost at hand. It tasted like the sweetest ambrosia. All the mysteries of their kind, of their universe, were about to be his.

Chris was full of rage. The vet had been close to Angela's camp since leaving her gate. He'd spent the time removing threats trying to sneak in. He had killed his share of the enemy, though no one would ever know it. He'd heard the calls on his radio, and listened to her agree in disbelief, but deep down, he'd known she would sacrifice herself. Angela loved her herd; Chris loved her for that.

The vet stayed down behind the cabin. He couldn't save her alone, and he didn't need any of the rescue party that would arrive tomorrow to

know he'd been here. Chris expected Donner to burn the cabin to keep Marc from reading any clues, but it didn't matter. Chris planned to leave clear signs for the man to follow. Angela wouldn't be lost. She would be returned to her flock so Chris could continue to worship her.

Chapter Twenty-Four
Keeping Track



1

*C*an you get him to slow down?

Shawn snorted at Dari's silent question. Marc hadn't been able to leave until dawn and he was making up for it, almost running the entire way to the first site. Scouts had come in overnight to inform them of the chopper's last known location and now, with afternoon fading, they were almost there. Nothing would slow Marc down at this moment.

Behind the main rescue party, a small group of new descendants was trailing, offering supplies and guidance, but staying in the rear. Shawn was glad. They had enough problems. They didn't need another one.

On Marc's heels, Becky and Kendle kept pace and scanned for anything he might have missed. The two females had insisted on coming this morning, refusing to stay in the truck.

Marc hadn't argued long. That had given many of them leave to come; it wasn't a quiet group that was stalking these woods, but a large, spread out team of vengeance-seeking fighters. Angela would have been proud.

Marc stopped suddenly, head swiveling.

Those nearest also halted, waiting.

Jennifer stepped from the bushes and weeds alone, still coated in her last battles.

Marc was on the go again as she fell in on his right.

Kendle backed off.

Marc had three strong trackers with him now, but he still couldn't get a read on where Angela was. That only meant one thing and he wasn't happy about it. If Donner knew to go underground to avoid their mental radar, then Angie could be in more trouble than she'd planned for.

Jennifer nodded to people, but didn't bother with explanations. She had sent Kyle to Safe Haven with her daughter, then came here to do her duty. Despite her personal choices, Jennifer wasn't leaving Safe Haven until Angela was back where she belonged.

Marc held up a hand to stop the others as they came through the trees and found the wreckage of the chopper. He spent a few minutes examining the

scene for clues, then led them southeast, following clear tracks of soldiers carrying double weight. Angela's charred kit swung rebelliously over his arm.

As they moved away from the chopper, Marc became aware of ants on his left and instinctively chose to follow their path. As long as it ran with the grid in his head and the tracks in the mud, he would stay with their trail. He had little doubt that the insects were also hunting for their benefactor.

"Hey, Marc!"

Shawn's shout drew Marc to the middle of the rescue party that was five times the size of what he had wanted. "What?!"

"A group of soldiers sent signals to the rear group. One of them is named Ivan. Says you promised him a place."

Marc scrolled his memory and came up with the soldier he'd spared when the man caught him right after killing General Francis in his tent. "Tell him to wait at Safe Haven."

"I did, but he says he has news for you on Angie."

Marc stalked to the waiting group of five soldiers who had guns in hands that were pointed downward. "Where?!"

Ivan swallowed nervously. "He likes to use underground trails. That's where he'll take her."

"I know that already!"

"But we know which ones are still open," Ivan explained. "We were part of the fire team for the

battalion. Your...wife missed us in her demented schemes.”

Marc swallowed his rage to let Ivan show him on the map that was quickly unrolled. They marked the places and then Marc immediately went back to tracking. He knew where Donner was going. There was only one government facility near here that might still be operational.

“Put a can on that weapon!” Marc saw Ivan join Kendle as he stored his gun.

That angry woman bared her teeth; the soldier quickly retreated.

Marc didn't care. He had one focus and that was it.

2

They reached the cabin a half hour later, though most of the group took longer to catch up. Marc didn't wait for them. He could feel that he was gaining ground on Donner. He wanted every mile he could get before dark.

The cabin had been left in filth.

It took a second to find a marker outside. Someone had drawn arrows in paint, or blood, Marc wasn't sure, on the trees. He followed them, happy with all the help. Donner hadn't counted on so many people hunting him.

“Marc.”

He knew what they wanted, but Marc wasn't able to give it to them. He didn't care how cold it

got. He wasn't stopping until exhaustion forced him to.

Quinn didn't try again. The group huddled in their clothes as they hiked, all wishing for a vehicle that would fit between these molded trees. After the week they'd all had, walking for ten miles was the last thing they felt like doing.

If it had been anyone other than Angela, Marc wasn't sure they would have. She'd earned their loyalty, that much was clear, but for Marc, the cost was too high. He wouldn't let her place herself into government hands as a punishment and he wouldn't let her take her own life. Whatever her mental state was, he would help her straighten it out so they could have that happily ever after they'd been promised.

3

“Donner said for you to get settled in the bedroom.” Trey was using superglue on one of his many wounds that didn't want to stop bleeding. He'd been trimmed twice during the fight at Safe Haven. Donner was outside dealing with the newest group of surviving soldiers to join his cause.

Angela was taking advantage of his absence. “You don't understand what's going to happen when Marc shows up here tonight. I'd better be the first person he sees.”

Donner had taken them through caves that had once been tourist attractions, using trolley cars that

he'd forced her to find in the darkness. The jeeps almost hadn't fit through in places, but after some rock removing, they'd gotten through. Angela was sure it was driving Marc crazy. He would know where she wasn't and that she had to be underground. It was one of the only places his mental grid couldn't yet penetrate.

"Brady?" Trey stared. "We were told the Ghost was killed."

Angela grinned, hiding her pain. "You believed it. Excellent."

The guards exchanged worried glances, but Angela didn't take pity on them. "He'll have Donner to take his anger out on. You boys be still when he gets here and you'll be okay."

"You sure?" One of her sentries wanted a promise. "Cause he was pissed before."

Angela loved the protected feeling she got from knowing her man's name alone could cause such caution. "I'll handle him, but he'll watch you, talk to you, feel you out in every way, so be ready for that. If you're a traitor in disguise, he'll know it."

"But, uh...he doesn't like soldiers much."

"He'll adjust. I went to a lot of trouble to add a few hundred of you wonderful men to our ranks. Once he understands it was intentional, he'll let some of you live and even join my Eagles."

Trey swallowed. "And those he doesn't care for?"

Angela shrugged, not feeling much of anything beyond cold satisfaction and a deep ache. "I don't

ask those kinds of questions when it comes to Marc. I wouldn't be able to sleep."

Angela intended to continue Marc's legend as deeply and as ruthlessly as she could. When they were all crammed onto one boat together, he would be the man who could keep the peace.

Donner came into the room to discover five twitchy men who immediately began to protest about the Ghost.

Donner argued the Ghost was dead and that Angela was playing mind games.

Angela didn't mind being called a liar, because she knew the five men believed her. They would tell the others and the five-dozen men Donner had here would drop to four or even three.

Adrian groaned, waking.

When Donner would have shot him again, Angela glowered at him. "If he dies, I can't do what you want."

Donner didn't trust her. He knew by now that she had something up her sleeve, but he did need Adrian clear of the drugs for the tests. He put the dart gun away. "I'll kill all of us if you push me."

Angela already knew that and didn't comment. Donner's mental stability hadn't been good before, but he was only two steps away from leaping off that wire now. Angela intended to help him with that.

Angela stared out the window, at the light flakes with dread, and spotted movement that wasn't from Donner's men. She recognized the odd feel of the

person in surprise. If the vet had stumbled upon her, then Marc wasn't far behind with his grid. She needed more time. "I saw some of my people in the woods around us. You should flush them away."

Donner didn't have an explanation for her help, but he still sent a team to check it out, unable to take any chances. He went to the door. "We're leaving in three hours!"

Donner was amused by the groans of tired men. He could run rings around these soldiers and still get there first. But there was a nagging feeling that her rescuers were indeed closer than he'd estimated. The changes reflected that. He didn't want another shoot-out with her people. He wanted these two locked in cells and working.

Angela sighed in relief, obediently going into the dusty bedroom to rest while Adrian was awake. Marc couldn't come and blow the doors off everything yet. It wasn't time.

4

Safe Haven had won.

They were at the bottom of the mountain, once again surrounded by Indian camps on all sides. A few Mexican camps were also in the vicinity, but Marc had insisted on them keeping their distance as soon as he'd seen Sebastian's bullet-ridden corpse. He hadn't asked what had happened there yet, but he would.

With Marc gone, the Eagles were doubled and the gates were up, but few of them felt safe. All three of their strongest leaders were missing, causing Cynthia and Samantha a long night of keeping things calm. There were fights to be stopped, meals to be handled, kids to be cared for, and wounded to be tended. Those were still coming in steadily, keeping the doctor and his students busy.

Peggy and Hilda had organized the three tent areas and the mess, while Tracy and Charlie had gotten the bathrooms and showers going. Angela had left the barest of instructions for how to deal with the camp after it was all over, but these things were common sense. Charlie was sure that's why she hadn't left more details. She wanted to find out if they had learned enough to help her run this camp. Charlie thought she would be pleased, but it didn't matter to him. He just wanted her brought back so he could scream at her over Tracy's injuries.

Taking a short break at the mess, Charlie scanned those around them. The majority of people here were Eagles and camp fighters. It wasn't possible for them to sleep yet, not being this wound up, so they passed the time together, recalling their battles and scary moments. Now that it was all over, they were allowed to talk about everything, the note comparing had begun. Details of Angela's plan came out that shocked and amazed them. It filled all of the men and women with the same need for Angela to be returned to Safe Haven. Come dawn,

a group of them would head out to lend Marc support, even if he didn't need it. Sitting here waiting was too hard.

5

Angela stared in dismay at what would be her home for almost a year if Donner had his way. The tall building had once housed a company that claimed to make additives for drinking water. As they entered the doors that buzzed open to admit them, Angela caught a glimpse of a biohazard symbol on the elevator and knew it was a cover for whatever lay below.

She and Adrian were herded down three long flights of stairs with Donner's penlight to show the way. Drugged and weakening with the callous treatment, Adrian swayed, stumbling.

Angela used her body to steady him. Her bound hands wouldn't let her do much else.

They reached the bottom floor of the dark stairwell; Donner held a hand to the scanner that beeped and whirled before clicking the door open. They went inside another dark room as the door slammed shut behind them, making Angela's witch mutter about being inside the earth. The witch didn't care for any type of confinement. In this case, Angela found herself agreeing. No one above them would know they were here and even a descendant's strongest grid wouldn't be able to penetrate. Angela began to worry about Marc finding them.

Adrian snorted, still shuffling along in front of her. “Stop it.”

Angela rolled her eyes at her own mind. Of course, Marc would find her! He would tear these concrete walls down. All she had to do was call out to him once. He would lock onto her and then Satan would arrive at Donner’s weakened doorstep.

But she didn’t.

Donner directed them through a series of long, dark tunnels before stopping at a large intersection that was flanked by three cells with glass windows and secure doors. The cells themselves were black, impossible to view into.

“Get in!” Donner shoved Adrian toward the cell on the right as he hit a button on the wall.

Adrian did what he was told as Angela marked which buttons triggered the door.

Donner opened the cell across from Adrian and Angela went inside. She moved to the small cot and lay down on it, pretending not to notice the layers of dust and dirt, nor the pictures taped to the walls.

Donner locked them both in and then hit the master button on the computer. Lights came on, flickering to brightness as machines spun to alertness, waiting for orders.

Donner dropped down into the single chair behind the desk that had a perfect view of both cells, and began typing on the keyboard. He didn’t look up for a long time.

Trey, aware of what was expected from him, went to instruct the men waiting topside. They would all come down, bringing gear and food, and remain here under cover until Donner was ready to go. That meant disassembling some of their larger equipment, hauling it down, and then scavenging the surrounding areas for their immediate needs. They would also have to get this facility on a paying basis and that meant long hours of switching, sorting, hooking up, and improvising. It was the easiest part of what these men did.

As the lights began to illuminate her prison, Angela saw the adjacent room down the tunnel across from her and studied the furnishings. That room was clean and freshly stocked, judging from the lack of dust. There was a crib, a bassinet, a swing, and stacks of supplies for a newborn. Angela realized there weren't any adult furnishings. He didn't plan to keep her with her child.

Across the hall, Adrian saw the same thing and calmed his rising worry. Angela knew what she was doing. He would play his role. But it was hard to do when her entire presence suggested defeat. He was praying it was all an act on her part, because he had no idea how to erase such desperate depression in anyone, let alone someone he loved.

Angela felt the witch exploring the facility and shut her eyes, glad to at least be still. It felt like Donner's driver had hit every bump in the road and her stomach was sore, tight.

Angela sent a calming hand over her belly, sending energy and strength; the muscles relaxed. None of this had been easy on her and the worst was yet to come.

6

“State your name.”

“Adrian Mitchel.”

“Are you a descendant?”

“Yes.”

“Do you work for the government?”

“Not anymore.”

“Who do you work for now?”

“The alpha.”

“And who is that?”

“Angela.”

Donner hit stop on the recorder and studied Adrian. There wasn't much the blond could tell him about their gifts that wasn't already in the files, except for the one thing Donner had longed to know for decades. Now, he would have his answer, but it had to be extracted. Donner suspected he would get results with Angela when he threatened Adrian's life. “Are you obsessed with her, like the rumors say?”

“*You* might call it that.”

“What would you call it?”

“Love.”

Donner frowned and hit the record button. “Tell us where you’ve been since the war and why you didn’t turn Safe Haven over.”

Adrian didn’t respond.

Donner nodded to Trey, who leaned over and punched the blond man in the stomach.

Adrian gasped for air, doubled over.

Trey delivered another hit to his ribs.

Adrian slid out of the chair, coughing, as Trey stepped back.

Donner enjoyed his pain. “Tell me why you turned traitor to your oath.”

“Why did *you*?” Adrian forced out.

Donner scowled, nodding again.

Trey came and kicked until Adrian’s hand went up for mercy.

Trey retreated, relishing the feel of the man’s blood. Adrian had once been an alpha himself, with great power. Having him grovel was a powerful moment for the mercenary. Trey had come through his own training while listening to stories of the great Adrian.

Adrian sucked in air to talk with. “I needed...the protection at first. Long trip to the bunker. Then she came...and it all changed.”

“Why?”

“Because she believed in me. And I had...to try to live up to what I saw in her eyes.”

“So you threw it all away for a shot with a woman who didn’t want you. Interesting.”

“She does want me!” Adrian growled, wincing at the pain. He was fairly sure one of his ribs were broken.

Donner chuckled and nodded to Trey.

Angela listened to Adrian’s beating without responding. She knew Donner wanted her to. He didn’t need any of the information Adrian had, but he did need the advantage over her. He was hoping this abuse would get it for him.

Angela sank down into her mind, wondering how her camp was, how her son was, where Marc was. He had to be close, but she couldn’t feel him. It made the sense of isolation even stronger.

“Hit him harder!”

Angela’s resolve wouldn’t take much. To stop herself from caving, she took the first door in her mind that the witch lit up and left. She didn’t usually dream walk, but in this case, anywhere was better than here, listening to Adrian be hurt. The only thing worse would be if Marc or Charlie were in there. She was incredibly grateful that they weren’t.

Donner sensed it when Angela stopped paying attention and didn’t order Trey to do any more damage. He’d been testing her, seeing what her reaction would be. He wasn’t discouraged. She hadn’t been able to stay and listen. He would use that when the time came for more important things. Right now, he was choosing how to deal with her while the facility was brought up to full power and

the bunker sent instructions. Thanks to Angela's little Smallpox bluff, the bunker had gotten involved and Donner now had to walk a fine line with them until he got what he wanted. Once Adrian and Angela made the call, he could cut contact with the bunker, safe in knowing they didn't have any more troops to send out in pursuit of him.

His career had been spotless, except for Canada, and they thought he was still loyal to their cause. By the time they found out differently, the call would be made and he and Angela would vanish into the sunset. A few of the men with him would go along for labor and security. The rest would remain here to handle any Safe Haven rescuers that survived. The first group of those should be arriving soon and Donner was ready for them. Unlike before, when he'd needed to capture some of them, he wasn't going to hold back this time. He would wipe them out while Adrian and Angela watched, powerless to stop it.

7

"I'll keep her with me." Hilda took the baby from Kyle. "Get a shower and a meal."

Kyle handed Peggy a note from Jennifer and then moved back toward the gate he'd just entered. Jenny had insisted on him bringing Autumn to Safe Haven. He hadn't argued much after witnessing her attack a small team and kill them all. The soldiers were in danger from her, not the other way around.

Still, it bothered him to have her out there alone. He slipped back into the darkness with a renewed sense of urgency. Even if she didn't need him anymore, he wanted to be there and see the new thing she'd become.

Is that how I view her now? As some sort of thing or creature?

Kyle considered that question, aware that it didn't make any difference to his feelings for her. She could be a purple alien from Uranus and he'd still long to be with her. *But, yes. I do see her differently. And so will the camp.*

Safe Haven had accepted the descendants in many ways, but Kyle didn't think that newfound tolerance would extend to those who'd done the fighting in this latest war. Some of the stories would be passed off as fantasy, but the others would cause fear. Jennifer wouldn't be staying in Safe Haven once it was all over. She wouldn't feel safe.

Kyle grabbed the dirt bike he'd left outside the gate, glad to be able to control it with both hands now. Indian camps and Eagles now surrounded Autumn; he could spend the ride back convincing himself that he still held some value to Jennifer.

Kevin watched Kyle leave, then went to his next spot for a check in. "Everything okay in here?"

"Yes." The doctor didn't look up. He had Conner healing patients and there hadn't been any issues with the quiet teenager. "These check-ins are becoming distracting."

“Life’s hard. Especially when you’re a criminal.”

The doctor wanted to argue on Conner’s behalf, but he didn’t know what the boy was accused of. With his kind, it could be about anything.

Conner had flushed. “I was stalking someone.”

“Why?” The doctor paused, surprised. It wasn’t what he would have guessed.

“I like her.”

“Ah.” The doctor wanted to comfort the kid again, but he couldn’t. Stalking wasn’t a minor crime here and shouldn’t ever have been in the past, either.

“I wouldn’t ever do *those* things.” Conner shrugged. “I just watch her.”

“You might not right now, but later, when the...illness grows, you could,” the doctor told him tonelessly.

Conner didn’t like the picture of losing his sanity. He stopped helping with the man who’d been shot through the ankle. The soldier was one of the few wounded left; the boy staggered to his feet. “Stepping outside.”

The doctor hated his orders, but obeyed them. Marc’s wishes had been clear. “Guard!”

Conner glowered as the Eagle appeared in the door, but the doctor refused to show weakness. “He needs a shower and meal before he goes back in the cell. He can’t keep helping me if he isn’t cared for.”

Kevin had no intentions of starving or abusing Adrian’s offspring, but he didn’t plan to coddle the

boy either. Everyone was waiting to hear Angela's choice on Conner. Until it came, the camp would keep their distance.

Kevin trailed Conner as he headed for the shower, where clean outfits were waiting for anyone who needed them. The tables outside the campers were staffed with Eagles who had orders to keep track of people who were here, who they were with, and at what times. Marc's new security procedures didn't seem so unnecessary now that Angela was missing.

Kevin spotted Samantha at the mess with her men and approved even as he swallowed his jealousy. Cynthia and Daryl were in that crowd somewhere too, but Kevin hadn't run into them yet. He hoped to act normally, but he wasn't sure if he could. They would find out together. Her switching mates so quickly was sitting badly with him. When Angela came back, he needed to talk to her about that. Had she known all along that he and Cynthia weren't a match? Kevin had suspected it, but hadn't wanted to believe their leader was capable of such ruthless manipulations. Now, he wasn't so sure, and that was a life-changing confirmation for him. If Angela had played with his life that way, he wasn't staying here. This wasn't his home anymore.

Angela acted as if she hadn't read it in Adrian's files. "I've picked up bits on it from you and your men."

Donner motioned the guard to leave them alone in the interrogation room. Subtly watching, he saw Angela's eyes go to the bloodstains on the floor, the wall, and then the chair she was sitting in. They hadn't killed Adrian, but after six hours of making him scream, she had to know Adrian would die if she refused what he wanted.

"What are master calls?"

Satisfied she understood the unspoken threat, Donner pushed a cup and a pack of cigarettes toward her.

Angela lit one using her gift again, but she let the flame flicker weakly. The continual use of drugs would naturally dampen some of her power. Donner would be looking for it.

"Legend tells of a series of calls that can be made by alpha descendants, calls that go from your heart, straight to the master's mind."

"The master?"

"The Lord, our God."

"Really? Interesting."

Donner knew she was bluffing again, but he played along. "We can reach God, and beg to be taken home. *You* can."

Angela's eyes showed a deep fear. "We're not ready for that. It's why alphas are usually kept apart, to keep them from drawing the Master's wrath upon arriving to find such disappointment."

Donner scoffed. “How could anything be worse than aging and dying on this miserable little rock?”

Just for an instant, Angela agreed. And then that dauntless spirit slapped him with a view she knew that he hadn’t ever thought of. “Is there a time that it’s okay to make the call? Nothing I read had an answer for that.”

Donner was speechless. In all his studies and experiments, he’d never thought to research it. He hadn’t cared about getting permission. “I still don’t.”

Angela kept quiet, letting him work it out. Like with sex, it was better if both parties were willing. If the requirements were simple, he could have double the chance of success.

For Donner, his entire life had been about this quest. He’d been the only one in his family to have the gift. When his parents had perished, he’d been close enough to feel their pain and regrets, their horror at the empty blackness rushing toward them. *I have to know!*

“And you shall,” Angela muttered as Donner left the room, waving her guard in. She’d bought an hour at best while he searched her topic. Despite Donner’s lack of interest in the subject, Adrian’s notebooks had stated that the government data banks contained a short, but detailed answer. It was there that Angela had placed all her chips. No one knew what any of the calls would bring or what they were for. Angela had hoped the Butcher might have that missing piece, but it was clear he didn’t. Over

the centuries, the information had been lost. She was going in blind.

9

“I see you planted the seed.”

Adrian’s voice was thin, like he was barely there.

Angela didn’t pull him from the grayness. His injuries weren’t life threatening, but the broken ribs and cracked teeth had to hurt.

Adrian’s head lolled against the wall. “Not as much as you in that room, alone with him.”

Trying to concentrate, Angela frowned, sending a small current. Adrian had been in her cell when the guard brought her back. She hadn’t argued.

Adrian jerked and then slid over on the bunk. Angela returned to her plotting, devious mind using the meal and her child’s needs as an excuse for her actions. “If you’re going to keep him in here, you’d better feed me more. I won’t share.”

Angela was sure Donner would listen to every word that she and Adrian uttered.

That was confirmed when the guard slid a third tray into the window a few minutes later.

Angela hurried to it as if she was either starving or trying to claim it, hoping to throw Donner off a bit more. She didn’t wake Adrian.

Angela was still thinking about the images in Donner’s ugly mind. His run to Canada had hidden an attempt much like this between two alphas that

he had thought were a match. It had resulted in disaster and the government ordering a full sanitization to bring it under control. Some of Donner's men had been compromised. More than a few of them had committed suicide in the last month.

The Canadians were powerful. Stronger than her and Adrian, and it had gone badly. Would the same thing happen when she and Adrian were forced to do it? A Maker's Call was impossible to fake.

She needed to know what had happened when Donner tried this before. All she'd found was a huge explosion in his mind, with no details or obvious clues. Had the Maker been furious and destroyed the alphas? She was almost sure that hadn't been the case. If the Maker had been angered enough to come back, one country or even one continent wouldn't be enough to avenge all the wrongs that had been done in His name. Humanity would be wiped out when the Maker returned. That could never be allowed to happen.

10

"He isn't going to wait much longer." Adrian used her hair to muffle the words.

Angela acted as if she was still asleep. During the night, Adrian had turned toward her from their back-to-back position and she hadn't protested, too tired and too warm. Now, with fake light coming in

from the ceiling to tell them what time of day it was, Angela didn't like the closeness.

Adrian rose from the cot and moved to the hard chair, sighing heavily. The sleep had done good things for his injuries, but it was far from over. Donner was a psychopath fanatic that had to be eliminated.

"No worries on that." Angela tried not to picture it. Donner had to know they were planning his death, but he didn't care so long as the call was made and he got his answer. If there wasn't one, Donner was likely to kill everyone here. She had to get her plan finished before that. Angela spent a minute clearing her head and heart. They would make a call today that might change the world.

"Do you understand what causes the power? What sends the call?"

She shook her head. "That wasn't in the books."

"I thought it best to leave that part out." Adrian sighed. "Sometimes details are too...harsh."

"Great." Angela sighed. "What is it now? We have to mind-meld and reveal all our..." Her eyes widened. "Son of a..."

Adrian coughed, hoping to cover.

Angela jerked around to stare at the walls so neither he or Donner could see her expression. She hated lying.

"Yes. We'll be bonded. Forever."

"We already are." Angela forced out anger. "But you don't know what it will bring and neither do I! That has to be made clear to the Butcher or

neither of us will be alive tomorrow. He isn't the type to take disappointment well."

"So you don't think it will work?" Adrian was curious. *Did you foresee the outcome?*

"No, I think we'll make the call; I just don't know who or what might answer. It makes me nervous."

"Donner makes me nervous." Adrian stared at the hair he'd caressed before she'd woken. "Don't deny him."

"I'll do what I have to," she answered sadly, but inside, she was celebrating. She could feel Donner coming toward them, confident in their agreement now that he'd listened to them work it out. He was about to get what he wanted and then some.

Chapter Twenty-Five
Limited Information



1

“I had to be sure they knew the target was here, that all of the top descendants were here. It was the only way they were going to get their bunker babies to go past my second ring,” Angela explained tonelessly. “I tried to show them how deadly we were even without our gifts. I gave them every opportunity to make the right choice and leave us alone. I also tried to kill as many of them as I could through that second ring. I needed the odds to be even for the final fight. I came close, you know?”

Donner nodded. “Yes. You did well. They’ll be stumbling over bodies in the mountains for years. Keep going.”

“The final ring had to show what we could do—that we didn’t need the people we were using to fight, that we were more dangerous, more ruthless than our enemy.”

“You succeeded.” Donner’s tone was gloating. “All it did was get you captured and eventually, killed.”

Angela didn’t stop explaining, stalling. “In time, it will give me absolution. My sacrifice will be greater than my crime.”

Donner threw back his head and laughed. “Don’t you get it yet? There is no god or devil in that top room, no evil or good. That was the line we’ve been fed, but it’s all bullshit. *We* are the superior beings, the gods. Your call will prove that when no one answers. You’ve wasted your life trying to be good, when all you had to do was use your power.”

Angela understood his point of view, but she could never accept that. “I’ll be forgiven. You’ll burn.”

Donner shrugged. “One hell is the same as another.”

“Three days after the call, I go free.” Angela coldly switched topics. She could feel his fanaticism, his lies, and his tortured, twisted mind. “You can tag along and study things, wait for your

answer, but I'm leaving here. I'll blow my way out if I have to. *You* can't keep me."

Donner had expected it to come to this, but if the call was successful, he didn't honestly care what happened after that. "And Mitchel?"

"Give him to the bunker instead of me. Tell them I died."

Donner liked that idea even more, she could tell, but she was also aware that he would never keep his word. He would drug her anyway and just hope it didn't harm the baby.

"How about one day a week free, and you come back on your own to be with your child, who stays with me?"

Angela swallowed the growl, horrified and furious to be negotiating her child's life in the labs. This was exactly what had happened to Adrian's mother. Angela didn't intend to honor her deal either. "Three days free each week and you don't monitor me with anything that has to be implanted. Keep your shit out of my body."

Donner shrugged, waving at the blank paper on the table between them. "Write it up. I'll inform the bunker. It will take them a bit to get back to us. The rain is pouring."

Angela nodded and Donner didn't cuff her to the table as he had Adrian. He left them alone without even a sentry.

Angela was satisfied that she'd pegged him right. In time, she could probably wrap him around

her little finger and keep a government contact, but she had higher goals than one obsessive Major.

“I think you owe me an explanation,” Adrian stated. Turning him over to the bunker had never been a real part of this plan. He still had a lot to offer his Safe Haven.

Angela studied the man across the table from her, not caring that he was busy picking the lock on his cuff with a pen that had been left. Or maybe he’d stolen it.

“Borrowed.” Adrian dropped the cuff and held up his hand, eyes now glowing. “Show me.”

Reluctant to unleash something they had no control over, Angela slowly slid her hand into his. This was it. Once made, they couldn’t take it back.

“I’m sorry. I really am.”

“So am I.” Angela placed her hand in his, shaking.

Adrian opened his mental doors, all of them.

Unable to refuse now, Angela did the same.

The result was a blinding flash of brilliant gold and green lights that swarmed around them in excitement at being free. An instant later, both lights vanished.

Adrian couldn’t control his draw with all of her doors open. He pulled her into his mind ruthlessly, groaning at the effort.

Angela surrendered reluctantly, wishing it were Marc. She stepped into his devious, genius mind fully for the first time.

“I see you,” Adrian murmured. “I see you well.”

Angela was drowning in his love, his devotion, his insanity. “Then see all of me!”

They both froze at the immediate blending of their minds. It was so quick, so complete, that neither of them wanted to move and break their joy at finally being together. There was no one here to get jealous or to misunderstand when they physically gravitated toward each other, leaning their heads together. The images in their minds were consuming.

“What’s going on?” one of their guards asked.

Donner didn’t answer, too busy listening with them on the other side of the glass.

Trey filled in the blanks. “They’re bonding mentally. It’s the final mark of life mates. We assumed the Ghost fathered her baby, but this says differently. *These* two are the soul mates. Resisting each other would have driven them crazy.”

“They’ve done this in the labs, right?” the guard wanted to know.

“Not between two alphas. None of the matches the scientists lined up were actually a match. That’s why Canada blew. A negative and a positive, instead of two of the same, create bad things.”

“I’m confused.”

“You would be!” Donner glared. “Shut up.”

Light flared from the couple again, blinding to those in the next room. The soldiers slid their glasses on for protection as the glare increased through the glass.

“What’s happening?”

Donner didn’t answer the soldier. She’d made a deal, but in truth, it was impossible to guess what she might do now that she and Adrian were alone together. Donner casually retreated behind the concrete divider as the hum of untold power filled the facility.

Angela wanted to protect herself, to pull away and stop, but Adrian refused to let her back out now. He sent his force over her in full strength, finally letting her feel how much he wanted her, how he’d always wanted her. He took them back to that first meeting at Safe Haven’s gates, to seeing her and realizing she was the one. His voice echoed in her mind as he showed her what had become clear to him. *I have always loved you!*

The first image was one of Angela in western times, with a handful of kids and a happy husband, but the haunted look in her eyes when she glanced at the ranch foreman gave her away. The foreman, blond and too late to matter, stared back with the same intense longing.

You were always a day ahead of me, out of my reach.

The picture changed to Angela at the stake, burning, as Adrian and her husband screamed in horror from their cells.

He always met you first! Adrian’s awful pain blasted them into a deeper level of their former lives, taking them to a stunning, lush continent

where bombs were falling and three people were running for their lives. The same men were on either side of the woman, covered in ashes and blood, but it was easy to tell who the woman wanted as they died. Her hand clutched at the blond sentry, instead of her wealthy husband.

Why were you always out of reach?! Why?!

The image flashed to Rome, to Adrian in the arena as Angela sobbed from the balcony while her owner laughed.

Tell me why!

The final vision went farther; Adrian studied it obsessively. He'd never gotten further than this point in time. The next vision would give him answers he'd been denied in all those lives. Adrian tightened his mental grip on Angela and flung them into the past as hard as he could...

The garden teemed with life. Giant rabbits and wolves ran through the valleys, not in a life and death struggle, but both in pursuit of the apple Eve had tossed. She liked how the animals would fetch the food and then quickly swallow it. They could gather their own, of course, but it was fun to interact. The animals and Eve had nothing to fear from each other. They wandered the garden together in peace and amusement.

Nearby, Adam was farming, as he'd been told to do by the Master. His big arms labored under the bright sun. For a moment, Eve wondered what *she* was supposed to be doing. Then the rabbit at her feet

ran off, chasing the wolf, and she was distracted from the new thought.

Her sweet laughter ringing across the area brought a smile to Adam's lips. The Maker had promised him a mate and one had come. He was satisfied. When the Lord told him to, Adam would lie with her.

Across the pond, the caretaker sat with his back to the divine couple, pretending to be absorbed in his work. The Maker had decreed that Elliot would spend his life gathering knowledge that was to be passed along to the offspring of the Garden. Adam and Eve would live and love, and reproduce. Elliot would serve them until their children were able to replace him. During his time in the garden, Elliot had begun to feel that unfairness.

“So pretty!” Eve squealed as she discovered a particularly pleasing flower.

Eve's laugh sent mating thoughts into the minds of both men, but only Elliot acted on them. Put here to study and teach, the caretaker easily discerned what Eve liked, what made her smile, and what caused her to scold. He chose to use those things to steal her from her mate.

Eve had already begun to notice the differences in the two men. Adam was hard and commanding. He told her what to do and she obeyed without question, even when she didn't want to. The caretaker was covered in hair and more muscles than Adam, but he was kind and quiet spoken. He gave her gifts of leaves twined into animal shapes

and taught her how to swim so she could view the animals living under the waters.

Adam had no feelings of jealousy over Eve and the caretaker. The Maker had given the men jobs. When that work was finished, the woman would be his and the caretaker would tend to their children. Adam had no thoughts of disobedience or free will. The Master had said it would be so. Who was he to question it?

Elliot had become aware of the wrong he was doing and even felt guilt for it, but he would not stop his conquest of Eve. In the end, he seduced her away from her mate, like the animals he studied.

Eve, filled with love for Elliot, confessed to Adam that she had lain with the beast and would give birth to a child—Elliot's child.

Enraged by the betrayal, Adam struck Elliot down in the garden and brought about the final banishment that included himself, as well as the pregnant Eve.

When her child was born, she called him Cain.

Adam, bitter to have been turned out, cast the newborn from his sight to die, refusing to let Eve go to her child. Cain's cries weakened until both of them were sure he would soon join his father. Then Adam took what had been stolen from him and gave Eve his child, who they named Abel.

Angela struggled to break free of the awful visions. *That can't be. That can't be!*

Easy, Adrian soothed, almost as upset as she was.

But it's us! We did this!

Adrian could only try to comfort her, knowing it would never be enough. He now had the reasons. Despite being the better match, he and Angela had never been destined for each other. Each time he'd tried to interfere with her and Marc over their lifetimes, it had ended in disaster for all of them.

We cursed the world! Angela sobbed. *You did!*

Adrian felt the harsh judgment of centuries weighing down on him and he opened his heart to the Maker. "Why not me, Lord? Why was I left alone?"

Donner tensed. "The Maker's Call!"

There was a second of light pressure, of a wistful hand running over Adrian's brow with so much love that tears burst from his eyes. A voice came, perfect and masterful, with kindness on a level Adrian had never felt.

"You were to lead them gently into my awareness. You were to be idolized by entire civilizations. Love would have been your mate, love of the world. But it wasn't enough."

Then the true voice came, thundering down with unequaled rage that terrorized them both into huddling on the floor.

"You are the serpent in the garden! *Banished!*
Banished!"

Angela cried out at Adrian's pain, and then her own emotions slammed into her, stealing the last bit

of resistance. *It wasn't our fault! You made us this way! You let me love him! I didn't know!*

There was silence now, that powerhouse gone from their souls, but the truth had come out. She and Adrian had loved each other throughout the centuries, and it was wrong.

"I'm sorry!" Adrian put his hand over hers. "Please forgive us!"

Finally bonded, their power merged, creating a blast of energy that shot out from their bodies and traveled the globe. The call was one that had never been used in the world before.

Angela arched. Adrian's grip became iron as the power sent out a second blast, then rebounded, sucked back into its hosts.

Angela jerked her hands away, needing to gain control of her wildly thumping heart.

Adrian held his throbbing chest, not speaking.

"They've done it! They've called for the Maker." Donner turned toward his office. "Separate those two."

Angela went to Adrian as the door opened, aware of the protocol because of Adrian running through it in his head. She leaned down to place a soft kiss to his cheek. "I loathe you."

Adrian felt her trying to sever their new bonds, but he didn't offer any resistance. It couldn't be done.

Angela went to her cell without resisting or being restrained, further proof of her keeping her word to behave. She also took their drugs,

swallowing them in relief. Maybe she could sleep for the next 72-hours and pretend it was Marc in here with her.

Adrian slumped to the floor as soon as Angela was out of sight, clutching his chest. Unless he wanted to continue the traditions of Elliot, he could never be with her now. She would never be able to get over this and love him. The truth hadn't set them free. It had caged him.

2

Marc shifted restlessly in his bedroll. The others had insisted that he rest until daylight. He'd forced himself into it, knowing he needed to remain strong, but the dreams were haunting. In them, he wasn't himself anymore. He'd become greater than he had been, larger somehow. He floated over land that didn't appear to be the country he lived in. The earth below was perfect. From the birds and trees, to the waterfalls and fish leaping from the crystal waves. The only thing he could compare it to was paradise. As he flew over the mountain, Marc saw mountains and jungles, and then a crisp shoreline that invited him to come closer.

Can I?

To his delight, he immediately flew down and skimmed the waves until he reached the sandy beach. It was too narrow for a large boat, but perfect for someone who wanted to be hidden away and

forgotten about. Before he could explore further, his demon pulled him back to the edge of alertness.

They've bonded.

Marc knew. He'd felt the power, the forbidden call that he'd read about in Adrian's notebooks. The only way to do that was when two matched alphas made the promise of forever.

Will we sleep now?

Marc wasn't sure what would come from this, but the idea of putting his demon to sleep and taking off into the wilderness wasn't one he could stomach. He would die fighting, as he had in every other life his demon had shown him.

Perhaps it has been too much?

Marc disagreed. He knew more about his origins now than he'd ever suspected. He was a leader of men, of all men, and he would continue to be, even after this war was finally over.

Marc forced himself to wake, not wanting to stay in that heaven much longer. The temptation to take the easy way out was one that every person in hard times struggled with, but he was made of sterner stuff.

Marc's eyes opened to show him darkness and a host of people on the ground around him. His magic was stronger now. The bubble he'd placed over their small camp was still standing. Outside that clear dome, snow was falling. That had been the only thing to get him to call it a night. Traveling through the snow would make it easy to miss any tracks.

“I know where the call came from.” Kendle was on his right. “I found it in Ivan’s thoughts before you sent him back to camp.”

Her tone was rebellious; Marc quickly leaned over, eyes blazing. “I was never promised to you!”

Kendle flinched, wounded. “She’s at Mercer Bio Labs. It’s the only place near here that could house a government facility.”

“Really?” His anger rushed out in thick waves. “I already know where she is, but you should have told me that as soon as you figured it out!”

Marc shoved to his feet. “Stay away from me. You smell like death.”

Five minutes later, Marc dropped his shield and strode down the steep mountainside into Dalton. Very few people knew about the bio lab, but Marc had been there before. The high security complex wouldn’t keep him out. *Nothing will stop me now.*

3

“We’re leaving now.”

Cynthia nodded, busy with the paperwork that Kevin kept handing her. “Do the normal check ins, okay?”

“We will.”

Neil and Jeremy motioned to their team; the van rolled over to pick them up. The five vehicles slid from Safe Haven’s rear gate, where only a few camp members were awake to witness it. Inside these

vans were only a few people, but they were angry and it would make up for their numbers. These men and women had been told this war was over, but they didn't have their leaders. It was time to remind everyone that Safe Haven wasn't powerless.

Cynthia heard the gates shut, but she didn't watch the van fade from view. She had her hands full, even though most of the camp was still in their tents and campers. There were schedules for the next day to write and deliver, meals and caregivers to be arranged, guard shifts and posts to be checked on and rotated, and of course, questions to be answered.

“Are we back on full rations?”

Cynthia wasn't sure how much they had now and shook her head. “Not yet. I need to know where we are on food and water before I lift it.”

Kevin wrote that down and continued on to the next of his ten items. “How many shower campers do you want open?”

“Three.”

“Is that enough?”

“We have to be careful with our water. And I don't have those totals yet, remember?”

Kevin flushed, trying hard to act as if she was Angela so it wouldn't be as awkward. “Right. Um, what about the animals? No one can find the vet.”

Cynthia sighed. “Draft some people for feeding and watering. Maybe the kids can do some of it, or the older people.”

“Good idea. Okay, the last harvest gave us seeds that we’re drying. Should we restart the garden or wait for spring?”

“Restart it now.”

“Can I ask why? We’ll still be finding stashes of can goods for a while.”

“Because the winter may not let up by spring.” She handed over the last schedule—his.

Kevin didn’t let himself read it yet. Camp business came first. “We have questions from the camps around ours about leaving. Many of them have people of their own to prepare for the season change.”

“They can go.” That, at least, was one area she didn’t have to worry over. The Eagles and other fighters in Safe Haven were no longer afraid of magic and the descendants were tired of hiding it. If they were attacked again, there wouldn’t be any hesitating. The problem in camp was how the pieces of Angela’s plan were coming out, showing her to be so totally ruthless. It had shocked and amazed all of them to discover that Angela had planned to be captured all along.

“Cynthia?”

She glanced up to see they had more men standing around, waiting for her last answer. She shook her head to clear the thoughts that were suddenly flying at her faster than she could examine. Had Angela done *all of this* on purpose?

“Repeat that, please.”

“Is it okay to get a mass grave going or should we stick to individuals?”

That was an ugly thing to consider. Cynthia held up a finger, turning to view the camp. These people would want to pay their respects, but with more than two-dozen funerals, it would run into dreaded monotony and not be given the honor that each life deserved. “Mass. And I’m sorry for that.”

The men understood and were glad of the choice for more reasons than just the work that could be done quickly with their heavy equipment. They didn’t want to spend the next four days saying farewell to the deceased. They wanted to celebrate their impossible victory.

Kevin motioned the others to go on and handed her the paper with his final three questions on it. “They’re a bit personal.”

Cynthia read them without a change in expression.

Can you find a replacement for me? I can’t do this job anymore.

If so, can I leave come dawn? You don’t need me.

Please forgive me?

“Yes.” Cynthia felt the weariness, and the guilt, but the relief was greater. She hugged him tightly. “Thank you.”

Kevin understood she wanted him to go. That was the final push he needed. He started to remove his Eagle jacket.

Cynthia shook her head. “You’re always one of us, Kevin. Come back when you can live here. We’ll still need you.”

He smiled at that, glad to know it wasn’t banishment that would follow him. He headed for the gate, where he already had a truck waiting. There was another person in that vehicle who’d also had enough of Safe Haven.

Jeff held out the joint as Kevin slid into the passenger seat. “Hit this, turn up the music, and we’ll forget about them.”

Kevin did as he was bid, but he knew forgetting was impossible. He was walking away from the greatest thing he’d ever done. The rest of his life would be wasted trying to figure out why he hadn’t been able to make it work here.

Fate watched the truck roll quickly into the night and be swallowed by the darkness, but instead of sadness, there was hard, cruel amusement. Just because someone left Safe Haven behind, it didn’t mean that Safe Haven would leave them. Magic like that couldn’t be erased by time or grief, no matter how deep.

4

“The Maker’s Call has been made.” The voice was unfamiliar to most of the soldiers it controlled from the private complex inside the Utah Bunker. There was no reason to be friendly with his subordinates. That philosophy ran these tunnels.

“We’ve tracked it, sir. Donner has them at the Mercer labs in Dalton. We’ve prepared a team to intercept them.”

“Good. Keep me posted.” The leader of the bunker had only been a Governor before the war, but Benjamin had outlasted all those above him to claim this position during the chaos.

The flunky left as the man in charge opened a thick, laminated book. In it were symbols of the Freemasons, the Knights Templar, and other mysterious designs that had haunted them throughout history. The truth of it all was in this book.

Benjamin glanced at the orders he’d removed from the safe, as he had been instructed to do upon confirming that one of the forbidden calls had been made. He lifted the orders and the book together, then slowly slid them into the fireplace that the Presidential suite had come with.

In minutes, all paper proof of the conspiracy was only a charred frame that couldn’t be used against any of the Masons who had survived. And there were quite a few. Across the world, bunkers like this one still held remnants of the elite who had perpetrated this evil on the world. If anything came from the Maker’s Call, there would be no evidence.

It was a bit like shutting the stall door after the horse ran away, but Benjamin didn’t refuse the orders that had been written decades ago, when the scientists had started trying to determine what combinations of descendants could bring the Maker

home. He wiped the computer files reluctantly. Sad in ways he couldn't express—he'd enjoyed gazing at the images and stories before bedtime—Benjamin pulled up the latest figures for his bunker. He sat stewing over them, as he did every day at this time.

It wasn't good. There was less than four months of food and water to sustain the two thousand people still here. Half of those were draftees that he'd refused to release because of needing their skills, but that would change. Once he let them loose, those men would overrun every town they came to. Benjamin had to be prepared for them to try to do the same to this bunker.

"It's time for us to relocate." He reached for the files that explained in detail how to move people onto the underground rail system and get them settled in the next shelter. It would use a lot of time, nearly three of the four months of supplies they had left, but there was no other choice. If there were no other bunkers in reach, the order would have to be made to reclaim topside. He would send his little ants scurrying from their holes to reestablish the government's hold over this country. He'd kept enough men to do so. All he needed was a bit of time, a little luck for a smooth ride to the next site...and maybe a descendant to guide the way.

Benjamin pushed the personal files button to stare at reproductive stats for this bunker in the nine months since the war.

Live Births: 14

Stillborn: 19

Current viable breeding population: 178
Sterile population: 69%

The next stats were even less encouraging.
Ragonidusin Infection levels: 27%. Increasing
by .3% daily.

Deaths: 9,432.

Daily Deaths: 25.841

Current terminal population: 142

Current Healthy Population: 2342

Extinction odds would rise with every month that passed, until people finally began to notice and panic. He had to get them topside before that happened.

Benjamin hit a last button and leaned back with his drink in hand. The image on the screen was of the Maker's Call. It was blinding even for a fictional representation, with no one able to determine what was behind the light.

Benjamin didn't like surprises. Donner going rogue on them had come as one, and now, the Major had accomplished his life's goal and sent out a successful call. What would come of it?

The scientists had assured Benjamin that it would amount to nothing, but he'd felt the power of the call even while buried a mile under the ground. That sort of force was bound to draw attention from someone. *Or something.*

Donner's obsessions had been tolerated because of his exemplary record of getting the job done. To lose him now, when he was needed the most, was

an intentional blow that Benjamin intended to see the Major hanged for. The descendants who'd made the forbidden call would also have to be handled. Two matched alpha's running around the country was worse than a camp of oddball powerhouses. Alphas were a real threat.

Benjamin knew what to do about those. Once he was sure there wasn't going to be an answer to the call, he intended to destroy Safe Haven and all of the magic users there. Two large warheads would remove all traces of that rebellious camp and Donner right along with them. "You all have one more day. Make it count."

5

"It's the Ghost!"

Those words were said with the same fear as the other moments in this war, but it wasn't enough to make these soldiers flee in terror. They had survived all five rings of Angela's plan. They had come here to make sure Donner kept his word. He'd promised them Safe Haven and failed to deliver that, but the woman in his custody was worth more. As long as Donner had her under control, they would all be safe and fed. Many of Angela's gifts were known. These soldiers now had a bloodhound to track food and gear. In this apocalyptic hell, that advantage would keep them all alive.

“Move in!” Marc was first in the wave of fighters that burst from the buildings and trees nearby to attack the men on guard around the lab.

The demon wanted to help, but Marc didn’t need it. His fury lashed out through his Colts and then his knife when there wasn’t time to reload. He sliced through the men and leapt over their useless barricades to charge toward the only door.

Kenn followed Marc, their places now switched except for Tonya being here. She kept pace with them, firing steadily as they ran. When she had to reload, Kenn took up the slack, clearing the soldiers closest to her. These men hadn’t expected a full on frontal assault after all the sneaky tactics Angela had employed. They’d forgotten who her mate was.

Kendle wasn’t using her gifts either, preferring to feel the blood spilling around her fingers, but Becky quickly used her power to hit the soldiers running up on them while Kendle was distracted.

Angry that the brunette was so careless, Becky ran to Neil and partnered with him as they followed Kenn and Tonya into the main driveway.

Kendle barely noticed being left, too busy causing crimson to shoot from the screaming man’s eyes with her thumbs.

The soldiers weren’t helpless. As the alarms on the facility began to blare, they grouped together, firing rapid shots that forced Eagles behind whatever cover they could find. A wise man among those fighters grabbed his grenades; the sound of thunder lit the area.

Marc was almost to the door, uncaring of the explosions, the shrapnel, the flames. All he could see was the sentry on the door, who would have the code.

Out of ammo, Kenn ducked a swing to lift the soldier into the air. He tossed the shouting man into two soldiers grabbing Tonya's arm. The trio went down together.

Kenn landed on the pile and shoved his knife through two eyes before they had a chance to do the same to him.

Kenn jerked Tonya to her feet. He shoved her after Marc, who wasn't stopping for anything.

Kenn grunted as pain sliced into his arm; he ran faster, almost dragging her along.

Tonya was trying to keep up, but amid the chaos, she was lost. She wanted to help, to fight, but panic was telling her she had no business being here.

Tonya spotted Becky walking calmly through the rubble, waving her hands to deflect bullets and grenades, and quickly looked down, not wanting to witness anymore. She would pretend she hadn't seen that. It was too much to accept right now. Or maybe ever.

Marc reached the door, arm drawing back to threaten.

The Private tipped his cover. "Damn, Marc. I thought I was gonna hafta to do this alone."

Marc didn't spare time for the grin, just looked at the door.

Seth quickly opened it. As Marc vanished inside the dark lounge, Seth was a clear target. A nearby soldier fired at him in betrayed rage.

Neil shoved Seth, hard enough to knock him into the wall and then over the railing. The slug plunged into the wall where Seth's head had been.

Almost to them now, Becky beamed. "Guess we're even now, Neil."

Seth picked himself up and followed the others into the complex, glad they'd finally chosen to attack. He'd felt Eagles out there last night, but he hadn't been able to contact them without drawing attention from the twitchy soldiers. He'd been ready to trigger the fight himself to keep from hearing Adrian scream anymore. Donner's torture had been continuous until a few hours ago. Whatever Donner wanted, Adrian hadn't wanted to give it to him.

That was proven further when they entered the bottom cells and found the room where Adrian had been held. Kenn collected his bloody Eagle jacket from the corner.

"He ran!" Marc's anger echoed through the complex. The heartbreak underneath it was crushing. "Donner ran. You coward!"

The fighters began stripping the facility, waiting for Marc to choose their next course. Except for Kenn. He knew what Marc would do from here. Kenn motioned Tonya toward a dark hallway. "Come on."

Tonya went curiously, relieved no one had mentioned her lack of fighting skills yet. “What are we doing?”

“Looking for a...” Kenn grunted, forced to use arm strength to turn the handle and force the door open.

Tonya shined her light into what was obviously a tunnel made for a subway car of some sort.

“Go get Marc.” Kenn stepped into the darkness. “And then go back to camp. I’ll meet you there.”

Tonya didn’t like being ordered around, but she knew he was right. She would only distract him. Tonya ran a hand over Kenn’s filthy hair.

He sighed, tugging her close for the hug she seemed to want. “Jeez, woman.”

Tonya chuckled and then went to tell Marc they’d found the hole Donner had fled into.

6

Marc looked down at the wolf, who had stayed on the outer edges of the battle to pick off wounded soldiers rather than to come down into the tunnels. The wolf didn’t like the underworld, but he’d been sitting by the door when Marc came out. *Can you track her, like you did with me?*

Dog whined, head lowering. *Yes.*

Marc understood the wolf’s reluctance. Being underground was like a cell. *Will you find her? Look after her until I can get there?*

Dog moved through the door without saying anything else. Marc needed him. He would conquer his revulsion to do his part.

Marc waved at Seth. “Burn it all after we’re gone.”

“You got it.” Seth had his arm around Becky’s shoulders.

“Kenn’s been trimmed.” Tonya took the medical kit from her belt.

Marc didn’t care. “We leave in ten minutes. Wounded will head for home. Everyone else, get set.”

Becky moved out from under Seth’s arm. “I’m going with Marc.”

Seth understood he was supposed to return to Safe Haven after covering their trail into the tunnels, but he had no interest in being in camp unless Becky was there. He sighed. “I figured. Kenn?”

The Marine grunted, more at Tonya’s rough handling than the request. “She’ll cover it. I’m going along to bring the other one home too.”

Marc growled, stomping into the tunnel, but he didn’t override the order. Adrian would be brought in alive to stand trial and hang.

“There’s a call coming in.” Trey read the instrument panel on the gently swaying train car.

They were in the front two, using the rear for storage of the prisoners.

“The bunker finally noticed we’re rolling,” Donner waved. “Put it through to the rear car.”

Trey hit the buttons, telling the person to hold.

Donner moved carefully though the small train to reach Angela and Adrian. He activated the screen on the wall and flipped on the light switch.

The face that appeared on the screen was young. It was something of a surprise to Donner, who had only dealt with leaders his own age.

“I’m Benjamin Harker, President of these United States.”

“You already know who I am.” Donner frowned, evaluating his boss.

“Yes, I do!” Benjamin smiled thinly at the sight of Angela handcuffed to a cot, appearing to sleep peacefully. Adrian was hanging by his arms in the corner of the railcar. “Double standard?”

Donner snorted, moving to block the man’s view of both prisoners. “Yes. Well?”

Benjamin stared impassively. “You gave away your location. This is a courtesy call before we shut you down.”

“I wanted you to find us. You can’t blow up these tunnels without hurting your own escape plans, so don’t try to bluff me, young man. She already did and my patience is thin.”

Benjamin was insulted. It came through in the darkening skin, the narrowing eyes and thinning lips. He slowly poured himself a drink before

responding. “You’re absolutely right, Major. There’s no need to lie to each other. Tell me what you want.”

“Time for it to work.”

“Then the call was successful?”

“Unknown. You felt it on your instruments?”

“Of course. We know of any mass use of power or force on American soil. The sensors miss nothing.”

“Give me time with her to learn what’s coming from it, what we can do to gain control of it!”

Benjamin stared at the Major, one of the few that remained in the entire country. “Perhaps we can make a deal, Major Donner. Continue to your chosen destination. I will be in touch.”

“Wait.”

“Yes?” Benjamin’s voice was a warning all by itself.

Donner began to understand that the young man might also be hard. That could be useful. “What about Mitchel? I’ve gotten nothing from him.”

Benjamin considered. “We’ve been upset with Mr. Mitchel since the war. I think it’s past time that he...retired. Don’t you?”

Donner chuckled. “Yes, sir.”

“Good. Alpha bunker out.”

Donner frowned. He had begun to hate that name. Despite what he wanted and all that he could gain, dealing with alphas was hard. Donner felt he was getting too old to continue this line of work. But with a baby who could do things, a retirement in the

south with a few loyal men didn't sound bad. As long as nothing came from the call, anyway. Donner had known when he started this madness all those decades ago that he might not be able to handle whatever came from the contact. He'd accepted that he would likely be killed for the evil in his soul, but he still hadn't been able to stop himself. Now that his goal had been reached, Donner was confident there would be a response.

He looked over at Adrian's pale, unconscious form. As soon as they were settled, he would spend some time alone with Adrian and get the answers he needed for himself and the angry little bunker man. All he had to do was threaten Angela's life. Adrian would do whatever he was told. It was the way alpha pairing worked. Donner knew how to take advantage of it. Once he got the information, or assured himself that Adrian didn't know it, he would slit the blond man's throat and leave his body on these dark, dank tracks for his precious Eagles to find.

If they even made it this far. The refueling hub they'd just left was filled with soldiers. When Benjamin had said he sent a team, he hadn't been kidding. Thirty heavily armed mercenaries were now in these tunnels, setting traps and watching for anyone who didn't belong down here. Benjamin had told him the team came from a small site in the east that was dying. The bunker leader had appeared glad to have a reason to use those who hadn't starved. Benjamin had told those men the Safe

Haven rescue party was carrying a stock of food; that was all it had taken to get the desperate soldiers to agree. It was that way in all of the remaining bunkers. No one wanted to be sent out into hell unless it was for food. Then, there were too many volunteers to use.

There was only one other facility within a hundred miles of here. The Eagles wouldn't be able to miss it. His advantage was that it would take Donner three hours to get there. It would take the rescue party ten. He had the only train in this area. Not many elites had been expected to come from Georgia, Donner assumed. The four train cars were sparsely supplied and would hold forty people, at most. Donner had half that number of men along, making it an almost comfortable ride that rolled through the tunnels in near silence. The government had spared no taxpayer expense on their private conveyance.

Donner went to the main car, missing Angela's eyes opening, the smile coming to her lips. "Benjamin, is it?" She was already busy trying to track his exact location. Once she had that, she could lock onto the new President and then find him wherever he went. Her powers had grown again, though Donner would never get the chance to explore them. As soon as the bunker called again, she would be ready to strike.

Chapter Twenty-Six
Under the Bus



1

“**W**hat is this place?”

“It’s a refueling hub. They’ve got one like this outside the western bunkers too.” Ivan was walking next to Marc, giving details when he asked for them.

The building had come into view slowly, lit by dim bulbs that flickered in reluctant duty. The platform of the small hub was dank in places and held an odor they all recognized.

“Someone’s sick.”

“Too many chemicals.” Ivan pointed. “See how yellow it is? All drugs and no food.”

Those words were met with Marc trying to avoid the ugly pictures of Angela being starved and

drugged while she was dragged through this newest hell. “Doors to topside from here?”

“Negative.”

“Closest access point?”

“Ten miles, due west.”

“Great.” Marc sighed. That meant any number of soldiers could be waiting for them. As he had the thought and held up a hand to stop his group, the sound of gunfire filled the tunnel.

Marc couldn't see much once the lights were shot out. He heard the hiss of flares being tossed as Ivan lit up the target zone. Marc followed it with a heavy layer of gunfire that allowed the rest of his fighters to take cover around the edge of the curve before the hub.

“Move in!”

The order came from the enemy.

Marc tossed his grenades into the tunnel in a useless attempt to stop the flood of mercenaries coming their way. Donner's trap was more than Marc had bargained for. The feeling that gave him was as close to fear as he came now when it concerned fighting. Marc let the demon out as he rushed forward to meet death.

He ducked, slicing in the smoky dimness and felt blood splatter his arms. He spun and sliced, stabbing behind him. He kicked out to knock men off their feet.

Marc's Colts had one full load left and he used them now, taking out five of the stunned men who

had no idea what was coming after them in the darkness as the flares burnt out.

A vicious growl echoed as Dog joined the fight, able to see perfectly. He clamped down on a man's neck, squeezing until it burst in his mouth. He hadn't been able to track the soldiers through the muck so he'd come back to his master.

"Marc!"

Kendle's shout drew his attention to the flood of soldiers chasing his team, shooting at them.

Marc did the only thing he could think of. "I'm the Ghost! Catch me if you can!"

He didn't wait to see if they would. The shouts and stomping boots said they knew the bounty for him was huge.

Marc fled toward the hub, hoping his team would come up behind the men to trap them.

At his heels, Dog lunged for another unprotected throat as the soldiers caught up and gunfire echoed again.

Missing the wolf, but not Marc, the gunfire trailed off as the pair vanished into the single door of the small refueling station.

"Move in!" one of the soldiers commanded from the doorway.

Dog was there to leap up and bite down on his face. More gunfire finished the soldier's gruesome death as Dog darted after his master.

Less than a dozen mercs were left as they entered the dark control room in a quick line, trying to stay together.

Behind them, Marc's team rushed up and hurried in, leaving no room for anything except hand-to-hand combat in the darkness. Men grunted, women screamed, knives slashed, and blood covered the floor, leaking out onto the tracks.

“Get out! Its gonna blow!”

The warning came from Marc.

Eagles fled the room right before it exploded, providing more light than they needed.

The explosion rushed down the tunnel, catching good and bad alike. The smell of charring flesh filled the air.

Marc struggled to stand up, blown against the wall as he tried to get all of his team out. He still wasn't sure he had, but he didn't see any soldiers stumbling around. He'd had them all over him in a far corner when he'd pulled the pin and ducked, crawling his way out of the main blast zone.

Above them, a jagged hole had been blasted into the roof. Marc sucked in the fresh air gratefully, clearing his head. When he thought he could walk, he searched the area for any of his team who had survived, aware of a small cave-in happening behind them. Donner's ambush hadn't killed him, but it had come close. Marc's hand slid down to cover the bloody bullet hole in his arm as he counted bodies and survivors.

“Spread out, search for people and ammunition. And be careful.” His voice sounded like he'd swallowed a chain. Marc pulled his shirt up over his

face to avoid the smoke, then tied his bandana around his arm.

Quinn waved. “Over here!”

They dug through the rubble quickly, piling it nearby to find the bodies of Red Stone and three soldiers who’d insisted on following Marc into the earth. They also dug up Ivan, who immediately staggered off by himself. He vanished into the darkness.

“The tunnel’s blocked,” Quinn said too loudly, making himself wince. His bleeding ears didn’t want to work right.

Dog brushed up against Shawn; the Eagle patted the wolf comfortingly, glad the animal had escaped.

“Are we stopped?” Quinn wasn’t sure how they would track an underground train without being able to follow the tracks.

“Maybe we can help with that.”

The new voice was welcome. Marc nodded, then groaned at the pain. “How about throwing down a rope first?”

Neil hurried to get them all out of the ground. He’d witnessed the explosion from his high perch and rolled down to find a gaping hole strewn with crimson splatters. He’d known that was where Marc would be.

Marc sat on Neil’s passenger seat while the rest of Neil’s men tended to the injuries. They also handed them much-needed mags.

“So what’s this idea?”

Jeremy leaned over the seat and handed Marc his laptop. “We broke the code.”

Marc stared at the waiting screen and broke into harsh laughter that ended in a coughing fit.

Neil exchanged glances with Jeremy that said they understood. While Samantha had been missing, they would have driven themselves and anyone around them into the ground during a quest to rescue her. Marc would do the same.

2

Adrian wasn't doing well.

Awareness slowly came to his mind, along with pain, weakness, and worry. His health hadn't been the best before this. The neglect and abuse was taking a toll. Angela was in charge of this run. She would make the call on when they'd taken enough pain to achieve their goals, but Adrian wasn't as confident of his own outcome as he'd once been. Angela had sworn him to trade his life for Charlie. He had assumed that meant he would remain alive. He had no illusions about her leaving Marc. That bond was unbreakable.

“I should know.” Adrian couldn't hear himself through the ruptured eardrum that was causing nausea and dizziness. He hoped Angela planned to trigger their trap soon or he wouldn't be around to witness the result. Even now, his heart was giving odd palpitations that warned of a coming episode that he had no medication for.

“Easy...” Angela soothed from across the car. She’d been sneaking him bits of her food and water when she could, but it wasn’t enough. Another full day like this might see him dead and he knew it.

Will you kill him to achieve your goal? the witch asked.

If I have to. But I won’t. She sent that to Adrian, along with what little energy she could spare, wanting... Angela slammed her eyes shut as Donner came into the car, followed by Trey.

“Looks like she’s still out.”

“What about him?”

Adrian groaned, hoping to avoid the usual punch to the ribs to wake him.

“Feed him.” Donner frowned. “Take him down and cuff him to the couch so he can sleep.”

Adrian fell when Trey unsnapped the chain. He struggled to help drag himself over to the couch. His body didn’t want to obey. He couldn’t remember a time when he’d been in worse shape.

“We’ll be contacted soon.” Donner took the seat near Angela’s evenly breathing body. “You’ll answer some questions I have.”

Adrian nodded. He put both hands to his neck, moaning at the sharp lance of agony. “Whatever you want, just don’t hurt her.”

Donner smiled coldly. “That’s exactly what I wanted to hear.”

Adrian tried to eat everything in the MRE that Trey tossed onto the couch, but his guts wouldn’t hold much. He forced himself to take all of the water

in the bottle, then sank down onto the softness with a grunt. “Can I have a smoke?”

Donner gestured.

Trey lit one, then threw it onto Adrian’s grimy chest.

Adrian enjoyed the brain-fog that the first drag gave him, but the pain from the cough reminded him of his waking thoughts. “I’m not doing well.”

“I noticed that.” Donner smiled. “Something in the air down here doesn’t agree with you.”

Adrian’s chuckle was weak.

Donner frowned. “I’d heard you were a hardass.”

“Before Marc came, maybe,” Adrian said bitterly. “I was younger then.”

Donner snorted out laughter as he understood the old bull, new bull reference. “That’s rich. Why didn’t you kill him?”

“I did.” Adrian gestured resentfully. “And she saved him.”

“So you gave up? Unlikely.”

“I sent him to the front lines where he was killed again and brought back by another of his devoted harem!” Adrian spewed. “He can’t die.”

Donner was forced to accept that. What his men had been telling him was the truth. The Ghost was alive. “It’s him on my trail, huh?”

“Yeah.” Adrian dropped his cig into the tray so that Trey couldn’t eat the remaining food as he’d been doing to torture Adrian further when Donner wasn’t around. “It will suck to be you if he catches

up before you reach the big bunker.” Adrian rolled onto his side, easing the pressure off his broken ribs. “Thank you for the food.”

Donner didn’t answer. He waved Trey on and returned to the main car, scowling. He hadn’t counted on the child’s father being alive, let alone coming for his family. His hub trap might not be enough. He would have to come up with something else for the Ghost. Thanks to the destruction Marcus Brady had delivered to the first battalion, Donner knew not to underestimate him. When Marc came for his woman and child, Donner would be ready to give him the welcome he required.

Donner glanced over at Adrian. First though, he would gain some much-needed information and secure his deal with the bunker.

3

“Answer me!”

Adrian shouted hoarsely as Donner sent fire into him again, but there was nothing to tell the evil Major. No one knew what the Master Call would bring.

Donner had tired of playing with his toy, but he wasn’t allowed to kill Adrian until there was a response from whoever was on the other end of such a call. Adrian had been insisting there hadn’t been a response and wouldn’t be. Donner knew he was lying, but he still couldn’t break the man.

“I’m not lying!” Adrian gasped. “I don’t know what’s coming.”

Donner gestured.

The soldier chosen for this duty swung again.

Two cars away, Angela was feigning sleep while Trey ate her lunch and chuckled over Adrian’s pain. Trey had turned out to be much more dangerous than she’d thought, starving her, grabbing her when Donner wasn’t around, beating Adrian while he was unconscious. Angela wasn’t sure how much more she could take of it.

The monitor near the door beeped.

Trey went to answer it, wiping away telltale crumbs. “What?”

Benjamin stared icily at the mercenary, angered by the lack of respect. “Get Donner.”

Adrian’s scream echoed through the cars. Trey smirked. “He’ll be a few.”

“Working on Mitchel?”

Trey nodded, moving aside so Benjamin could view Angela. “Takes care of her, though. You guys got some sort of deal, right?”

Benjamin already didn’t like where this was going. “She holds value.”

“How much value?” Trey sat down next to her. “Cause she holds a certain...appeal, for me.”

Benjamin frowned. “Name your demands quickly, before your master returns and kills you.”

“I’ll bring her to you and I get to stay. Donner isn’t going to, you know. There’s a small lab before

we cross under the Mississippi River. He plans to stay there until she has the baby.”

“And you’ll kill Donner, I assume?”

“Of course.” Trey ran a hand over Angela’s dirty braid. “Is it her or the child you want?”

“Both.”

“Figures.” Trey rose and came to stand in front of the screen again. “I need it written and sent to me, with *your* signature. I stay with you. Don’t care what happens to anyone else.”

Benjamin slowly nodded, noticing a new problem, but not speaking up about it. He hated having to negotiate with the help anyway. “I’ll draft it as soon as we’re done here. Anything else?”

Trey started to answer and felt the cold hand of fate settle onto his brow.

“I promised you something, Trey.”

The mercenary spun in surprise to discover Angela standing behind him. He opened his mouth to shout for Donner and found himself frozen. *I can’t move!*

Angela rotated to look at Benjamin, finally face-to-face with her true enemy. “Hello, *Benny*.”

Benjamin felt her tinkering. Her witch was coming through the screen! He tried to switch off the communication, but it was too late. Angela sank into his brain as if she’d been born there.

“Stand up!”

On the screen, Benjamin’s eyes never left hers as he did what he was told.

“Draw your weapon.” Angela could see him trying to fight, to resist what was coming. She increased the force, draining herself. “Put it in your mouth!”

His arm slowly raised.

Angela grinned at him, voice full of ruthless satisfaction. “You have been found guilty of treason against the people of this country. I sentence you to death.”

Mentally, Benjamin was panicking. Angela smiled as he opened his mouth and shoved the barrel inside, breaking off two of his teeth as he tried to clench them shut. Tears streamed down his red cheeks as he screamed silently—not begging, but shouting in angry, frustrated disappointment.

“Pull that trigger!”

The body dropped to the floor; footsteps flooded in to find their leader dead.

Angela’s voice and power stunned them. “I find you all guilty!” Angela pushed harder than she ever had.

A blast of energy slammed through the bunker room, causing soldiers to flee. Many of them drew their guns in defense against coworkers suddenly going insane and attacking. Shots and screams echoed as Angela used her gift a last time to capture the nearest female on the screen. “Stay a minute... Marcella, is it? Let’s talk, dear.”

On the screen, the stern woman nodded, eyes wide with terror. “What... Whatever you want.”

Angela smiled, the first real bit of happiness she'd felt since going into Little Rock. "Excellent answer. You may live another day. Those with you will not."

Marcella waited, unable to move and not completely sure she wanted to. The power in her mind didn't seem evil, just insistent.

"I want you to do something hard for me. Can you?"

Marcella nodded, getting the images Angela was sending, the new goal.

"I require the lives of every evil soldier in that bunker and across the country. You're going to see that I get them."

Marcella nodded again, in a daze but able to think enough to understand a coup was taking place and she was in the heart of the conversion zone.

"Good. Go lock the door and then open the files that control the life support systems."

4

Adrian screamed again as Donner sent flames up his spine. "What do you want from me?!"

Donner heard the cracking tone he'd been pushing for. He sat down at the table. "Whose baby is she carrying?"

"Mine!" Adrian sagged against his chains.

"Liar." Donner had been reading descendant faces in the labs for as long as Adrian had been a

specimen in one. “The Ghost really is her chosen mate. No wonder she gave you up so easily.”

Adrian was trying to block his thoughts of the Call; it left him open to Donner prying at other doors, witnessing his humiliation by Marc.

Donner chuckled at some of the images, rubbing it in when shots of intimacy flashed.

Adrian slammed that door with a brutal shove.

Donner took advantage of the moment to yank on the other, suddenly unprotected door and managed to get it open enough to peer inside before Adrian could react.

“You lying scum!” Donner shoved away from the table. “I’ll kill you both for this!”

Adrian ducked the swing as best he could. He let Donner’s momentum spin them toward the wall, where he was able to get his foot on the edge of a shelf and leap up enough to wrap the chains around the Major’s thick neck.

“You know,” Adrian gasped out, struggling to tighten the grip. “You have been a pain in my fucking ass since the moment you landed.” Adrian used his rage and his bitterness to pull out strength that he rarely used. His arms locked in place while Donner twisted and jerked violently, trying to free himself. “The bunker will make contact whether you’re dead or alive, *Major*. You’re now expendable.”

“Never laugh at a witch.” Angela staggered against the doorframe as blood dripped from her

nose. She'd come to witness this moment for herself instead of just watching in the witch's vision.

Angela's weak voice at the door wasn't a surprise, but Adrian refused to let go of his victim. Donner was realizing he was about to die here. Adrian could feel him drawing power to send them both up in flames. Those eyes would be glowing bright green right now if he could see them, Adrian was sure. That shade was a dangerous warning. It was how Donner had controlled the power of his team for so long without any true gifts of his own. He could steal energy.

Adrian wrenched Donner around, and slammed his face into the window, shattering the glass. He jerked him away a bit.

Donner felt what was coming next, but had no way to avoid it. "No!"

Adrian slammed Donner forward again, using the jagged glass as his weapon. The shards punched through Donner's eye and into his brain, sending blood and spasms down his body.

Adrian, still furious, grabbed Donner's head and twisted until he heard that satisfying crunch of a broken neck. Donner had escaped justice too many times. Angela would have to change her plan.

"That won't be necessary." She was still leaning against the doorframe. Donner had wanted to gaze on the Master's face so badly that he'd given his life, but Adrian had taken his sight, hopefully denying him even that final reward upon death.

The success was on her face, but Adrian didn't ask for details. If she wanted him to know the outcome, she would tell him.

Angela didn't. She motioned at a shaking soldier to unlock him. When she'd mentally grabbed the bunker people, it had also snared the two soldiers Donner had placed in the car to guard her. "See that Adrian is taken care of." She shut her eyes as the gently swaying train came to a rough stop.

Not ready for it, the soldier unlocking Adrian was thrown through the window and impaled on one of the same shards that Donner had been.

"Guess I'll have to work on that one," Angela murmured, going back the way she'd come. "You'll have to take care of yourself."

The train stopping brought the remaining soldiers rushing toward them.

Angela placed Trey at the door, forcing him to do her bidding. "She says you can get lost or face the Ghost, but if you come in here, she'll take your souls."

Of those three choices, the soldiers still couldn't make the right one. Well-armed now and fed again, with no slugs or explosives flying by them, their egos refused to believe they couldn't take her.

"Kill that witch! Fire it up!"

The soldiers also rushed toward the other cars, eager to slip in from the rear. Fighting began there, with Adrian blocking their way.

“Are you sure?”

Jeremy nodded, face buried in the screen as Becky led him forward with a tense hand on his big arm. She’d gotten tired of him tripping over things instead of paying attention, but she hadn’t scolded. Jeremy was tracking the only moving thing in this area.

“It’s stopped, half a mile up.” Jeremy shut off the device and stored it in his kit. “We should see it any time.”

Marc motioned the top men to go, indicating the rookies to take the rear. He moved forward in the darkness without a light or guide. Debris under his feet shifted, some squeaking and scurrying away.

Marc picked out a large shadow and then gunfire lit up the tunnel in front of them. It took a second for him to realize they weren’t the target. “Hold your fire!” he called to his team, hoping the fighting ahead would cover his voice.

As they neared the battle, Marc realized the soldiers were firing on their own train and broke into a run. There was only one reason for them to do that. “No mercy, Eagles! Kill them all!”

Marc’s voice coming from the darkness was a nightmare for the soldiers. Most of them immediately tried to surrender.

Marc was having none of it. He sliced and shot his way through to the car that had bloody bodies already outside of it.

“Angie!” Marc leaped into the car. “Where is she?!”

The Eagles behind him followed his example, killing every man who didn’t flee their wrath. They were sick of being hunted by the government. There was no reason to submit to it ever again.

Marc spotted Adrian in the corner with bodies and gear piled on top of him. His hand moved weakly, threatening to pull the pin on a grenade.

Marc was again disappointed that Adrian hadn’t died.

Adrian had felt Marc step onto the train and held up the grenade in his own defense. Now was the perfect time for his rival to be rid of him.

Marc ignored the thought. His next chance would come around again shortly.

Marc pushed open the door to the front railcar, aware of a crunching sound that sent urgent warning signals into his brain. He stepped inside, carefully flipping the light switch up.

“Ugg!” Trey gasped, pouring blood. “Elp E!”

Marc didn’t even consider it. Not that he could have anyway. The damage had already been done.

Marc turned his attention to the true danger in the car.

The witch was beautiful and terrifying as she lunged forward to sink her fangs deep into Trey’s arm. The scream as she tore out the chunk of flesh was awful. Free for the first time in centuries, the witch swiped out to rake a fresh layer of blood from

Trey's face. She rubbed it down her cheek, moaning in delight.

Angela turned away from the gruesome scene. She waited calmly for the witch to be done and the battle outside to finish, mind once again on the future. They'd won this war. Their losses were heavy, but they would go on. Where and why was the next big choice, and she hadn't forgotten that. The bunkers were about to experience a true survival situation, but she would always worry about them recovering. No damage she did to them would ever be enough.

6

Ignoring the panic around her, Marcella locked the door to her tiny room and went to her bed, where she pulled out a small trunk that held all the remaining remnants from her old life. Before the war, Marcella had been an instructor for the Navy. After the war, she had been reduced to coffee girl and pok-ee when Benjamin had needed intimacy that he couldn't get elsewhere. It had been a sad existence.

Angela's words rang through her mind.

"I require the lives of every evil soldier in the bunker and across the country. You're going to give that to me."

Marcella had dreamed of cutting loose on the males here, but the idea of dying had stopped it from being more than an amused smile occasionally

playing on her lips. Now, thanks to a voice from across the country, she would live the dream.

You may die doing this. Your sacrifice won't be forgotten.

Marcella found that she didn't care if she died in the next ten minutes or in ten years. The vision Angela had shown her of the future was worth every life she could give, starting with those here.

Marcella strapped on her breathing apparatus, grinning like a loon under the SCBA. Safe Haven wouldn't be followed. Angela's future would be realized.

Marcella went to the control panel near her door, hearing female screams that implied the men were getting the upper hand. They outnumbered the females four to one. It made Marcella confident in her weapon. She hit the sequence of buttons Benjamin had used once to bluff another bunker, threatening to suck the oxygen straight out of the rooms. Even with the doors shut tight, only a few people would survive. Marcella typed in the reason for the immediate extermination.

Uncontrolled pattern of behavior, of infection, that resulted in damage and chaos that can't be reversed. Infection levels are at 97%. Recommend complete purge.

The computer flashed a verification request.

Marcella took the hand from her bag and cackled as she used Benjamin one last time. Before, it had been for safety and extra supplies. This time,

it was to activate the failsafe and give life to her new dreams.

7

“Angie?”

Marc stepped in front of her, being careful not to draw the attention of the witch bathing in Trey’s blood. The mercenary had stopped screaming on the last swipe, throat ripped out. Marc didn’t think he would be alive much longer.

“She silenced him for me. She’ll keep him awake enough to feel it. Don’t underestimate her hatred.”

“I won’t.” He stared at her blood-covered body, noticing how the layers of it seemed to be growing. Because the witch was coating herself with it? Maybe. There was still a lot that he didn’t understand about their magic. They would discover it in time, he assumed, now that they had some of that.

“Damn.” Angela reached for Marc.

The rumble under their feet was unmistakable. Marc cradled Angie close while the quake ripped through the area.

Unlike the tremors they’d dealt with in the past, this one didn’t stop right away. It kept rumbling, rocking and swaying until Marc took them to the ground to wait it out. All around them, men were being flung down. *A big one—not in the west, here!*

Angela felt the witch return to protect her; they burrowed into Marc's big arms as the ground slowly stilled. They weren't meant to die here. Knowing that was a comfort during situations like this.

Marc caught the thought and found himself asking the one thing he'd avoided the entire time he'd known her. "Angie, how do I die?"

She immediately began to sob, tears spilling in thick drops.

Marc forced himself to be quiet and wait instead of taking it back.

"Adrian."

Marc had already thought of it. He'd only needed confirmation. "Is it a fair fight?"

Angela ignored the clean clothes he dug up and held out. "Yes, but you can still change that future. It doesn't have to be that way!"

Marc smiled softly, no longer bitter, only tired. "Yes, it does. There's one of you and two of us. How could it ever end any other way?"

Angela didn't answer, drained and blurry now that it was truly over.

Marc gently swept her into his arms and carried her from the train. He leaned her against Neil's strong side and moved toward the large, ragged band of survivors who would always have a place in Safe Haven and with him. "We won. We did it! There's just one more thing to handle and then we can begin our new lives."

The fighters cheered loudly, happily.

Kendle had an arm around Adrian, healing him without being asked. “What’s the one more thing?”

Marc grinned, tossing an arm around Kendle’s gun hand. “This.”

Marc drew his Colt and fired into Adrian’s chest, five times in rapid succession.

The reports echoed, sending men to the ground and fighters to the train doors for cover.

Marc and Adrian were locked in eye-to-eye combat as the blond slid to his ass in the tunnel, pouring blood. Adrian tried to ask, but the wounds were already affecting control of his body.

“She said it was a fair fight, but that I didn’t have to do it that way. She meant make peace, of course.” Marc leered as Adrian coughed out blood and puked. “You can die now.”

Adrian gathered what strength he could and shoved into Marc’s mind. *You can’t kill me. Only she can and she won’t! This is why!*

Adrian forced Marc to witness what they’d seen during the Call. “It was always me!”

Adrian spared Marc nothing, including Elliot making love to Eve and Eve groaning his name in ecstasy. “Always mine!”

“I should have known.” Marc fired another shot into Adrian’s gut, drawing a scream. “Thank you, Lord. I hope you enjoyed it, too.”

Kendle hurried to help Adrian.

Marc spun around. “No! Let him die!”

Kenn rushed to get between her and Marc, determined to take a beating to buy time. “You don’t get to make that choice!”

Marc growled in frustration, arm drawing back... The ground split open under his feet.

Marc leapt to the side, anger replaced with instant understanding. Angela wasn’t the only one protecting Adrian.

“Damn you!” Marc swore, staggering over to cover Angela. “Why can’t he die?!”

Arching in agony as Kendle healed him, Adrian heard the curse and laughed through the pain. He knew exactly how Marc felt.

8

“Get them inside!” Samantha’s distorted shout drew enough attention from the guards to get them following. She used hand codes to remind them what to do during these moments. It wouldn’t prevent all the panic, but there were few issues they hadn’t already dealt with. It wasn’t as chaotic as it could have been.

Samantha stayed down, watching for cracks and waiting for the nauseating rumbling to ease off.

It didn’t.

Samantha listened to the growling earth below them, aware of a shift in the air, as if it had gotten ten degrees hotter in an instant. Her mind began calculating possible faults, comparing it to what she

remembered. Then the ground under them began splitting open and the time for thinking was gone.

“Shit!” Samantha scrambled to her feet and ran with the rest of the camp toward the carpet warehouse that Angela’s final instructions had sent them to yesterday. People stumbled inside, shoving and shouting. It was a clear moment for Samantha on why they needed to have descendants in charge. Without the proper shelter, they would be dying faster than they could breed. It was obvious that someone among them had foreseen this happening now. Sam had odds on Angela, but it could have come from any number of people. She wished she’d been able to predict today and be more prepared. She never would have let them outside.

“Stop berating yourself and help me!” Cynthia handed her a crying baby.

Samantha felt her body respond. For one second, nothing else mattered but the tiny life in her arms.

“Look out!”

Samantha ducked automatically, covering Jennifer’s baby with her body.

Daryl pulled her away from the falling stone.

The roof above the doorway collapsed, trapping the last of them to enter in darkness as they pushed their way toward the rear door they’d come through this morning. They knew it was there, but with the cloud of dust that was causing constant coughing, it was impossible to see.

“Light us up!” Daryl flipped his on.

Once they could see, things quickly calmed down a level, but everyone was aware of screaming children, muttering camp members stuffed into a huge cutting room, and the rough grumble of the earth under them that still hadn't faded away.

“Did they bomb us?”

“What is it?”

Confused voices called out for answers. Samantha forced herself to stand up, though she refused to surrender the baby she was instinctively rocking. “Calm down. It was a quake. Take it easy.”

Her words were repeated and sent to those huddled in the rear rooms. The screams slowly faded below the sound of grinding rock.

Samantha had never known a quake to last this long. She wasn't... Her mind flipped her into the zone, showing her what she'd missed. “Yellowstone.”

Several people around her frowned at those words. Adrian had mentioned the super volcano more than once.

“Man, when does it end?” Sam wondered what so many before her asked. She received the same answer they had all loathed.

“It doesn't.” Daryl repeated what Adrian had told them in Oklahoma. “We still have to survive it.”

“When will they get here?” Samantha was tired. She and Cynthia weren't enough to keep these people together.

“At least two days, maybe three.”

Sam sighed resignedly. “Okay. Let’s get the wounded handled and rooms set up. We’ll stay in here until the boss gets back.”

9

Marc kept his group by the train until the ground was completely still. The sound of collapsing structures was now the loudest noise. Marc wanted to be out of the ground more than he could say. The concrete tunnels had showered them in dust and pebbles, and thankfully, held up, but for how much longer?

Marc stood up, tugging Angela along with him. He’d spotted a hatch. “Who has rope?”

Marc kept Angela by his side as he directed the fighters on how to blow it open and rig the rope to get them all out the fastest way. They’d been lucky to have no injuries from the quake that were fatal, though the walls could have collapsed on Adrian. Marc would have ordered a celebration right then and there. “What’s that sound?”

All of them looked to the west, where the sky seemed to have been swallowed by an early nightfall.

“Bugs or birds, maybe.” Becky sent out her grid as Marc did the same, in a different direction.

He suddenly knew what was coming and concern rose. “Where can we go?”

Becky was speechless.

“Bugs and birds. Also dogs.” Kendle started to inch toward the tunnel. She had let go of Adrian, who was no longer full of holes, but was still on the edge of death. He slid to the ground unnoticed.

Next to him, Kenn stared at the sky. They didn’t have air horns this time. “Can we use the train?”

Angela moaned in protest, but Marc immediately detoured that way. Hours behind those bugs and birds would be an ash storm, and then survivors. Safe Haven would need its leaders there to either welcome or eliminate them.

Kenn was the only one who thought of Adrian. He didn’t want Adrian dead, but down here, it could happen. Marc would never forgive the blond.

“Can we make it to camp with him?” Jeremy turned away from the others. “I see a truck you can hotwire.”

Kenn wanted to, but no matter what happened with Adrian and Conner, Kenn had earned his place back. He wasn’t leaving until Marc told him to. “No. No fuel or gear, and no time to collect. He’s not good. Kendle said he had to sleep and eat before he was bounced around.”

Jeremy and Kenn struggled to get Adrian down in the tunnel by themselves without hurting him further. They managed it because of Kenn’s determination to uphold his vow to Adrian. “I’ve got you. Just like always.”

Marc was waiting at the bottom of the rope. He’d sent people to get the train rolling while he settled Angela into the front lounge car. She’d

refused to take any of the cots scattered through the train. “He’s not going with us. If you want him brought in to stand trial, find a way to get him there. Make your choice now.”

Jeremy knew what his priorities were even without Neil’s pointed glance at the door to the train. Jeremy let go of Adrian, giving Kenn an apologetic look; he took his place by Neil.

Marc stared at Kenn with an expression that said he knew everything going through his mind. For all Kenn knew, he did, and then the moment was gone. “I won’t leave him, not like this. It isn’t right.”

Marc shrugged. “That never mattered to him. Wise up before he throws you under the bus too.”

Adrian opened his eyes to search for the only one he cared about. He found her leaning heavily against the window inside the first train car. “You knew.”

Angela nodded wearily from the doorway, unable to rest alone. “Of course. It had to happen here, out of view of the herd. When I said your life for his, I always meant *Marc*.”

Adrian’s cry of pain caused Angela to flinch as though she was feeling it.

Marc stormed to the train. He disappeared inside. “Get us moving!”

Kenn stood there with an arm under Adrian, respiration not even yet from the trip down the rope. He watched the train slowly roll away. He had no idea how he would get Adrian back to Safe Haven,

but he had little doubt that was where his boss would demand to go once he could travel.

Kenn heard the birds and bugs start to pass over. He hefted Adrian's body up to get moving. He would follow the train for a while and stay away from the open areas where the fleeing wildlife would try to find shelter. They were safer down here.

“Wait.”

Kenn spun in surprise. He hadn't known anyone else was still here.

“Let me help him a little more before you drag him around all night.”

Kenn laid Adrian down and watched Kendle send those mysterious orbs into Adrian's body. The castaway had injuries too, but Kenn saw they were scabbed. He assumed she'd tried to heal herself, because the stream of orbs was weak.

Kenn put a hand on her arm, trying to help.

Kendle flinched, swinging.

Kenn fell against the tunnel wall, smacking his head, hard. As he faded into the grayness, his last words were, “Don't teach Tonya that...”

Unable to take being down in the tunnels, and fed up with the way things had gone since she returned to America, Kendle stood and detoured to the rope. She didn't care about birds or bugs. Her rage wasn't as bad now, and for the first time since the wave hit her cruise ship, she felt almost normal. She needed to do some hard thinking and determine what her future would hold. She'd made the choice

to live. That had been the first step. Now, she had to figure out what came next and the two men at the bottom of this tunnel had nothing to do with that.

10

“Come on out before I get upset.”

The vet had lingered, waiting to see Marc carry Angela from the ground with loving care. He’d viewed Adrian’s bloody body and Kendle healing him, but he’d only wanted to see one person emerging. The vet had hid his joy as best he could when Marc brought her up alive.

“I could have healed him completely.” Kendle grunted. “But Marc wanted him in pain for the ride and then in the medical tent, out of his hair.”

“And you’d give Marc anything?”

Kendle shrugged. “I understand his hatred. Adrian is a manipulative son of a bitch.”

The vet instantly liked Kendle. He joined her on the logs around the fire. She clearly wasn’t sure being in Safe Haven was what she wanted.

“I didn’t want it before, but Marc was there.”

“And now?”

Kendle sighed, a painful sound of neglect. “Too hard, maybe. I’m not normal.”

“You’re a descendant. You’re not supposed to be normal.” Chris dug in his kit and tossed a pouch by her feet. He opened his own and had a light meal, listening to the sounds of nature cleaning up the mess below them.

“What are you doing here?”

It was a question that hadn't occurred to her right away. She watched the vet tense and had a brief moment when she felt like she might be in danger. Then it passed and she waited patiently, content with the company.

“I love her.”

Kendle winced. “Yeah, that figures.”

Chris shrugged. “She doesn't know and she wouldn't care if she did. I had to come to make sure she was okay.”

Kendle spotted his red fingertips. “You drew the arrows.”

He didn't answer, face sad.

Kendle left him alone. He understood how she felt. He also wanted something he could never have. “Is her whole damn camp like that? ‘Cause that's a little much, you know?”

Chris nodded. “Considering I'm eightieth on any list, I sympathize.”

Kendle was startled into a snicker.

The vet joined her, allowing the small release of emotions he usually only shared with Ray or Dale. Kendle wasn't like the others. She didn't expect him to be normal because she wasn't. It made it easier to connect with her.

“Because I'm screwed up. Otherwise I probably would worry over you. Be careful with your actions or someone will notice.”

He scowled. “I have been.”

“What’s your excuse for being gone all this time? Or are you not going back?”

“Are you?”

Kendle wasn’t sure. “I’ll make the choice come dawn, I think. I’ll see how tonight goes with the thinking.”

“I’ll tell them I got lost, fell down and got knocked out. I’ll have someone discover me on a patrol.”

“Smart.” She didn’t care that he was a lurker. If he flipped and killed Angela in his obsession, all the better.

“I’d never hurt her!”

Kendle stared in shock. “You’re one of us. You’re a descendant!”

Chris realized he’d given himself away and shoved to his feet. “Damn you!” He stomped into the darkness.

Kendle chose to pretend she hadn’t run into him at all. “I stand by the thought. If he flips out and kills her, Marc will come to me.”

It was almost reason enough to try living there again—that and the feeling of aloneness settling onto her shoulders. Marc wouldn’t notice her absence for days. She could be free now, if she had the guts to break away.

Do I?

Kendle hung her head.

No.

Humiliation was still better than isolation. Her time as a castaway had destroyed her.

Chapter Twenty-Seven
Soft and Sweet



1

“Does this feel odd to anyone else?” Billy looked around.

A small group was in the front train car, watching the tunnel go by, but the sense of traveling backwards was strong. The concrete appeared to do the same.

“Me.” Becky scanned the monitor that showed where they were going. She could feel the worry in camp, the need for Angela to be there, and wished they could make the train go faster. She’d already suggested it, but Billy had refused, saying it wasn’t the same as going forward in a normal vehicle. Becky had no idea what he meant, but the feeling of needing to be in camp was strong for all of them.

“How long?” Jennifer was sitting in the swivel driver chair.

“It took us hours to get here from the hub we blew up.” Billy shrugged. “From there, we have to acquire another ride.”

“And it took a day to get from camp to the hub.” Greg grunted. “So, at least a day and a half.”

Becky frowned. “Damn.”

“Yeah. We’ll need to have a spot picked to sleep.” Greg started to get the maps out.

“Safe Haven isn’t in the same place.” Jennifer came over to point out the new location. “There.” She was locked onto her daughter. Not even the ground kept her out.

“Good.” Billy yawned. “I saw a car dealership about a mile before we found the hub. One of those beauties will have fuel that’s still good. I feel it.”

Everyone except Jennifer snickered at the driver, glad of a light moment. Despite this run being over, they weren’t relaxing yet. That was a bad sign, as if their minds knew there was more trouble waiting for them.

“Something’s wrong in camp.” Jennifer tensed. “They think we’ve abandoned them.”

Billy’s brows drew together. “Is there... Are we able to call them now?”

Dumbfounded expressions circled the group as Billy picked up the mike. “Come in Safe Haven. Anyone out there? This is Eagle team 6. We’re comin’ home.”

The sound of his voice was the answer, but the man on the other end knew to confirm it. “Say again, team 6!”

“We have found the raven and are coming home!” Billy grinned. “She did it, Daryl. We’re free of them this time.”

In the next car, Marc was still evaluating Angela’s condition and trying to figure out what all to do for her, in what order. Her condition was terrible, but not anything he couldn’t fix. What concerned him was the baby. Her pregnancy wasn’t far along. He’d been thinking about it since Adrian had ripped his guts out and made him go talk to the doctor. When Hilda had confirmed her life was in danger, he’d made the choice easily. Soon, very soon, he had to bring that up to Angela.

“I’ve already thought it over.” Angela didn’t move from the lounge chair where she was snuggled under his jacket and pillows. “I can’t.”

Marc needed to know why, but he was wise enough now to understand this wasn’t a good time for that. He handed her the small tray of food he’d been able to scrounge. He scowled again when she dove into it like there was a steak in front of her, moaning in delight.

Angela frowned thinly. “She’s hungry. Let it go.”

Marc dug through his kit again, searching deeper, and pulled out a twisted, faded wrapper that

crinkled in his hand for an instant and then it was gone.

“Chocolate! Oh, Marc!”

2

“I missed you.”

The witch drowsed contently in the demon’s arms, fed, loved, and safe again for a while. She had accomplished a dream with Angela that no other had ever been able to do. The feeling was incredible. “Did you find anything?”

The demon opened a chest, mentally bringing out a small scroll he had gathered while away from her. “Marc found it at the bottom of the halls, under the feet of muck. I wasn’t sure he would come up when he saw all the others down there.”

The witch read it eagerly, sitting up in excitement. “It’s about the Calls! Marc knows what will happen!”

The demon settled back smugly, happy to have the advantage, though not in the cruel way. Marc needed him for the first time in their lives. The demon was proud, satisfied.

“You’ve done well by him. I know waiting until he could accept you was hard. Most of us would have gone mad if we’d had to wait so long.”

The demon puzzled it out for a moment and then shrugged. “He didn’t need me until then. If that hadn’t happened, I’d still be in the sleep.”

The witch shuddered. She would never permit that to happen to her again. Not even if the Maker returned to walk the earth.

3

In the west, Yellowstone exploded, shooting a geyser of primordial material high into the sky. It blasted through the surrounding park with waves of ash and debris that raced over the land like a time-lapse shadow. Above the ground, the geyser of lava spewed lava bombs and flames that flew for miles before setting a new area ablaze.

Burning embers floated down, bringing the air to a boiling mix of ash and smoke that took away oxygen and smothered all forms of life. Tons of that mix swirled in the atmosphere, rushing with the wind. Escape was impossible; the only option was to take shelter as fast as possible. Few people made it.

Not far from the growing destruction zone, a small group of women were riding ATVs west. They were going to an old government lab that had been used for experiments. It was empty now, but still stocked as a last resort hub for the bunker train that ran below it. They hadn't been able to contact the hub or access those tunnels since the war, but Marcella was sure life still existed there. The experiments had been nuclear in nature. It was probably the safest place they could be.

East of Yellowstone, a huge mob of draftees emerged from the ground and swarmed the only sign of civilization in view—a local town too small to have a name. These desperate men and women ignored the ash cloud raining down them, busy kicking in doors to slice hunger-weakened necks. They were free. After nine months, they no longer cared about the cost of it.

4

Billy brought the train to a gentle halt, still grinning. He'd had a rough moment when the autopilot hadn't engaged, but he'd found the right controls in time. He now had another driving experience to his credit.

Greg slapped Billy on the shoulder. "Is there anything you can't drive?"

"Not that I've found. Say, what do you think I'd look like with a crewcut?"

"Different." Greg stared in amused surprise. "Decided to go for it, did you?"

Billy grinned again, shrugging. "It's not like it's a secret."

"True. Does the kid know what you have planned?"

"Nope. She's a kid. No reason to talk about those things yet."

"And if she gets older and doesn't want you?" Greg demanded harshly, suddenly forced into Daryl's role.

Billy's smile faded; a lost expression came over his face. "I almost think being her friend would still be enough. She's special that way."

"Is she a descendant?"

Billy nodded reluctantly, knowing that information would only go as far as their leaders. "She hears the voice, sees things that are coming." His voice lowered. "She can make fire."

Greg put his friend at ease, suspecting why this had been brought up. "Cut your hair, go to the classes, and hope she doesn't fry you in your sleep when puberty hits."

Billy laughed, relieved. He'd witnessed the way everyone treated Kyle over Jennifer, but Billy understood. He had his own...obsession with a girl who was too young for him, though it wasn't a sexual attraction for Leeann. She was like a little sister, or the sister of a dear friend that he'd vowed to protect. Something inside said to stay close to her. The early bonding classes and tests were a good way to do that. Billy expected her to choose someone else when she was older anyway. He was used to being overlooked.

"Things okay here?" Marc was behind them. He'd heard it all, but didn't comment on it.

"All good."

The two Eagles joined Marc and Angela as they left the train and climbed a rubble pile to the surface.

Neil and Jeremy took off to the car dealership as soon as Marc got guards posted, both still in good shape despite the long run. The train ride had allowed them a much-deserved rest, allowing them to make the two mile run in fifteen minutes. They had two large vans back in front of their group within an hour. Finding the key to the fuel tanks had been the hardest part.

“Wait.” Marc gathered them around to listen. “Night will be here shortly. I’m taking Angie to that hotel by the lab. We’ll be along in a day or so. You guys can all go home now.”

Marc led Angela into the van, frowning over her dazed eyes and pasty skin tones. He thought the meal and few hours of rest would help, but she looked worse. It was time to consider following the clues on the scroll. To do that, he would have to discuss it with her witch, who he still didn’t like. Tonight, after he settled her into a pleasant evening, he would make contact.

“Whatever you can do, Marc.” Angela gagged, dizzy. “Save our daughter!”

Marc lifted her into the seat and began digging for the mylar blankets, wishing he had more. Around him, the group grew serious and quickly divided up with little discussion. Marc had Angela covered, they knew that, but it was still evenly split when the two vans pulled out and went in different directions.

Dog sat down by Marc’s seat.

In Marc's van, Shawn drove, Becky and Seth dug through gear to make the five kits they needed, and Jennifer rode shotgun. The atmosphere was calm. Even Angela's breathing was evening out. She slowly drifted off in Marc's arms, leaving the stress for another time.

Marc knew she needed the day to get her head together and decide how much to tell the camp, but he also needed the time for the same thing. He had knowledge about the Calls and other things. He gathered more each time he went dream walking. There were infinite pools to explore and all he had to do was hold his breath. The demon thought he was being reckless, but Marc had to know his role. After what he'd discovered on this run, he would never stop searching until he found what he was searching for.

What are you digging for? his demon asked curiously.

The meaning of my life. Why were we cursed to this existence where peace can't be had? What is the great plan? Is there one? Where do we go when we die? You know. All the usual.

The demon chuckled, still wrapped around the witch. *We shall help you. Won't we?*

The witch was afraid to trust Marc. She'd done so with Adrian and it had hurt to be betrayed.

I understand, Marc sent carefully. *For a little while, I started to believe in him too.* Marc grinned. *So I shot him six times.*

The witch chuckled, too tired to keep fighting. *Yes, I'll help. As long as she's happy, she allows my freedom.*

It was a lame excuse and both males knew it, but they respectfully kept quiet. The witch loved Angela, the same as Marc's demon loved him. Their hosts had accepted their presence without going mad. At times, life was very good.

"It'll get better." Marc shifted to be able to smoke and scan the area they were entering. The Timbertop was a mountain cabin suburb built on a thirty-thirty plan, where the owners had spent thirty thousand for a cabin that would last about thirty years, thanks to prefabricated construction. For a rental property that charged four thousand a month, it was an amazing deal to then be pawned off on some unsuspecting retiree or rookie landlord after three decades. It was yet another housing fraud that Marc was glad had ended. "Take us to the top."

Shawn turned them onto a long driveway that immediately began winding upward. "There's a lodge on the right. I saw it earlier. It has all glass windows on one side."

The Rainbow Nest Party Hall turned out to be empty of cars and people, but not supplies. It was decorated for Christmas, complete with a tree, fake presents, and even a rusting reindeer by the front door. The Eagles cleared it together, leaving Marc and Angela in the van with the wolf.

"Wow." Shawn was impressed. "Nice place!"

“Too bad we’ve got no power.” Becky stared at the room with dual hot tubs. “Wouldn’t that feel good?” Both tubs were empty, waiting to massage sore muscles.

The men groaned. “Stop it.”

Becky chuckled, going to one of the bedrooms. There were eight in total, each with their own bathroom, though only that room in the front had hot tubs.

Becky slung her kit onto the chair by the door and began kicking off her shoes and clothes. She wanted to be clean and naked under the sheets, and sleep for the entire time Marc wanted to stay.

Seth returned to Marc, hoping Becky was going to eat and rest. She wasn’t acting tired, but he knew she had to be running on her reserves now, like the rest of them.

Shawn waited for Marc. “Where do you want us?”

Marc considered it, then shook his head. “Go to bed. Anyone who screws with us right now won’t survive.”

Shawn had to agree. They had four descendants and two high level Eagles here. That was enough to do serious damage. They knew how lethal they were now, thanks to Angela’s plan. She’d given them all a new sense of worth and respect.

Jennifer took the room across from Becky, sure she wouldn’t be alone in it for long. The trouble with Safe Haven had been chaos over the birds and bugs, but Samantha and Cynthia had things under

control now and she had a worried mobster flying toward her in the dusk.

Jennifer sent out a strong call, making sure Kyle knew where to find her, but even as the blast rang out, she heard a dirt bike pull up out front. He'd tracked her down without any help.

Jennifer heard him greet Shawn, who had chosen to crash on the couch by the glass windows so he would be a surprise to anyone who broke in.

Kyle stayed there for a few minutes, checking in with Marc. He saw Angela was already asleep on the master bed with her shoes and coat still on, then he slowly made his way down the hall. Now that it was over, Kyle was dreading the talks and choices that had to be made. He tapped on the open door softly. "Hi."

Jennifer motioned him in. "Can you help me with this zipper?" She tossed him the stuck kit. "I have a clean change of clothes in there and it would be nice to be able to wear them."

As men often do, Kyle flipped the zipper around and made it look easy. He handed the kit back with a grin at her glower. "What?"

Jennifer rolled her eyes, unable to keep from smiling. They'd not only survived, but won! She hadn't been sure when Angela had first rolled out the grand plan.

Kyle slowly shut the door, waiting to be told she wanted the room to herself, but Jennifer only took her clothes into the bathroom, using her penlight.

Kyle dug out clean duds as well, and then searched the room, coming up with a small bowl of snacks that were still good. He assumed the chips and crackers would be as stale as everything else was these days, but food was food when you were hungry.

From across the hall, small moans came, making it through two closed doors.

Kyle rolled his eyes.

Jennifer came from the bathroom in time to hear them as well and see Kyle's reaction. She snickered.

"Again!" Becky's plea rang through the hall.

"Sounds like they're having fun" Jennifer was unable to block the images she was getting.

Kyle watched her, able to tell when the thought he'd been hoping for finally crossed her mind. It took all of his will power not to speak up or rush over to her.

Jennifer listened to Becky's pleasure, feeling her body respond and mind flip dark images. Instead of avoiding the new feelings, Jennifer faced her fears. "You can make me feel like that? Without hurting me?"

Kyle refused to move a muscle or even breathe too loudly. "Yes."

Jennifer blushed at the deep tone of his voice. "How does that work? The second you touch me, I'll get the flashes."

"I've thought about that, about you saying even the good will remind you of him." Kyle began his

plan as if he were walking on glass with bare feet. “What if you keep your eyes open?”

Jennifer hadn’t thought of that. “You mean...watch what you’re doing?”

Kyle nodded, almost unable to keep from shifting. He managed with a small grimace.

Jennifer went to the window, mind working on it.

Kyle was able to readjust and then force that side of him down. They were only talking.

“You promised,” Jennifer reminded him without turning around. “Don’t you back out either.”

Kyle sighed heavily, head resting against the wall. “What do you want from me, Jenny?”

“I want to feel like that and not be scared anymore. I want to be able to enjoy that part of my life.”

Kyle stopped his first thought from coming though his lips. *So do I.* “I’ll help you however you want me to.”

Jennifer looked at him. Kyle could see the fear warring with the courage.

“Will you...but only me. I’m not ready for more.”

Kyle swallowed, suddenly unable to think. “You want me to... And then I’ll go away so you can sleep?”

“You can too. You know, but not sex. With me.”

Kyle was confused; the lack of blood in his brain was a serious disadvantage. “Can you say that again?”

It was so cute that Jennifer was disarmed into giggling at his lost expression. “Wow.”

Kyle chuckled along with her and was able to run it through again to understand what she wanted this time.

Jennifer waited tensely for his answer. “You do think about touching me a lot.”

Kyle twitched. He’d thought he was doing a good job at controlling those thoughts while he was around her.

“You have been.” Jennifer moved toward the empty side of the large bed. “I, ah, woke up a couple times.”

Kyle realized she’d heard him taking himself in hand when he was sure she was sleeping. His face flushed dark red.

Jennifer wasn’t worried about anger, though she didn’t know for sure what his reaction would be. She’d been worried the first couple times she’d woken to discover him curled away from her, rocking and breathing hard, but it had slowly drawn her until she’d begun to scan his thoughts, searching for violence. All she’d seen was a man who longed to touch and taste. It was part of the reason she had the courage to do this now.

“Sorry, Jenny,” he whispered as she climbed into the bed and began getting comfortable under the heavy quilts. “I’ll try harder.”

Jennifer rolled onto her side, facing him. She saw his eyes flick to her gaping top and then find her face. He was ready. Was she? She rolled onto her back and placed her arms above her head, face going pale. “Go on.”

Kyle frowned. *Must be the position Cesar required. I hate that man!*

“We’re never going to do this if you think that way,” Jennifer’s willingness was sinking a bit.

Kyle went to the next step of the plan he’d made for this moment. “That’s not how it works with me. I like the woman to get things rolling. It helps me to know for sure she wants me. I don’t do pity moments.”

Jennifer flushed. *Can I do that?* The thought of leaning over Kyle, kissing him, touching him, brought fear, but also interest. She chose to try being brave again. She quickly rose up and sealed their lips before he could react.

Kyle hadn’t been given time to brace. He groaned in need, hands coming up to twist in her curls. Kyle’s kiss was all man with no holding back. He tasted every inch of the mouth he’d been lusting for. He kissed her urgently, demanding a response, and felt her shiver. He slid his hand along her neck, deepening the kiss to feel her breath catch. He extended the moment by sliding his free hand down her arm to twine their hands together.

Kyle drew back and ever so slowly put his hands on her hips. He lifted her on top of him, aware of how she’d frozen. He cradled her close. “Move

around on me, Jen, see if you like that.” He bucked gently under her, rubbing their bodies together.

A moan flew out of her lips that sent Kyle’s ego to the roof. “Again?”

Jennifer nodded, breathing increasing. She closed her eyes as a sharp, sweet bolt of pleasure shot through her at the contact.

Kyle thrust again and then kept repeating the movement, breaking into a sweat. “This way, we both cum,” he gasped out, hand in her hair, eyes on the front of her shirt where he could see her bra and the tops of the beautiful breasts he’d been dreaming of.

Jennifer was lost. She thrust against him, loving the way his eyes continued to get darker. Every time she responded, he grew hotter.

Jennifer smiled, trying to let him know he wasn’t scaring her.

“Ready for a little more?”

She nodded.

Kyle rolled them over with a fast movement that sent tension into the chilly room. Kyle didn’t give things time to cool down. He slid between those long legs, picturing her without the shorts as he rubbed against her heat. “How’s that?”

Jennifer knew she needed to be scared now, but like before, her body took control and she arched in response, aware of his big arms on either side of her shoulders. It was a flash of the past.

Kyle seemed to know that. He leaned down and kissed her, softly.

Jennifer's lids flew open, eyes locking with his.
Cesar never kissed me!

Kyle used his mouth to shower her with affection, moving from the corner of her lips, to her jawline and then her neck. His hips kept a steady rhythm.

The sight of Kyle's face flushing with need and control was an erotic addition that distracted her from her ghosts. Jennifer lifted her hand and placed it on his cheek, connecting them. For an instant, she was terrified of the images there. Again, Kyle knew and placed a gentle kiss on her palm.

"Touch me if you want," he groaned, increasing the pace a bit as sweat rolled down his spine.

Jennifer let her hand go where it wanted...straight to his hair.

Kyle gasped at the sharp, sweet sensation. His hips thrust harder. He felt Jennifer suck in a breath, surprised that harder could be good. Kyle knew he was near his limit and reluctantly stopped, sliding onto his side.

"What are you doing?" Jennifer was breathing hard. "We're not done, right?"

Kyle laughed. "Just need a man minute."

Jennifer listened to him talk himself down, not getting all the words, but the general tone. *That's the difference. Cesar could never keep from hurting me.*

Kyle blew out a deep breath. "Okay, we're good. What's next?"

Jennifer flushed, but didn't hesitate. "More kissing?"

Kyle snickered, rising up on one arm to deliver what she'd asked for. It allowed a free hand, but Kyle kept it on the bed next to her. He tasted her again, deep and sensual, and curled his fingers into the blanket to keep from touching.

"You can."

Jennifer jumped when his big hand settled onto her knee. His breath against her neck gave her chills.

"I won't hurt you. Try to relax." Kyle slid a hand up her tense thigh, groaning at the feel of her. He cupped that alluring heat with his palm.

Jennifer felt him push inward and then her entire body arched upward at the delicious contact. "Mmm!"

Kyle swiveled his palm, being sure to mash that nub on each rotation as he leaned down to kiss her again, loving the wiggling and panting. No other woman would ever be this hot for him.

Jennifer felt his lips on her neck, then the top of her shirt. She arched again as he kept going and settled over a taut nipple through her shirt.

Kyle moaned, rocking against her hip.

Jennifer gasped as he tightened his lips on her nipple. The noise sent Kyle to the edge, but he didn't take a moment to cool down this time. He rocked faster, swiveled a little harder, and let his tongue slide inside her shirt. Warm milk sprayed his tongue. Kyle growled, suckling in a sexual haze of need.

“Ohhh...Mm. Kyle!” Jennifer went over the edge with his hot tongue swirling around her soaked breast. She was vaguely aware of him jerking furiously against her, grunting and moaning.

Their sounds mingled into a short chorus of pleasure that snapped Kyle awake to hear Becky and Seth still at it across the hall. He’d fallen asleep to that noise.

He glanced over to find Jennifer sleeping next to him and realized he’d been dreaming. Kyle winced at the blue balls and carefully rolled over, putting his back to her for privacy, but also to avoid the temptation of touching her.

Jennifer listened to Kyle’s muffled sounds and movements, scanning his thoughts. They’d had most of that conversation before going to sleep.

The dream kept her cheeks red and her mind protesting, but her body lit up. She was forced to admit that she would be willing to act out that fantasy with him. If it only went even half as well as his dream, it would be a safe start to their physical relationship.

So you’ve chosen to stay? the voice inside asked curiously.

Jennifer listened to Kyle making sure he wasn’t a danger to her and felt her heart fill with more caring than she’d ever planned on. Kyle was supposed to be a means to an end, but he’d turned out to be so much more. *Yes, for now, I’ll stay.*

Next to her, Kyle groaned lowly, mind filled with soft kisses and sweet rocking. It would have

terrified her before, but now, she could do that with him and probably not even flinch.

Jennifer wondered if that new coldness inside was from the killing she'd done. Not only had she fought in the war, she'd delighted in each moment, savored it.

I'm as damned as Angela said I would be. Before she'd left on her run, Jennifer hadn't been bothered by the thought of what she was about to do. During the battles and while waiting for the next one, she'd controlled those thoughts with exhaustion and sleep. Now that was over. The crash had come and it was heavy. *I did what I had to.*

That voice in her mind was relentless. *You enjoyed it. You want more. It wasn't justified.*

Jennifer shoved those thoughts from her mind and rolled over, forcing contact between her and the steadily grunting Kyle instead of facing those horrible accusations.

Kyle froze for a moment, then assumed she was just shifting in her sleep. His movements gradually resumed until he was rocking the bed.

Jennifer let it put her to sleep.

6

On the couch alone, Shawn groaned in annoyance and rolled over to stare at the material instead of the empty fireplace and the mud-tracks on the floor. Daryl would have gone in there and broken things up with his fists, but Shawn could

hear that Becky wasn't being abused. "Whole damn place can."

Shawn wondered if Marc and Angela might be expecting him to handle Seth, then shrugged. If he heard her yell, he'd go in.

Becky's loud squeal and giggle echoed.

Shawn sighed, putting the pillow over his head. "Maybe I'll sleep next year."

In the rear bedroom, Becky shifted on top of Seth's sweaty chest and got comfortable.

"It scared me, hearing that you didn't expect to survive."

Becky wasn't sure what he meant until he repeated her words.

"I won't be here then. Not my problem."

"That was the last of my innocence dying, Seth." Becky hugged him tighter. "That girl is gone." Becky drifted to sleep, sore and satisfied.

Seth didn't. Her words had brought up worrisome images that refused to leave him alone. *She isn't still dangerous to herself...is she?*

Chapter Twenty-Eight

The Flock



1

“**C**ome, my children.” Everett held the end of the rope. “Come on down. We have the Lord’s work to do.”

The group of stoners went down the knotted rope in silence other than the occasional grunt of effort, but each of them wanted to protest. Monsters lived below ground. Everyone knew that.

“What work are we doing down here?” Simon was bringing up the rear.

Everett lit a torch and motioned the others to do the same. “We are going to make sure those government men can’t bother the Chosen People

anymore. You saw what shape they were in when they came from the hole. We have to help them.”

“Safe Haven helps those who help themselves,” the group chanted.

Everett was satisfied that his people understood. “Come, pick up a weapon when you find one, but never forget that the stones under our shoes are the givers and takers of life.”

“Respect the stone,” the group responded obediently. “Love the stone.”

As they moved into the darkness with their torches, all of this group occasionally bent down and grabbed a pretty rock that caught their eye. Within a short time, their pockets were bulging.

“Did you hear that?”

Adrian’s head barely came up. “More of my lost ones. Don’t shoot.”

Kenn still drew his gun while they waited. Light flashed, gradually growing brighter as it came closer. Kenn didn’t like the feeling he was getting even though Adrian was doing a little better after a few hours of rest and a hot meal. Kenn hadn’t told him the food had been a dog or that the bed he was on had mold on the other side of the cardboard. Adrian already knew those things. This wasn’t the first time the blond had been abandoned for his sins. Kenn had confirmed that while they walked. Adrian hadn’t held anything back. Kenn now knew more about Adrian’s mental state than he wanted to.

“Sorry.” Adrian sighed. “It wasn’t our plan to make that call.”

Kenn understood the revelations that had come from the Maker’s Call had caused Marc’s snap too, but it wouldn’t have mattered. At some point, he would have done it anyway.

“I agree.” Adrian struggled to sit up as the lights neared them and the low grumble of worried voices reached their ears. “I’ll try not to do this again.”

Kenn didn’t laugh. He and Tonya would go off with Adrian and restart Safe Haven. Angela and Marc would control their island, and he and Adrian would find somewhere else to go. *Or maybe stay here.*

“I’m going back to Safe Haven!” Adrian was angered that Kenn still didn’t understand it was never okay to walk. “They need me and she knows that.”

“But Marc hates you, and you’re...”

“Still the leader of Safe Haven refugee camp!” Adrian was now putting on a show for their new audience. He would play this role to the bitter end. “Do not underestimate me!”

Kenn shrugged. “I go where you go. That hasn’t changed.” Inside, Kenn was concerned for Adrian and also glad of the choice. Leaving that camp hadn’t been in his plans yet either.

“It’s not in mine at all. Looks like we drew trouble. You want to shoot them or use knives?”

“You could use your gifts.”

Adrian stared, surprised..

Kenn shrugged. “You’re right. You’re the leader of Safe Haven. Why should you hide who you are? There’s no reason for it now.”

That was absolutely true, Adrian realized. If Angela let him live, he could be himself now.

“We want to know who you two are and what you’re doing down here. Right now!” Everett stepped forward to stop the men from their planning and bickering. “The leader of Safe Haven is...”

“Adrian Mitchel.” Kenn flashed a grim smile. “You can be our friend or our enemy, but make the choice quickly.”

Everett broke into a gaff of laughter and coughing. He had to be slapped on the back so he could continue.

“We hit the jackpot, boys!”

The entire group was smiling.

Kenn tensed to fight until he realized they were dropping to their knees. “What the...”

Adrian stood up and raised his hands, thanking fate for sending him what he needed, even though he hadn’t begged for it like he should have needed to. “Safe Haven has to be protected. You’ve been doing that. I know your actions, your reasons and ripples. Come sit with me. We’ll talk of things.”

Everett took the place across from Adrian with the feeling that big changes were coming.

Kenn listened to the odd, fanatical conversation, but only as much as he had to. This was the type of people Adrian would usually have had Kyle take care of after he culled the few innocent ones from

among them. Kenn assumed they would now use these grimy people for protection and then handle them later.

Adrian disabused him of that notion quickly. “You’ve been watching the camp long enough to know they won’t take you. That’s why you won’t join.”

Everett wasn’t pleased to have his secret out, but he didn’t lie or offer excuses. “I’m keeping my people alive.”

Adrian waved at the area around him. “You don’t belong in her camp, but there is a place for you.”

Everett frowned. “The one we have now.”

“Yes. There will always be a need for your kind. Evil will follow Safe Haven. There must be more of us than them, but only the worthy can truly enter.”

Kenn didn’t think any of these people would be found worthy. Their faces were different, far beyond the normalcy that a camp setup would require, even one as forgiving as Safe Haven. Kenn accepted that Adrian was already up to no good, and meddling with things he shouldn’t be. The Marine stood up, heading for the darkness.

“Kenn.”

Kenn stopped, but didn’t turn. “Yes?”

“I forgive you.”

Kenn’s rage spewed forth at that. “Me?! You forgive me? How dare you!”

Adrian didn’t reply.

Kenn stomped off, grumbling, kicking objects from his path. He was quickly out of sight and then hearing.

Adrian covered the pain with conversation. Letting go of his bond to Kenn was the second hardest thing he'd had to do for this run, but Angela had been right. Kenn had the chance to be a new person now. That would only happen if he could view people for who they were, including his idol.

Adrian leaned against the damp tunnel wall, dying inside. The plan was a success. Everything Angela had set up had fallen their way. She'd adjusted on the fly with Donner and managed to use it to her advantage. *Other than a few dozen precious fighters, the only thing she sacrificed, was me.*

2

“What is that?”

Jeff was grumbling like he'd been doing since they left camp. Kevin's question took a minute to sink in.

“What is what?”

“Over there.”

Jeff looked toward the west and saw a nasty sky about to shit all over them. “Damn. Pick a spot.”

Kevin didn't like it that they were already being stopped a few hours into their trip north. He pointed at a crumbling office building. “It's either there or the hospital.”

The area was separated because of being medical. Jeff steered them toward the hospital, making Kevin frown again. “Really?”

“Yeah, we’re gonna need things for this trip. Might as well start scavenging now.”

Kevin couldn’t argue with that. He began checking his weapon like he always did before a run.

Jeff caught it and felt that voice inside complain, but he didn’t allow it to trigger his grief. He would have a different life now. “We’ll go in the front doors. If anyone’s in there, we’ll talk first.”

“Sounds good.” Kevin had no problem with Jeff being the lead between the two of them. Jeff’s attitude was laid back and fun loving, not snotty. *Or at least it had been.* Losing Crista would change him, as death was supposed to.

Jeff pulled them straight up to the doors and checked his own weapon. “Ready?”

“Sure,” Kevin lied. He suddenly had an awful feeling about this place.

Jeff caught that thought too. He passed it off as rookie nerves, forgetting Kevin hadn’t displayed those even when he’d first joined the Eagles. It was why he’d been chosen as Angela’s right hand over so many others. “Let’s go.” Jeff hurried out and to the main doors, holding them open for Kevin to rush inside with his headlamp on.

The hospital was empty. It took them an hour to walk the main floors, carefully pushing open

squeaking, dusty doors to sometimes reveal a body. There were no prints in the dust and no evidence that anyone had come through. The supplies they needed were here, along with enough to outfit Safe Haven for months.

The two men paused on the first floor after clearing the hospital, enjoying a drink and a meal. Neither of them said it, but both men knew they'd call this in. Safe Haven had wounded members and this was a goldmine, just three hours away.

“Look.”

Jeff turned to see rain beating on the front doors. He frowned as he realized he couldn't hear it. He narrowed in on the dark flakes. “Ashes. Something blew.”

Kevin didn't understand.

Jeff spent their break explaining about the ash from a volcano and the tiny bits of glass that were deadly when inhaled.

“How do you know this stuff?” Kevin watched the flakes cover their truck. That would be a good thing if anyone came by.

“I loved the history channel, and any other channel that gave me information on the world's mysteries. Used to drive the wife nuts. She liked Survivor.”

Kevin chuckled. “That's ironic.”

“I know, right?” Jeff was trying to feel normal around the gaping hole in his heart. He'd now lost two women who meant the world to him. Knowing

for sure that you were meant to be alone was a heavy burden.

Kevin slapped him on the shoulder. “Sorry, man.”

Jeff nodded, glad of the friend. “Me too. For you, I mean.”

Kevin shrugged, voice twisted. “Not so sure I didn’t get the better end of that deal. Those kids are rough now. What will the toddlers be like? I’m not a fan of boogers and Barney.”

Jeff laughed, not expecting the picture, and felt some of his loneliness ease. This is what he needed. In time, he might want to be a part of a group again, but for now, the two of them would work fine.

“I’ll call in the morning,” Kevin smothered the small part of him that hoped Cynthia would be there to hear it and feel shame. “They can’t come through this anyway.”

“Okay. You done?”

Kevin was. They cleaned up their mess automatically, following what they’d learned from Adrian. Kevin noticed it this time and met Jeff’s eye. “I know I should hate him, but I don’t. I still miss the way it was.”

“Same here on the way it was.” Jeff grunted. “But I’m on Team Marc.”

Kevin snickered. “Nice. That was a great story, wasn’t it?”

The two males fell into a discussion of fictional characters as they set up a minicamp in the lounge where they could reach the truck in a few steps and

still see anything coming toward them. As for the lights they used and the noises they made, neither of them worried about drawing attention. In fact, it might be that Jeff had put them in the open intentionally, hoping for something to take his grief out on. Instead, shiny vampires filled their dreams with the first true peace either of them had felt since Adrian had gone into Little Rock for his son.

3

“Angie?”

She knew that tone. *Brace for it.* “Yes?”

“Did you know all of this would happen?”

Angela was in the middle of rubbing lotion over her cracked hands. She’d been refusing to think about anything.

She finished rubbing the lotion in before she answered, needing time to find the right wording. It wasn’t a simple yes or no.

Marc was in the chair, looking much like he had back in Nebraska. He pushed his boots off, waiting patiently for her to decide if telling him the truth was a bad idea. Marc was glad when she chose to have nothing else between them.

“Almost all of it. Until I made contact with Donner the first time, I didn’t know about his obsession.”

“And when you realized what he wanted you to do, you chose to take advantage of it?”

This was the part she hadn't wanted to face yet. "Yes. It allowed me to get to the man in charge of the bunker without having to set foot in that place. It was the only scenario that still gave me and my children our freedom."

"And in exchange, what did you do?"

"I bonded myself to another man, one you failed to kill, by the way. Don't think I didn't notice that."

Marc was surprised at how fast she'd turned the tables on him. He thought before he spoke. Did he want to do the same and give true honesty? "I would have done the same even if Kendle hadn't been there."

Angela was glad he'd chosen to be honest, as well. It meant everything to her. "I know. I made sure she would be."

"Why do you keep stopping him from dying? I have to know!"

"I love him, Marc. I'm sorry. I won't ever kill him. He'll be banished from the camp, though he'll be around and you'll have to live with that."

"And why should I?" He might not be able to kill the man now, but chances would come in the future when there weren't any healers nearby.

"Because nothing changed."

Marc's mouth opened... "What?"

"Name something that changed between us because of what I did."

Marc took a quick second to think, sure there was a huge list.

Angela smiled as the silence dragged out. She'd estimated it would take him two full minutes. She lit a smoke. Deciding she would stop soon. Stale cigarettes tasted like ass.

"You never intended to live up to it!"

"Give that man a cigar." Angela was impressed with the ten-second answer. *He's so smart!* "This is war. Just because I made a deal, that didn't mean I had to honor it."

"But he thought...thinks?"

Her happiness faded. "Adrian thought it would change everything. He didn't realize I'd gone by corrupt and sank head first into cruel."

"You sacrificed him?" Marc was trying to figure out the small parts he didn't know.

"And then some." Angela flipped her ash into a pot with the dead plant. "He planned to die in Little Rock; then he hoped to turn himself in to avoid them coming for me. Once it was too late for that, he had no choice but to trust that my plan would save us all."

"It did."

"Yes. And at a cost."

"Because he'll be banished?"

Angela shrugged, not sure if that was part of it. "I'm still working through some of it too, Marc. I didn't foresee having to actually make the call. The bunker contacted Donner the first time while I was under the drugs and it took a bit to wear off." She stared at him in regret. "I didn't plan to make that bond with him. I hope you can believe that."

Marc wouldn't have from nearly anyone else, but he honestly had no reason to feel that way about her. She'd remained strong time after time when tempted by Adrian.

"And I will at any point in the future when he slips close enough to try. The bond isn't what you might think." She stood, going to him on shaky legs that felt foreign. "It means we can't refuse to help the other person if they call for us. That's it. No love involved. Two matched male alphas can do it in friendship."

Marc was suddenly relieved, dazed, and tired. He leaned his head back and shut his eyes as she slid by him to go into the bathroom. Knowing that let the hard cover over his heart fade. Marc realized he'd once again been braced for her to leave him for Adrian. *Why am I so insecure? Did I drive her away with that in each lifetime?* It was something he would spend endless hours considering over the next months, he was sure.

Angela leaned on the dusty sink, not glancing in the mirror. She had noticed Marc's eyes on her hair. She hoped it wasn't as bad as she expected it to be. Holding her breath, she looked up.

It was worse.

Angela ran a hand over the snowy, brittle strands. The ash had been starting as they came in. Marc had probably assumed that was the discoloration. If he'd known it was her hair, he would have been panicking by now. *What should I do?*

“Hey, Angie?”

“Uh, yeah?” She gently pushed the door to block his view.

“I know what to do now.”

“For what?” she asked, stalling. She knew by the tone he’d figured it out.

“To fill you up.”

His chuckle said he knew she was blushing. Angela shook her head. “We’re too tired right—”

“I’m never too tired.”

She could hear him moving around and groaned. “You’re kidding, right?”

“Yes, actually, I am. Come get some sleep. We can cover that in the morning.”

Angela was both relieved and disappointed. She stood in the doorway, frowning.

Marc laughed. “Come on, Baby-cakes. I want to hold you.”

Angela hurried. That sounded perfect.

4

“They’re here.”

“Good.” Samantha didn’t rush to meet them, sure both of her men would come to her as soon as they could. Again, they’d only been apart for a few days, but it had felt like much longer.

Daryl finished his update. “The ash is still falling.”

Samantha didn’t expect it to stop for a while. If Yellowstone had blown, the lightest prediction for

this far away had still been an inch of the volcanic ash. The heaviest had put it at nearly three inches and Samantha was in the middle of finding a better location for them to shelter for the winter. She had maps around her, but she was stuck with mountain areas for her decision, thanks to the camp voting for these stone cliffs.

Samantha heard people go by her room. She put the pencil and notepad down, too distracted to concentrate on it. She'd been planning for their return. Now that the moment was here, she was nervous.

Samantha listened to the familiar steps of two tired, victorious Eagles moving her way and stood up, taking a calming breath. "Hey!"

Jeremy came in first.

Samantha lingered in the hug and kiss, body lighting up.

Jeremy looked around as she stepped back. He saw two beds and went to the one that was untouched.

Neil swept Samantha into his arms when he entered, lifting her to get a giggle and to grope her ass as she held onto him. He then went to the bed where she'd been sitting.

Samantha cleared her throat; both men looked up.

"I need a shower. Go with me?" She looked back and forth hopefully, doubting they would take the hint so easily.

Jeremy paused in removing his jacket. “Uh, which one?”

“Do I have to pick just one?”

Neither man spoke as they exchanged glances.

Samantha bent down to pick up the bag she had ready. The front of her shirt gaped open, revealing no bra and all of her skin. “I booked the shower and there’s a discrete guard on it. That’s where I’ll be.”

She left the room quickly, not sure if either of them would show. It was something she’d always wanted to try and there was only one way to find out if they were willing. She had asked.

Neil and Jeremy were staring at each other.

Jeremy hadn’t moved, jacket half off. “Did you see this coming?”

Neil shook his head. “No. Guess we should have?”

“Yeah, probably.”

Neil sat on the bed to remove his boots, trying to figure out what would happen if they said yes.

Jeremy hung his jacket up next to Samantha’s, wondering what would happen if they said no.

After a minute of quiet, Neil stood up. “Does the idea gross you out?”

“No.” Jeremy shrugged. “I assume we only touch her.”

“Right. And it’s not like we’ll be staring at each other, right?”

“Right.”

Samantha had lingered outside the door, needing to know how against it they were. It was

something of a surprise to hear them working it out. Did that mean they were giving in to please her or that they liked the idea of trying something new? The next words cleared that up for her.

“She won’t be mad, you know. We can say we’d rather not.”

“I know.” Jeremy shrugged. “But I hate to tell her no unless it’s something I honestly can’t give her.”

“So you can do this?”

“Yes. You?”

“Yes.”

“Are we?”

“Do you want to?”

Jeremy shrugged, embarrassed. “I’ve thought about it once or twice.”

Neil grinned. “Me too.”

Sam had heard enough. She headed for the shower she’d reserved in case they agreed. Jeremy thought he was an unneeded third wheel. Neil used to wonder if she just wanted him for his by-the-book nature. She’d already proven Neil wrong. Now it was Jeremy’s turn. There were just some things two people couldn’t do.

5

“Where do you want us?”

Samantha turned around, already in the center stall. She grinned. “One in front, one in rear.”

Her words were pornographic, sending blood rushing downward for both men.

Aware that they would need encouragement for a situation like this, Samantha rotated and began rubbing herself while they watched. She heard the sound of clothes being removed after that and relaxed, knowing she'd won. This would be the most erotic experience of her life. She wanted it now, before her body swelled up with the twins and long before she couldn't sleep this off for a full day. She expected to be sore.

Neil was naked first. He took the rear of the stall, gently turning Samantha when she would have put her arms around his neck. He'd dreamed about having her like this for a while now, though Jeremy hadn't been in those hot images.

Samantha put her arms around Jeremy's neck instead.

He kissed her hard, putting his final inhibitions aside. Every time he crossed a line, he felt more alive than ever. He suddenly couldn't wait to share this with her. "I love you, Sam."

She smiled happily. He didn't usually say it. "I adore you too." She leaned into his embrace. "I always will."

Jeremy kept his hands in front of her, but that was the only rule he gave himself—to stay on his side.

Behind them, Neil was stroking and already close to the edge. He planned to go ahead and then

slowly join in for a second round. He'd never done anything like this before. He wanted to enjoy it.

Neil watched Samantha arch as Jeremy did something to her that he couldn't see. The trooper surprised them all. "Turn a little, so I can see?"

Samantha shifted eagerly.

Jeremy's hands were both busy, thumbs stroking hard nipples. Neil felt his need reach the peak. He grunted as he came, aiming for her hip.

"Damn." Jeremy moaned. "Too hot, Neil." He grabbed his own jerking flesh and aimed for her thigh.

Sam understood. She had a hand between her legs, leaning on Neil as she exploded. "Too soon!"

The three of them broke into chuckles and gasping laughter, relieving the normal tension that could have come.

Jeremy used the sprayer to clean her hip and leg, while Neil soaped up a washcloth and then got busy cleaning her cheeks. None of them mentioned leaving yet. They weren't finished.

Chapter Twenty-Nine
Riding the Waves



1

“**A**re you about done? We want to get this over with.”

Zack tossed the shovel out of the grave and climbed onto solid ground. He didn’t answer the insensitive rookie. If he opened his mouth, violence would emerge.

Zack left the others to prep the site, too tired to help with the next mass grave. Putting ten to a site, they had about half the needed holes dug, and the rest of the night’s work would be the same—opening the earth to swallow the corpses of their loved ones.

Zack went to the huge tent they were using for storage, moving through small clusters of grieving people and medical students. He joined the doctor, who was in a partitioned area getting each body

ready. They would all be cleaned and wrapped before being laid to rest.

“You don’t look good.” The doctor carefully affixed the last piece of gauze around Crista’s forever-pale face. “Guess none of us do.” The doctor had lost much of his bad attitude while treating the wounded. He was beyond arguing.

“I’ll carry her out.” Zack had been on two fake dates with Crista when she was trying to gain Jeff’s attention. He hadn’t thought of her in that way until this week, this run, and then it had hit him that he cared for her. Now she was gone.

“Are you okay?”

Zack shook his head. “No. When will you be ready?”

The doctor sighed. “She can go now if you like, or I’ll keep her here until morning. Your choice.”

Zack drew in a breath and stepped forward to lift the cold, stiff body into his arms. Crista had once told him she’d feared being left on the battlefield to rot. Zack was ensuring what she had feared wouldn’t happen. She was going in the ground that he’d just lovingly turned for her.

The Eagles nearby stared in pain for a moment, then rushed to hold doors and clear a path. They’d expected Jeff to be carrying her out, but no one asked if they should wait. Everyone wanted this awful part finished. The horrors they’d suffered rang in their memories as Zack stiffly walked by them. The loss of any fighter was hard, but this was

a woman they'd all known and admired. Crista hadn't had an enemy in their camp.

Zack took her straight to the torch-lit gravesite, cursing the war, Angela, and even the fact that they didn't have real coffins to use. Crista deserved better. All of their fallen heroes did.

Zack felt Angela's swift glance run over her not quite peaceful camp from a great distance and turned his head, unwilling to acknowledge her in any way. He wasn't sure he could forgive this, no matter what the reasons had been.

2

“Will you tell me?”

Angela was tempted to act as if she was still asleep. Marc would let her wait until tomorrow on the conversation if she really wanted it. She sighed. “I've changed the world. At least, our corner of it.”

Marc wasn't sure how she meant that and was glad when she clarified.

“I made contact with the last big bunker. And then I destroyed it.” Angela wanted to say more, but it didn't feel like she should. Marc wouldn't understand why the other part of it had been so important. There was no way that he could.

“The bunker's gone?” He was stunned that she'd been able to do it from such a distance.

“Yes. They may have other holes to crawl around in, but they've been hurt badly enough that it will take half a decade for them to recover and

fully retake topside.” *And even then, it will be under different rules.*

“You’re sure?”

“Yes. We’re free of them.”

Marc shifted so he could see her face. “Then why are you so sad?”

Angela sighed. “I’d rather not cover that right now, okay?”

Marc knew she needed a break from the stress. He flashed a sexy grin. “Wanna get naked?”

Angela groaned, laughing.

Marc felt the witch shove into his mind.

Have you learned nothing?!

“I need to hit the bathroom,” Marc kissed the top of Angela’s head. “I’ll see if Shawn has any chocolate left while I’m at it.”

“Yeah!” Angela played along, perfectly aware of what was happening. It was all expected.

3

What? Marc hated the witch. He blamed her for bringing Adrian into Angela’s heart. He stood on the rear patio, glaring.

Ah, yes. I’m the root of all evil.

Maybe.

The witch cackled briefly. *One day, Marcus Brady, you will remember how you longed to hear me when you pulled up to that rest stop.*

Marc paled, reading the warning for what it was. *Tell me.*

Only because I need you! Your rudeness is unforgivable! I've saved her life and the lives of your children. How dare you forget that!

Marc went quiet, but he felt every scratch. It stung badly that she was right. If not for the Adrian problem, Marc might not mind the witch.

I have needs. You won't satisfy me, so I have to go elsewhere.

What about the garden? Did you encourage that for the same reason?

Yes. You were too busy working to love me!

Marc had no idea how to comfort a tearful witch and didn't think he should have to. None of this was his fault. He couldn't even remember that life!

Neither can she. It doesn't matter.

Marc found himself listening intently for the next words.

In her mind, she will lose the child, maybe leadership of the camp, and definitely Adrian's presence in her life. She has little to live for.

Marc hated it that he immediately understood. He wanted to keep to his plans of killing Adrian, plans that had become solid, step-by-step blueprints in his mind over the last 24-hours. He knew exactly how to do it.

Many feel that way. Including myself, but not her. She can't control her heart or the coming vote.

And she knows what I'll vote for.

"Yes, I always have."

Marc turned to see Angela standing near the rear door he'd come out. She was wrapped in his blanket, sexy and yet thinner, paler.

"I'm not as bad as she's making it out to be," Angela began to defend. Marc's happiness mattered more than the truth. "The witch is trying to save her own skin. She's the one lying this time." The demon faded back in anger as Angela leaned against a damp, ashy tree. "I'm tired."

Marc went to her and gently lifted her into his arms, loving the way they fit together so perfectly. "If you can only have one of the three. Which would it be?"

"The baby. I've done my duty by the camp and I can't change the past. I wouldn't."

"What?"

"I'm corrupt," she choked out. "I took innocent lives. Not the witch, but *me*. I can't go back. What we saw confirms that."

"What can we do? Tell me." Marc knew his demand was impossible to refuse.

Angela's eyes grew glassy. Her answer came slowly, chilling Marc as the sound of that dead voice always had.

"Nothing."

Marc refused to accept that; he reached out to the witch. *Tell me.*

The witch came forward easily when Angela was so weak. *You have to accept me, as he did. Love me and that power will be great enough to heal any injury.*

How do I do that? We don't even like each other!

The witch cackled softly. *I adore your devotion.*

I feel the same way, he admitted gruffly. *She wouldn't have been able to survive all this without you.*

The witch gently stepped into Marc's mind. This time, he allowed her caresses, her greedy whimpers of delight when he didn't refuse. If all he had to do was submit to save Angie and the baby, he could do that easily.

Never submit to me! the witch roared, lust bleeding over them both. *Take me!*

Marc did.

Afterward, the witch gazed at him, sated. *You have to make a choice.*

The demon had said he wouldn't like it and Marc hadn't, but only because there was so little he could do. Even Conner's gifts couldn't fix this while she was pregnant.

Why him and not me? Marc asked, aware of the irony.

Adrian's gifts can heal her because they are matched alphas—another reason to keep him alive. To be perfectly matched, neither can have an advantage. He sees her as an equal. You don't.

Marc watched the images of the couple making love without rancor, waiting for the witch to explain further. She'd worn him out.

Love heals all. Give them the time alone and never ask about it. No one has to know, not even you.

Marc understood the witch meant for him to give Angela the freedom to do what she wanted. Marc confessed his biggest fear. *I'll lose her to him. You saw them.*

I saw a mistake, one that both of you have overlooked in your outrage and shame. What was Eve's job in the garden?

Marc ran through the stunning, awful images. *Uh, making babies.*

Was she told who to make them with?

Not that I saw, Marc said slowly.

Even the Maker preferred her willing. Don't you think he saw the romance brewing? He could have stepped in and banished Elliott or killed him, even. Why did the Maker allow their love to grow? To create a child?

Marc wasn't comfortable with the topic, but forced his brain to work through it. Whatever the witch was trying to make him understand was important. He knew that by the way she wasn't ravaging him again. She'd promised to every time he would allow it and right now, he was too tired to resist her subtle charms.

The witch flashed him a brutal image of Angela and Adrian, snaring his attention back to where she wanted it. *The true sin in the garden was Adam's reaction.*

How can that be?! The Maker promised him!

The Maker promised him a mate. Adam assumed it would be her, as she was the only female there. Perhaps it would have been from Eve's children with Elliot. Who was Adam to assume he knew the Maker's will? But more than that, they were given the freedom to make their own choices. We weren't cursed until Adam couldn't control his jealousy and committed murder.

Marc didn't want to believe that; the witch drove in her point ruthlessly. *Why would the Maker have a grand plan and then give us free will?*

Marc stopped in his mental protests to puzzle that one out and couldn't. *I don't know. Why?*

When you have that answer, you'll be able to understand. I have to let you figure that out on your own. She has insisted.

Marc realized Angela was controlling the conversation without them having to deal with the awkwardness and emotions. He was relieved and offended, though he wasn't sure why.

She fears your anger.

I'd never hurt her.

Every man has, the witch denied. *She has made many choices based on that damage. Now, she feels she deserves it.*

She hasn't done anything wrong.

No.

Marc's mind cleared of everything except for that. *She hasn't done anything wrong.* She didn't do it. Elliott seduced her, but if the witch was right, they were both blameless.

Yes.

So what did that mean? He had no right to be jealous if she chose to spend time with Adrian? Marc already knew that, but like with her and Kendle, it would kill him to endure it.

Don't ask, don't tell, the witch tried to inject a bit of levity. *Did you notice the peacefulness of the Garden? How the animals who are now bitter enemies, once coexisted?*

I did.

It was the only time there has ever been peace on earth—when Eve and Elliott were caring for the garden and Adam was working for the future. As soon as Adam was told of their love, he broke and allowed the gates to slip.

The gates?

Between worlds. There are many, and the Maker loves them all, even those that exist solely because of our nightmares.

Marc's mind was spinning. *Huh?*

Aware that he was near overload for this talk, the witch finished it as gently as she possibly could. *Elliot was Information. Adam was Labor. Eve was Love. Those are your destinies. Fighting them will only curse us again.*

4

Adrian limped to the edge of the rise, staring down on the lodge with bitterness and longing. The stone throwers had gifted him with their energy

without him asking for it. He was almost fully healed. Only the last wound Marc had delivered was lingering. Angela or Conner might be able to finish it, but Angela wasn't going to. If he wasn't sentenced to death at the trial, she would stay clear of him. Marc would see to that.

Kenn came up behind him and draped a thick blanket over his shoulders. Adrian hadn't expected the Marine to be waiting when he climbed from the hole, but he had been there with a truck and he hadn't been alone.

When Kendle pushed a cup of hot tea into Adrian's hand, Kenn approved and moved back to take up a sentry post. The stone people had erected tents and even found extras for them, but Kenn doubted Adrian would use his. He was sorting through everything that had happened, scheming on how to get back into Angela's good graces.

"I was never out of them." Adrian realized he didn't have to hide anything anymore. He also knew Kenn and Kendle were his when it came to loyalty. "It all worked out exactly as she meant for it to."

Kendle knelt down and peered through the ashy rain that was now falling. They were protected by the overhang, but it was still frigid.

Kenn assumed they would both remain here, staring at their obsessions. He slowly moved toward the new people, not able to relax with the stoners around. And if he couldn't, neither would any of Safe Haven's guards when Adrian rejoined camp.

Kenn needed to get them ready. He also needed to be distracted from thoughts of Tonya.

Adrian was aware of Kendle's warmth as she let their bodies touch. Her scent drifted up in tormenting waves. She was still using the vanilla.

"Why?"

Kendle glanced up absently. "I want what she has."

"Marc."

Kendle shrugged, stare going back to the cabin. "Maybe the power too, and that's wrong. Right?"

"Of course." He shrugged. "It's also human. Besides, she needs women like you. The power will come in time."

"If I pick Team Marc?"

"Not for her. She'll be relieved if you stay with me."

Kendle frowned. "Do you want me to?"

"Only because I'm afraid of being alone," Adrian answered without meanness. "I'll care for you as much as I can. Maybe love would come for us in time."

"Yeah, maybe. I'd be doing it because if you're good enough for her, then you must be like him."

"I know that!" Adrian ground out. "He did it intentionally, to hurt me."

"Did what?"

"Made you fall in love. He could have given you to Quinn or Jax, or even Shawn, but he chose to torment me with another woman who dreams of him."

“He did a good job.” Kendle had never felt so used. At least with Ethan, she’d known he was dangerous. She’d thought Marc was one of the good guys.

“He is, actually,” Adrian was forced to correct. There wouldn’t be any lying allowed in this relationship. “He always does his duty.”

Kendle recognized the tone. “He’ll demand your death!”

“Won’t need to.” Adrian snorted. “The camp will. Angela will try to stop them. Marc will get the final choice.”

“And we both know what he’ll pick, so why are you going back?”

“Why are you?”

“She might die in childbirth...or choke on a piece of candy.”

“You’re a bitch!”

“Well, yeah. Isn’t that part of why I’ll work so well as a substitute?”

“Yes. And I’d like to tell you now that when you stop shooting flames, we’re done. I need that fire to make this work.”

“That’s fine, since I have more heat than you can work off me in a lifetime. Here’s my caveat: I want to be a real Eagle, preferably XO on that *bitch’s* team. Can you get me there?”

Adrian slowly knelt down and took Kendle’s chin in his cold hand. He studied her openly—not her features, but her mind. It took a moment to see that she had earned whatever she was given.

“No need. She’ll reward all of her fighters.” He dropped his hand, aware of the tingle. They were compatible. “Ask for something you’ll need that she won’t give you.”

“Time alone with Marc.”

Adrian rocked back on his heels. “Yeah, that’s definitely one.”

“Can you?”

“If I promise him to leave her alone, he’ll sleep with you.”

Kendle sighed. “It wouldn’t be enough.”

“Yeah, tell me about it.”

“You’ll try?”

“Of course.” Adrian shoved himself into the future. “As my woman, you’ll be well cared for.”

Kendle also took the window of opportunity, sure if she rejected him here, they would have a platonic relationship. He was reaching out. “Tell me a little about that, Mr. Mitchel. Marc seemed to think you can make me melt.”

Adrian moved behind her without responding orally. He didn’t touch her right away, trying instead to see if they had true sparks or if their longings would drive it all. That would determine how their physical moments would have to go. Did she like him at all?

“I find you...attractive.”

“Only passing fair?” he rumbled in bitter amusement. “I could dye my hair.”

Kendle snorted at that image. “I could get pregnant.”

Adrian's breath caught. "...would you be willing to go that far?"

"Only if it got me Marc in the end." Kendle sighed. "I don't think I'd be a good mom right now."

Adrian understood. He noted the drooped shoulders and carefully placed his hands on them. "How fast do you want to get over what was done to you?"

"What did *she* pick?"

Adrian didn't ask how Kendle had known. The grapevine in Safe Haven would always keep people informed. "Fast, of course. She considers her options, scans the future, and then makes the choice."

"Head-on, huh?" Kendle was becoming aware of Adrian's warmth behind her and the urge to lean back. "Figures."

Adrian waited as Kendle considered her options. When she scanned the future, she didn't seem to have one. That made the choice easier. At least she wouldn't be alone, and if Adrian could help her over the trauma of Ethan Kraft, it might be enough to hold her for a while. "What does fast mean?"

Adrian was encouraged that she'd asked the correct question. He stepped forward to provide the warm resting place she'd been thinking about.

"Mmm..."

Adrian stiffened. "Is that funny?"

Kendle turned around, brows drawn together. “What?”

Adrian realized she hadn’t been mimicking Angela. Their pleasure sounded the same. “Damn, he’s good. I hate him so much.”

Kendle figured it out as she stared up at him. Would it be the same for her? Had Marc at least hooked her up before he’d forgotten about her?

Adrian felt the request and leaned forward to place a soft kiss to her forehead. “Give me a day and I’ll prove that he did.”

Kendle allowed him to tug her into his arms, where his body heat immediately swarmed over her. It was disappointing about the kiss, though. She’d agreed without knowing if he would be able to satisfy the itch she had.

Adrian growled as his male side leapt to the front. He tangled his hands in her short spikes and kissed her as if she was Angela.

When Adrian ended the embrace, Kendle didn’t move. He could feel her ragged breath against his cheek. He wrapped his arms around her, heart thumping in his chest. “He picked it real well, didn’t he?”

“Bastard!” Kendle buried her head against his chest. “God, I miss him.”

Adrian sensed she wasn’t referring to Marc and led her into his tent. They had a lot to discuss.

“Our vehicle won’t start.” Shawn came in from loading their gear. “Damn ash clogged it up.” Shawn took off his scarf, missing the ski mask he’d left in camp for some unknown reason. “I’m gonna go scout another set of wheels, once I make this.” Shawn held up a bag of coffee grounds he’d found in the trunk of a rusting car down the block.

The lodge filled with cheers. Samantha’s bean plant had been stripped and used, and was already a memory. Li Sing had been making the coffee with chicory.

Ten minutes later, the smell of boiling grounds had brought an eager morning chat between the seven people. Coffee had that effect, even if it was cowboy style.

Shawn grinned. “Should take us about three hours to get home, as long as we can find a road Angie didn’t destroy.”

Angela gave the expected smile and let her fighters blow off the steam they had left. She’d given Cynthia notes on doing the same for the camp. So far, she hadn’t sensed any trouble there since the quake.

Jennifer took her mug to the big glass windows, sipping carefully. She hadn’t cared for coffee before the war. It was another welcome change to discover that it now hit the spot perfectly. “Hot, dark, and bitter.”

Kyle heard the comment and began rooting through the cabinets. “Come on. I know you’re here.”

The others stared in confusion as he tore through the last drawer to come up with a small yellow box. “Yes!” Kyle took the box to Jennifer and held it out. “How about hot, dark, and sweet? Like you.”

Jennifer grinned, taking the sugar. “Silly.”

“That’s me.” Kyle took her place at the window while she doctored the mug.

“Anyone else?” Jennifer offered.

Becky got up. “Me.”

Everyone else passed.

Marc took the moment to scan Angela’s thoughts. The darkness hadn’t lifted. He was still worried despite bonding with the witch.

Bonding? His demon snorted. *I can’t walk and you call that gift bonding?*

Marc snickered, drawing Angela’s attention.

“Something amuses him.” She hoped he would leave it alone until they returned to Safe Haven.

Marc thought fast. “Cynthia and Samantha might be a bit miffed by us sitting here having a latte like it’s a commercial.”

Angela snickered with the rest of them at the wording. She allowed her lighter side to surface for a rare moment. “You’re too cute for a coffee commercial.”

“That is so true.” Becky didn’t like the speculative glances she was getting from Seth. “How about a swimming spot for the Olympics?”

Marc’s cheeks started to redden. “I don’t think—”

“Why not the beautiful cowboy in all those cologne shots?” Jennifer loved Kyle’s mock growl as much as Becky when Seth tickled her for her comment.

Marc’s face was steadily getting darker. Angela shrugged. “I’d need an audition before I pick. Make sure our new ride will fit a casting couch.”

All three couples broke into laughter as Marc dove at her, gently tickling.

It was a simple, sweet moment for the pairs, who didn’t get many of those. Shawn tried not to begrudge them as he joined in the teasing. He left sooner than he’d planned though, and wasn’t surprised when Dog met him outside the lodge.

Shawn opened the passenger door to let Dog into their ride. “I’m gonna pop it in neutral and let us roll. Maybe the bumps will clear it out a bit and then she’ll fire up.”

Dog leapt into the seat eagerly. His thoughts were still on the strangely attractive female he’d seen. For a brief moment, he thought again about tracking her down. Dog glanced at the door of the lodge, whining. He loved Marc... *But I’m not content anymore. It’s almost time for me to go.*

6

The trip back was silent and somber for most of them. Shawn’s idea had worked, saving time, but to reach Safe Haven’s location, they had to drive through part of Angela’s battlefield. It was

gruesome. After days in the elements, the bodies were gory.

Kyle saw Jennifer shut her eyes and immediately understood, thanks to the witch. He slid a quick arm over and tugged her into his lap.

His fast reaction distracted Jennifer as she huddled there tensely, aware of half the passengers frowning at him.

You needed something else to think about. Kyle adjusted so she would be more comfortable. *Did it work?*

Jennifer snickered, nodding, and allowed him to settle her under an arm and over a knee, so that he could rock her. “I have a question for you.”

Jennifer didn’t sense anything bad coming and yawned, face still turned into his chest. “Sure. What’s up?”

“Do you think you’re ready to try the camper again?”

Now Jennifer was completely distracted.

The others approved the technique, especially Angela, who had sent her witch out to warn all of the males that her team would need to be cared for after it was over. Men were always better at adjusting than women were. She hoped their no-nonsense attitudes about war would help her girls understand that serving the greater good in these ways wasn’t an unpardonable sin.

Jennifer frowned. “Will you be there?”

“If you want me to be.” Kyle glanced down, suddenly glad to be doing this in front of witnesses.

“We won. You’re safe now, and you certainly don’t need me protecting you anymore.”

All of those things are true, Jennifer realized happily. Other than the deaths of those she loved, life could restart for her now.

“Conner told me he healed you.” Kyle cleared his throat. “If you get cleared first by the doctor, I’ll even try to give us a son.”

“Are you bribing me?” Jennifer demanded, lanced with pain. She could still feel him in her arms!

“Yes.” Kyle admitted it shamelessly. “I’d rather wait on another baby and let you heal, but if that’s what you need to be happy, I’ll try my hardest to make it happen.”

Jennifer blushed at the eager tone, giggling. “Stop it.”

“Whatever you need, Jenny. I mean that.”

“I know you do. Yes.”

Kyle gaped. “Yes?”

She nodded, without meeting his eye. “I want a son. Give me my baby back, if you can.” She dissolved in sobs, emotions finally spewing.

Kyle gathered her into his arms, murmuring nonsensical endearments as he rocked her. Once the poison was out, she would feel better.

Jennifer’s anger rushed out through her sobs. “I meant it! Don’t you b-back out on me.”

Kyle laughed, cuddling her tighter. “Not on my life! I’d give you anything. You know that.”

Jennifer allowed the tears to flow; she eventually fell asleep that way, with drops still glistening on her dark lashes.

Chapter Thirty
Homecoming



1

Angela had instructed Cynthia to take the camp to the carpet warehouse because of the size. It was a vast complex of rooms she had hoped might still be filled with items of use. Before they reached the monstrous building, they had to cross the railroad tracks. Before they could get to the tracks, they had to travel through dozens of small groups that were lined up around their people.

The Indians made up the farthest rings. Marc was glad to see that Grendin, Natoli, and Atolius had survived the battles. He would tell them about Red Stone, though they already knew. It was the

proper way, so the Indian's body could be retrieved by his mourning people.

After the Indians, came a surprise to some of those in the truck. The remaining soldiers, now moving away from the road as Eagles rushed toward the convoy, appeared to have been disarmed and were under guard. Angela had vowed not to leave a single enemy alive. Less than one hundred had survived, and only because she hadn't been willing to kill any more of her own people just to have a perfect tally. It was intimidating.

As the small convoy rolled by, shouts of support and cheering began to echo. The wave of sound drew waiting people from their tents; the sides of the road quickly filled with Eagles, Indians, soldiers, and descendants.

Angela tried not to cry. *My people!*

They love you.

Marc stiffening next to her told Angela that he'd heard Adrian's message. She chose to ignore it, but she was surprised when Marc waved a hand at her to continue before falling into a discussion with Shawn on their remaining fuel.

I'll be there soon.

Angela ducked her head to give herself the illusion of privacy. *You should go north. Nothing good waits for you here.*

I'm coming in.

There were survivors in Canada. You heard his thoughts. You could start over.

Not without you.

She sighed again. *Then come home and face what you've done.*

Thank you.

Don't thank me! I traded your life for the sheep and then for Marc, and I'd do it all over again!

That's what I'm grateful for. Adrian relished the feel of her, even the part that now loathed him. *You've reacted exactly as I needed you to and the result is coming into view. Enjoy their love. You're worthy of it.*

Angela felt him shut the door between them and was relieved that he hadn't said more. She had begun to suspect that Adrian had manipulated her into what she'd done at the bunker, but she hadn't allowed herself to actually spend time thinking about it. Now, she added up the clues as they came to her, not enraged like he probably expected. How could she be, when the goal had been reached? Did it matter that she hadn't known her destiny until the grand plan was being drawn up? Did it matter that she wouldn't be here to control the new future she'd started? Only time would tell.

The convoy, now larger from an Eagle escort, rolled across the railroad tracks to find another group under guard. The Mexicans were waiting to speak to her about their leader. The sentries here were thicker than on the soldiers. Most of the Mexican army had gone south after fighting with Marc. Sebastian and his main men had shown up for round two; there were roughly fifty of them left. They glowered at the happy reception with hatred.

Their leader hadn't made it back. They wanted to know why.

The new groups of descendants were also staying close to the Mexicans. Marc was sure that had kept Eagle guards alert. If the descendants thought the heavily-armed men were a problem, they probably were.

"Don't get out until I clear it," Marc tossed over his shoulder and then went back to his talk with Shawn. Fuel was important.

Angela hadn't planned on it. The rebellious thoughts of the Mexican's were already forcing another choice she didn't want to have to make.

"I can handle it." Jennifer was also monitoring thoughts and didn't like what she was finding.

"No." Angela waved it off. "It's covered."

"You're the boss. Do you need me right now?"

"Not with your daughter yelling that way. You are off duty until morning."

"Nice." Kyle smiled. "Me too, Boss?"

Angela winced, glad Marc's back was to her. "For a bit."

Marc hadn't missed her reaction, but he had other pressing concerns as Charlie stormed from the flag-decorated warehouse with a thunderous face and clenched fists.

Angela's mental sigh was awful to hear. *Leave him alone. I've earned this and much worse.*

Marc scowled, but didn't interfere as the truck stopped and Charlie began screaming.

The accusations were spat with a teenager's lack of caution and tact. Everyone listened in shock as he accused her of sending Tracy off to be beaten and raped so that she could talk the bunker into letting her keep Adrian. He then went on to connect that to her hurting Marc and then getting Crista killed.

Angela withstood it without any reaction, but she took each arrow deep into her heart and held it tight, knowing it would fester. *I'm a monster.*

Charlie had gotten most of the rage out. He stared at his mom in confused betrayal. "Why?!"

Angela swept the witnesses, seeing they too needed those answers. She'd planned on it. Angela was glad to know that the rest of her designs were coming to fruition as well, but it still hurt her deeply to see such wariness in their expressions. "Tomorrow morning, there will be three trials held in Safe Haven. One is for Conner Mitchel, who is accused of stalking and sexual deviance. The second is for myself. It's a leadership vote."

Stunned, Marc turned to her.

Angela quickly finished her last orders. "The third is for Adrian. He'll be here soon. Get three cells ready and get us locked up."

For almost a full minute, no one moved. It was easy to see that her voluntary surrender was likely enough, but her plans required that she play this role to the end and she would.

The Mexicans suddenly began to cheer as the words were passed to them.

Angela glanced at Marc. *Take me into custody.*

Marc almost couldn't do it. In the end, it was the witch and her whispers of the grand plan that allowed him to take her arm and motion for Shawn to get her other side. Angela was lethal and he still had to train his men. Like those who'd come before him, Marc was going to use every moment as a tool.

Marc led her through the silently staring crowd and into the warehouse. He'd already used his grid ability to find the brig.

"Thank you."

Charlie spun around to find Tracy standing by the flap of their tent. She'd chosen to have some time alone. No one had argued once the doctor had cleared her. It didn't seem to bother her that the freshly dug graves were about to be filled in right next to them. Charlie did mind, but not enough to bring it up. They wouldn't be here long anyway. "For what?"

"No one ever stood up for me like that," Tracy sighed "She doesn't deserve it and you're going to apologize and then make it right, but I'll never forget it, I promise."

Charlie was completely confused. He followed Tracy inside their tent, sputtering reasons for his rant.

Forgotten during the show, the rest of the passengers exited. They made their way through the congratulations and into the warehouse behind Marc and Angie. Seth and Becky went toward the mess, using her mental grid to find it. Peggy and

Doug exclaimed happily as she and Seth joined them.

Angela heard it and frowned at the changes in Peggy. Her public tune had changed drastically after Samantha had called her out.

Angela swept each area they went through, noting the work that had been done to make it safe. She nodded approvingly at Ray and Dale, who were busy collecting carpeting they would need in the caves when they settled for winter.

Both Eagles started to rush over and then realized she was being escorted, like a prisoner. They stayed back and watched in confusion.

Marc took her to a center room, glad of the location when he realized there might be many people who wanted her out of the way. Now would be a great time to accomplish that goal.

“That’s the reason I told them to put the cells in the center.” Angela grunted. “I’m reaching in my pocket.” She would act like what she was—a suspect awaiting her judgment. She lit a stale smoke that had come from Donner, then handed her jacket to Marc and stepped into the cell.

“Get her out of there!”

They all looked at the angry woman storming into the room.

“Right now!” Cynthia motioned to the men with her.

Daryl had Angela out of the cell and back into her jacket before she could protest.

“She’ll be held in a real room. One with a bed, food, a bathroom, and her man. See to it.” Cynthia’s tone was a set order that pleased Angela. She was obeyed without question.

Angela could feel Marc’s relief. He hadn’t been sure how long he would be okay with her crammed into a small cage.

Behind them, Conner was being brought into the cage room, though he wasn’t shouting the way Angela had foreseen in the beginning of things. She’d put him with the wounded intentionally, hoping it would bring him a new awareness of life and death. With that, he might be able to recover.

Angela sank down into clean sheets a few minutes later, smelling fresh-baked bread. They were giving her a hero’s welcome, doing it in ways the camp couldn’t argue with. “I don’t deserve this. And I love you for it.”

Angela was asleep in the bed a few minutes later, with Marc curled around her. They were home.

2

“Welcome back.”

Kenn returned the greeting in relief. He hadn’t been sure of his reception after the glowers they’d received while coming through the camps. Kenn had been glad when Adrian insisted that he and Kendle come back together. Adrian wasn’t far

behind though. Kenn looked at Daryl. “Where’s the boss?”

Daryl frowned, happiness fading. “She placed herself under arrest, along with Conner. Told us to do the same to Adrian when he gets here.”

Kenn scanned the crowd that was no longer as hostile to him now that he’d been greeted by a top level Eagle. “You won’t get him there.”

Daryl wasn’t sure he wanted to.

Kenn looked around again and saw little support. Those who would help him were flashing gestures, but it wasn’t enough to control a mob. Kenn noted the armed men standing in small groups, the tense air waiting for a spark, and shook his head. “He won’t make it out of the truck.” Kenn spun back toward his vehicle. “If this is now how we handle justice here, tell Tonya she’ll have to come to me.”

“Get back here!”

Charlie’s voice was one Kenn hadn’t expected to hear. He waited for the teenager to reach him. “What?!”

Charlie still found enjoyment from Kenn’s distress, but he had a job to do. Tracy had insisted. He held out an envelope.

Kenn stared at it in hatred. Small and torn in places, the message had obviously survived more than one battlefield.

Kenn opened it with nervous anger, aware that there were hundreds of witnesses.

*Marc is the only one who can get him through.
Use what you have to.*

And below that, in a quick script that Kenn was sure she had added reluctantly:

Ask Kendle to help.

She didn't want Kendle and Adrian together, but she'd added that note. It meant he would need the assistance. "I have to see Marc."

Daryl couldn't find a reason to say no. He led Kenn into the warehouse, immediately relaxing once they were out of sight of the other camps.

"I hope Adrian has a good plan, or we'll be burying him with the other bodies tonight." Daryl was now moving fast and spitting out information. "That crowd is angry and they outnumber us if the soldiers and Mexicans make a deal. We've got them separated and under watch."

Daryl opened a door and took them down a long, dusty hall covered in prints. "If he walks in here, they'll riot. Some of our people will join them too. They're all pissed."

"They have a right to be." Marc was in the doorway in front of them.

The guard on the room, Greg, nodded to Daryl and headed down a different hallway.

Kenn didn't get close enough to be easily reached as he tried to convince Marc to save his rival. "Think of—"

"I won't."

Kenn held out the last envelope from Angie. "Then follow orders!"

Kendle had trailed them, hating Angela for her new chore. She was ruthless.

Yes, I am. Now do your duty and then go be rewarded with the reception from Safe Haven that you've longed for.

Angela's voice was a deep command of the alpha, but it wasn't needed. Kendle didn't want Adrian killed. With him around, there was always the chance that Angela would go to him and Marc would be free.

That will never happen! He has always been mine!

Marc smirked, aware that Kenn knew the females were talking, but wasn't picking it up. Being out of the loop drove all Marines crazy.

"You can't let him be lynched." Kendle dropped a bomb. "Adrian and I are a couple."

Marc, furious at being set up, blasted into Kendle's mind and found each lie she'd told.

Kendle shuddered as Marc dug through all the layers of her torment and then went deeper. Nothing escaped his attention.

Kenn, worried for Adrian's new relief source, put a comforting arm around her shoulders.

Just as Tonya walked in.

"You skank!" Tonya ran straight toward the cringing castaway.

Marc barely caught her around the waist, swinging her around.

"Take this!" He shoved Tonya at Kenn.

Kenn caught her and held on, dragging her toward the door as he tried to explain. “Stop! It’s not what—”

“I’ll rip your eyes out!” Tonya swung on Kenn. “And hers!”

Kenn grunted at a well-aimed blow to his jaw from a pissed elbow. Tiring of it, he pinned her against the wall with his body, straining to be careful but not get hurt.

Listening from her bed, Angela reluctantly put a stop to it. She was enjoying the show. “He’s not lying. Be quiet.”

It took Tonya a full minute of listening to Angela’s explanation before she would calm down. She kept kicking and delivering death threats until Angela finally tired of it and opened the door.

Tonya froze at the wave of menace that ran over her. She stared at Angela in concern and distrust. “Kendle and Adrian?”

Angela nodded; it was easy to see from the pain in her face that it was true. “Marc was scanning her lies. She was scared. Your man showed compassion to her. Real progress for him, wouldn’t you say?”

Tonya tried to keep it going. “If it’s true.”

Angela went back to her bed. As she sank down, she waved a hand and slammed the door shut.

Kenn moved back as Tonya shivered. “She has no reason to lie for me. I don’t even like Kendle.”

Kendle stiffened. “You’re no picnic either, Smurf Balls!” She turned to Marc. “You’ve seen my

secrets. How about we see yours? Are you a good guy or are you hiding scum, like the rest of us?"

Marc was taken aback, despite feeling covered for this moment. "Yes, I am."

Kendle seized onto the short list that Adrian had given her. "What about all those snake women? What about your decades old lie of not being a descendant? Or the way you left Angie to raise a baby when she was a teenager? When were you forgiven for all of your mistakes?"

Marc scowled. "This isn't about me."

"Yes, it is. You can stop them from lynching someone on their way to stand trial."

"And when we vote to hang him? What then?"

Kendle's anger faded. "Then it's what he deserves. It has to be a fair trial. If it isn't, everything you're building here will collapse. You know that."

"You're doing this for personal gains."

"Yes, but does that change the truth?"

"No." Marc let out an ugly sound and hit the button on his radio. "I want all level six Eagles at the front door. *Now.*"

Marc strode that way, hating it that he had to keep playing this awful role. He longed for Adrian's blood and here he was, forced to save the piece of trash yet again. The camp would think any form of punishment was okay if he allowed a lynching. It would undermine all the effort they'd made to be civilized. Angela had known exactly what to use.

Angela shut her eyes. *You can come in now.*

*Have you looked?
There's only darkness.
You don't have to do this. Let me die.
Not even if I have to destroy all we've built.
Your life belongs to me.*

3

Jennifer had to stop at the bathroom campers before she could go to her daughter; she hurried, not sure where Kyle had gone. He'd been by her side until she reached the restroom. Upon exiting, Jennifer rushed through the lantern-lit halls, waving and calling greetings that were returned. She entered the area where the younger children were sequestered, and stopped in amusement at the sight of Kyle already holding Autumn.

The pair wasn't facing the door and hadn't noticed her yet. Jennifer stayed still, observing. She usually left them alone when Kyle spent time with the baby, trying not to push him into being closer with Autumn than he was ready for. Even at her age, she knew kids were a rough adjustment. Jennifer pushed in gently and was shocked by the level of communication.

She's okay?

Yes, darlin'. She just had to pee.

She should get a diaper.

Kyle chuckled. *I'll tell her that.* He leaned down and kissed Autumn's soft cheek, nuzzling her like

he sometimes wanted to do with her mother. *Were you okay while we were gone this time?*

Yes. They stayed closer. It was fun.

Kyle marveled at the fast adjustment that kids could make to danger. *Are you hungry or wet or anything?*

No. They're afraid of mommy. They keep changing me even when I don't need it.

Kyle laughed again, feeling the Safe Haven comfort settle onto his shoulders. It was good to be home.

Autumn's hand was busy exploring Kyle's hair and face, as she did with everyone who held her. The mobster kept still so she could get her fill of it. Autumn's gifts still required physical contact to be effective.

"That won't last long," Jennifer said from the doorway. "We'll have to teach her to control herself when she gets upset."

Kyle smiled at the infant. "We will. Together."

Jennifer had slipped from their minds when she revealed her presence, but she stepped closer as the baby let out a giggle of delight. "What did I miss?"

Kyle was grinning from ear to ear. "She's happy we're staying."

"So am I," Jennifer lied. She'd much rather be alone in the lodge with her baby and Kyle.

Kyle turned to look at her. "So would I."

Jennifer's eyes narrowed. "Autumn, what did I tell you about that?"

Kyle shielded the baby, snickering. “Here in a few days, why don’t we go spend a week at the lodge? You, me, and little cute cheeks here?”

“Really?”

“Sure. If things go the way Angela planned, we’ll be headed for our settlement next. They can start putting up boards and bags without us for the first week, can’t they?”

Jennifer nodded right away. “That sounds wonderful.”

Kyle listened to the drowsy baby in his arms, happiness fading. “She said there’s trouble coming.”

Jennifer sighed. “Adrian.”

“Yeah, he’s here.”

An instant later, his radio lit up.

“I want all level six Eagles at the front door. Now.”

Kyle answered the call with a short click and kept ahold of the baby as he and Jennifer went to the door. He’d missed her.

It didn’t escape Jennifer’s attention, but it actually drew gawkers among the camp members and the Eagles. Seeing a dangerous man like Kyle cradling a baby and cooing to her wasn’t expected. It showed a side to his obsession that few people had thought of. By claiming Jennifer, Kyle also got to be Autumn’s dad.

Kyle met his team at the door. Those men surprised everyone by doing the same thing he was.

“How are you today, Autumn?” Daryl asked in a high pitch voice that drew grins.

He nodded at her answer. “Same here, sweetie.”

Autumn’s face glowed as the group of men turned into babbling fools competing for the best impression. Even Shawn had a moment where he was unable to resist holding his arms out for a quick hug. In mere months, Autumn had worked her way into the hearts of all her protectors.

Her life mate will probably come from that group, Jennifer sent to Kyle. Encourage it. They already love her.

That stunned Kyle, but before he could respond, the hall went cold and quiet.

Marc was here.

Kyle took the baby and handed her to Jennifer, then assumed his place behind Marc as they headed for the door. He didn’t want to do this. None of his team did, but if Angela had thought this far ahead, then they still needed Adrian for something.

Marc wasn’t so sure, but he wouldn’t be able to live with himself if he didn’t bring Adrian in and then Safe Haven fell apart because of it. Society had to have rules and people had to stick to them, even when it went against everything they stood for.

Hopefully, he’ll put up a fight, his demon suggested. You can’t be blamed for that.

Marc grinned coldly.

Kendle came into the huge room that had been designated as their mess. She froze as the crowd rushed forward.

“It’s her!”

“Kendle!”

“Ms. Roberts!”

Quinn reached her first, but Kendle was aware that his expression wasn’t that of an adoring fan. He was upset. She knew it because he only stared at her.

Kendle tolerated the well-wishers and welcomes as best she could, thinking she would need a lot of sessions with Adrian to get over this instant flinch from being touched. It was so bad that she didn’t think it could be fixed.

Kendle was ushered to the buffet tables, where Li Sing had outdone himself to welcome Angela home. The pig looked like it had been roasted perfectly. Kendle wondered when there had been time for cooking, and then remembered that the main camp had been sequestered with nothing to do except wait and see if the enemy would reach them.

Kendle took her generous tray to the table in the corner, still surrounded by people who wanted to hear every detail of her life before the war. They knew she’d been fighting in this battle, but the old lure of wealth and power was what still held their interest.

Kendle answered vaguely and downplayed her fame, sensing it might come back to haunt her later. People liked stars, but jealousy often caused a

distorted view that sometimes ended in violence. When she could, she went to a table alone to eat.

Quinn dropped down across from her without a tray.

Kendle glowered at him. “I didn’t even tell your boss bitch about me and Adrian, okay? Get off it.”

That was enough for Quinn. He didn’t have time for someone who couldn’t even be polite.

Kendle let him go. She’d chosen Adrian and it was easy to break these ties. Adrian was as close to Marc as it would get. He was the only one who might be able to help her achieve what she wanted.

Kendle glanced around as the last of the fans faded with the sharp remark she’d given Quinn. Her reputation for being unstable had also spread through the camp and that was good. It would save her some of the drama when everyone found out who she’d chosen to partner with.

Curious as to the mood of the large group here, Kendle dropped the mental barrier to allow the chaos of dozens of thoughts flying around at the same time to enter her mind.

It’s so great to be back indoors! And also creepy.

When are we leaving? It feels wrong in here.

We won! We can have peace now.

We owe her everything.

There shouldn’t be a trial. She saved us.

Adrian should be hung. How could he betray us? We loved him.

When is Angela taking back over?

I want Adrian back in charge.

Kendle looked at the owner of the last thought, shutting out all but that single thread. Why would the vet want Adrian in charge again?

Taking a chance, Kendle tapped lightly on his mental wall. *How did it go?*

The vet, aware of Kendle the instant her glance turned his way, kept eating and pretending to listen to Ray and Dale gush over the meal and the work they'd been doing. He normally enjoyed their drama-free conversations, but today, it was causing him to consider spending time in the livestock trucks.

Kendle sighed. She hadn't been trying to pry. She just needed the contact of her own kind.

I'm not your kind, the vet whispered, already deep into her mind. *I hate them both.*

You're keeping secrets, Kendle responded dejectedly. *That's all I meant.*

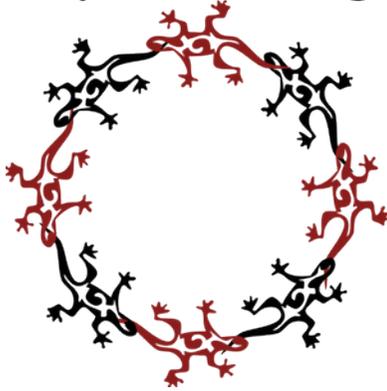
The vet didn't want this bond and he certainly didn't want to feel the similarities between Kendle and Angela. It would be too easy to settle for second best.

Kendle blanched, stomach twisting. She shoved away from the table. She could be accepted now if she could finish conforming. It should have been easy since the right side of the line was with Marc and Angela. She wasn't so far gone that she didn't know the choice she was making was wrong. But she was too far gone to change it now.

Kendle left the mess, heading for the front door.

Chapter Thirty-One

My Way or the Highway



1

Marc didn't hurry to the end of the camp-lined street where Adrian was waiting. There was still part of him hoping the crowd would become a mob and handle it before he got there.

Adrian was sitting on the hood of a green truck, surrounded by a group of men and women who looked as hard as any of Safe Haven's fighters. They wore long, thick coats made from animal hides; pouches around their lean hips bulged with rocks. The shapes were too distinctive to be anything else.

Adrian stared at Marc with open hatred, letting his eyes glow. He'd always controlled his emotions

while in Safe Haven. It was a wonderful freedom to stop hiding. Kenn's words had helped more than he knew. Adrian didn't have as many gifts as the other descendants here, but he'd had his longer and he'd studied their kind all his life. He knew how to use his power.

"Guess it had to happen." Marc slowly removed his coat. He had no idea how to battle this way, but he had no doubts about winning. He was in the right. He was also younger, in better shape, and hadn't just spent days being abused by Major Donner. That did take some of the fun out of it for Marc, but not enough for him to delay the inevitable.

As the witnesses realized what was about to happen, word was sent back and the crowd came closer. Some even began to place bets.

Marc dropped his jacket. "Rules?"

Adrian tossed his butt into the blowing grit and stood up. "Honor."

"You don't have that to bargain with!" Marc spat toward Adrian's boots.

"*Your* honor, grunt!" Adrian responded angrily. "No one expects me to have it. I gave up the luxury when I became their leader."

Marc unbuckled his gun belt. He'd already tried that method of punishment. "Rules?"

"None. Prize?"

Marc considered that one carefully out of respect for the future. Angela insisted they still needed Adrian. He knew her personal feelings had helped make the choice, but he had no reason to

doubt that she was telling the truth. She'd seen something else coming for them that only Adrian could cover, but Marc figured if it were truly that awful, fate itself would step in and save the traitor again. "You'll make it to your trial, where I'll enforce the decision. Especially if they choose to end your life."

Adrian slowly removed his gun belts. "Agreed."

The men moved toward each other without further words, both drawing upon their demons to battle for them.

Then darkness fell.

One minute they were in late afternoon sunlight, set to kill each other or die trying, and then it was nighttime and they could barely view their opponent.

Marc's anger flipped into concern for the camp at the same time as Adrian's, but neither man moved as the sounds of the panicking crowd faded into a rushing noise that some of them were still haunted by. It reminded them of the dam that had broken and nearly washed them away, but the source was much more familiar.

Angela and her team of females were coming through the crowd, each of them inside protective bubbles that refused to admit the slugs the Mexicans started firing upon seeing her in the open.

Angela motioned to Jennifer and Samantha. "Finish that."

The two females ran eagerly into the middle of the Mexican camp and began to lay waste with fire and wind.

Across the street, Indian camps fled Angela's wrath, but she didn't attack them. Her target was ahead.

Marc and Adrian stood in stunned silence as they watched Angela stride toward them with flaming eyes and fire twining around her body. She spotted the stone-throwers that Adrian had made deals with, fire blazing higher.

Adrian was forced to watch as she killed them all. It was why he'd brought them here, but it wasn't easy to view. Becky did most of it by forcing Everett to turn his new rifle on his own people. Tracy and Cynthia backed it up with fast blows of icy wind followed by beautiful rifle shots to the head. It was terrifying.

"They, uh... Well, they look pissed." Marc was suddenly without rage at all. He'd thought he was powerful. He'd known Adrian was, but Angela was controlling all of this chaos! He watched her jerk a hand; two cars in her path shoved up into the yards and over tents.

When I give an order, you follow it! Angela's shout slammed into every mind in the area and brought a few of them to their knees when they tried to resist. *He will stand trial!*

Marc and Adrian were both relieved when the females halted near the edge of the battlefield,

aware of burning cars, screaming men, and screeching demons.

“Any idea how to calm that down?” Adrian hadn’t known she’d become that strong either, but the government had. That’s why they’d sent Donner.

“Yeah, but he knew it and planned to use it. Looks like we’re the only ones who were fooled.” Marc frowned. “What else has she been hiding?”

Adrian shrugged. “Hard to say. Right now, we’d better think of something–quick.”

Angela waited impatiently for them to work it out, forced to leave her self-imprisonment to supervise them. It was beyond annoying after all she’d accomplished, to have to blow her cover for this. Now everyone knew how different she actually was. Even her team, with all their gifts, were no match for her. Taking so many lives had given her uncountable gifts, so many that she was still discovering them.

“Is this a bad time?”

Angela shook her head.

Sergeant Wallz slowly edged closer. He noticed none of her former guards rushed over as they would have days ago, and saw her wince. “You caught that?”

“I catch all of it,” Angela intoned. “Why should I let you join my flock?”

“Because we were forced and we withdrew, surrendered in some cases. We deserve a second chance.”

“Safe Haven offers that. But not freely. You’ll have to earn it. Until you do, I find you unworthy. Leave now or die.”

“And the others?” David’s heart fell as he watched her scan them with glowing eyes that allowed nothing to be hidden.

“All may stay except the three thieves who killed the old woman for her supplies. They will be executed.”

Gunshots rang out as Jennifer caught the images and location, and sent it to Tracy, who was closest to the soldiers.

“There are others here who are not who they claim to be.” Angela began showing their faces to her team of merciless killers.

Those with something to hide took off running, and those without anything to fear did the same to avoid being caught in the crossfire.

Angela didn’t control their panic. The Indians would now flee with tales of Safe Haven’s power. The few soldiers still alive would have their own stories of battles. Those who stayed and joined would have respect for her rules. As for the descendants, there were a lot of them here. Angela wanted to be clear that this was her ship. She would sink anyone who tried to run her aground. The fear she had over the exposure was from her own camp. She wouldn’t be voted out now, though she would resign if she felt they were only keeping her because they feared her retribution. It only worked if they could still love her.

Angela glowered at the two men lingering on the edge of their fight. *Get him locked in one of my cells before I get upset.*

The command was obeyed, though both men dragged their feet. Adrian had planned to go down in a blaze of glory at Marc's hand. Marc had been hoping for the same thing. Turning away from that identical goal was hard.

The walk back to the warehouse was a learning experience. Marc and Adrian observed her team working to calm and clear the area without speaking a single word. Other than Tracy, they weren't even exchanging a glance. Angela had taught them to read each other's minds during battle.

"I also trained them for this moment. It pisses me off that I had to." Angela shoved by them.

Marc was the first one to notice her hair had turned solid gray. There wasn't a single black strand to be seen.

Adrian saw it a second later, and concern spread over his face. He held his tongue because he could feel Marc's rage threatening to spill over again.

"You shouldn't have come back!" Marc growled. "I gave you your life."

Adrian didn't tell Marc that he couldn't do it, that being away from her felt worse than facing death.

Marc knew, and it increased the anger. There were no closed doors now. He wasn't supposed to have to feel the way Adrian's heart was beating

faster at being around Angela or see the way she was so perfect in his thoughts. It was awful.

Angela waved her team away from the duties that were mostly finished, silently telling Greg and Shawn to have the Eagles handle the rest of it. She needed her Eagles to be seen as the police, the enforcers. There were too many unknowns mixed in with the surviving camps around hers for comfort, though she wasn't going to kill them. She'd removed the offenders who made it a habit or those whose crimes were unforgivable. That was her new line. "Get the camp assembled. We'll hold Adrian's trial immediately following the leadership vote. If everyone wants to see him hang after we get all the details, Marc will make sure that happens."

Marc nodded. *You bet that sweet ass.*

Next to him, Adrian shuddered.

Marc began to understand that Angela wasn't planning to spare Adrian completely. He was going to face the people he'd betrayed.

They had no more trouble getting Adrian locked into a cell next to his son. They were in a room off the same hall as Angela.

Marc locked the brig door and dropped the key into Greg's hand. "Try to shoot him while he escapes, will you?"

Greg snorted and didn't meet Angela's gaze as he began to give her all the updates he'd been holding. "We're starting the funerals tonight. We lost less than fifty. Here's a list."

Angela put it away for later, when she would punish herself in ways that her people couldn't. "Next?"

"There are four camps left out there now."

"Good. Which ones?"

"Two Indian, one descendant, one soldier."

"Have the QZ set up where the soldiers are and put them all in it. Keep going."

"Level six is taking turns on watch over the...over Adrian. Kenn took the room next to him."

"Fine. Is that it?"

Greg scanned his list. "Yes."

"She did well. All of you did."

"Daryl's with her. He said she's off duty until morning, that Samantha is covering this shift."

"Fine. I doubt there will be any more trouble tonight."

Leaning against the wall while he waited, Marc snorted silently. People were afraid to breathe right now. No, there wouldn't be any trouble.

Angela headed for the bed in the holding room as soon as the updates were finished. Kenn would make sure Adrian and Conner weren't mistreated, and that they were fed. It was more than one of them deserved, but he would be alive to face the camp for the trial. Then he would either live or die and so would she. Their destinies had been entwined since the beginning of mankind. No one could fight something that strong and she didn't intend to. She would tell them the truth and let fate control the outcome.

Marc climbed into the bed with her after locking the door, vaguely aware that he hadn't seen Dog in a while. The wolfman twined their bodies into the position they'd gotten used to sleeping in and rested his head against her shoulder. He'd brought her back. For this moment, he was satisfied.

2

"I'd like to use my one request."

Neil and Kyle turned in surprise. Both men had forgotten that Cynthia had been promised a reward for saving Angela's life.

"What is it?" Neil was mostly willing. He didn't expect her to ask for something he couldn't give.

Cynthia glanced at Kyle.

Kyle nodded, but he felt that cold hand of fate sweeping over his head. "Sure."

"I'd like you to be the godfathers of my son. He needs a strong set of hands from what I've been told and well, you are the two I trust the most."

"I'd be honored." Neil was sure he would be around for long enough to do the job.

Kyle didn't answer, gaze going to the teenager and baby who were settled onto a nearby couch. After their week off, he planned to ask Jenny again and be sure she wanted to remain in Safe Haven.

Cynthia knew where his thoughts were and didn't push hard. She didn't think she needed to. "If you guys stay, will you accept?"

“Of course. And thanks for thinking of me.” Kyle frowned. “What made you think of me? I’m still on probation with most people.”

Neil listened openly, curious if it was the same reason he’d forgiven the mobster his weakness over Jennifer. He didn’t seem to have others.

“I let a kid die. You saved one and love her. Who am I to judge?” Cynthia left them standing there, shocked and a bit worried.

“Should we...”

“Yeah,” Kyle sighed. “But not now. Let it be a future worry for once.”

Neil nodded, in complete agreement after the week they’d had, but he still wrote it in his notebook. It was how Adrian had trained them. That wouldn’t change.

Daryl caught up to Cynthia in exasperation. “I left you in bed!”

The reporter rolled her eyes and continued on her course.

“Cynthia!”

“What? I couldn’t sleep.”

“It’s been like...three minutes! You didn’t even try.”

“No, I didn’t.” She sighed, slowing down. “I keep seeing myself in the grave and hearing that my son will be worse than his father, and everywhere I go, people are staring at me, wondering the same thing. I have to take steps.”

“To protect him?”

She lowered her voice as a small cluster of camp woman came through the hall. “I was told he should die.”

“By who?!” Daryl was instantly angry.

“Angela.”

That caught Daryl off guard. He wasn’t sure what to say. Angela hadn’t been wrong. Ever.

Cynthia’s shoulders drooped. “I know.”

Daryl did the first thing he thought of, flashing to the advice he’d overheard her give to Kyle about Jennifer. “Are you hungry?”

“A little.” Her hand went to rub her stomach.

“I’d like to feed you and try to tuck you in again. What if I stay and keep you company, at least until you fall asleep?”

Cynthia was aware of his tactics and approved. “I need a shower first. The hot water will help.”

“Just don’t go over that five minute limit or Hilda will have you dragged out. The den mothers are enforcing it now that you pointed out how low we are again.”

“Will you try to scrounge up a lantern we can see by? My eyes are giving me issues.”

Frowning, Daryl turned her toward the hanging lantern in the hall. He gasped. “Your eyes are red!”

She pulled out of his grip. “It’s been a long day!”

“No, Cyn, solid red. What does that mean?”

Cynthia had no idea where to find a mirror. In Safe Haven, a small compact was usually the best a woman could do. She slid her knife from the sheath

on her belt and stared into it, stunned by the glowing crimson orbs in the reflection.

“Should I go get someone?”

Cynthia thought about it and then shook her head. “I know who to talk to. Come on.” Cynthia ignored the camp members who gawked at her eyes, mind racing.

Daryl followed her to Adrian’s cell, not surprised. The former leader seemed to have endless files on descendants.

Daryl hung out in the doorway as Cynthia pulled a chair over and sat down near Adrian’s cage. There wasn’t a guard here yet.

Adrian had toppled his cell over and was stretched out on the smoothest side, face relaxed. His tone however, was nervous. “When was the last time you fed him?”

Two mouths dropped open in surprise at the obvious answer.

“Go spend some time alone with a friend and feed your son.” Adrian didn’t open his eyes. “You’ll be normal before morning.”

Cynthia glanced at Daryl. “Can you give us a minute or is it against the rules? I’ve never been here while there were prisoners.”

“None of us have.” Daryl felt more jealousy over the request than he wanted to. The Eagle shut the door and leaned against it, not straining to hear, but aware that he could if he tried.

Adrian finally opened his eyes and met Cynthia's hurt, confused stare. "No, she's not wrong. None of your safeguards will work."

Cynthia was crushed all over again. "Why?"

"Because he's mine." Adrian hated to admit it. "My children are light or darkness. There is little gray."

"And there's nothing I can do?"

"Not unless you find a witch who will break the rules for you." Adrian was sure Angela would be furious with him for interfering. "One with immeasurable power."

Cynthia blanched. "There's no way."

"Oh, yes. You just have to have the courage to ask for it openly and then convince her to allow the conversation. After that, you'll be held responsible for everything that goes wrong."

Adrian's words were cool warnings, with little sympathy.

Cynthia glared angrily. "What about you?"

Adrian slowly sat up. "I'm a traitor. Do you think it's a good idea for me to even try?"

She hadn't thought about it from that view. "No, I suppose not."

"You'll have to save him yourself, Cyn. Do you think you can?"

She nodded slowly. "I'll figure out how to approach her before I do it."

"Good girl."

Cynthia stood up suddenly, pain bleeding into her tone. “Do you have a reason? Something that will clear you tomorrow?”

Adrian sighed miserably and lay back down. “If I did, would she have left me in here?”

Cynthia didn’t hesitate. “Yes.”

“Smart girl, too. You’re making your new man nervous. Why not go spend some time with him? Daryl is a great guy.”

“Yes, he is.” Cynthia went to the door. She wanted to believe that Adrian was innocent, but he was making it hard. She left without asking any of the other hundred and one questions she had. Tomorrow would determine the fates of more than just their two leaders and one love-stricken teenager.

3

Kenn, Tonya, and Kendle took shifts outside the door to the brig as the evening wore down and late night came. Most of Safe Haven went out quickly, happy with the results and secure enough to crash early with plans to sleep late. The trials weren’t set to start until late morning, and it was as if a huge weight had been lifted from their camp. That sense of being dogged was missing.

Adrian had several visitors through the night. All but one of them was turned away. Cynthia had made it in because all three of Adrian’s guards had been out scrounging things for him and Conner.

Once they were satisfied they'd done the best for them they could, Kenn had refused to let the waiting people in, saying Adrian needed rest. The only other person to make it in was Doug.

"What do you want?" Kenn didn't expect trouble from the large man, but he was prepared to handle things if it happened.

"I want to talk to him."

"About what?"

"Peggy."

Kenn frowned. "What's wrong with Peggy?"

"She has the cancer. John's draughts are gone and she's starting to have symptoms again."

Kenn had gone pale, thinking of all the redheaded den mother had done and continued to do for these people. The camp wouldn't be the same without her.

Let him in, Adrian sent.

Doug stepped inside the chilly room and shut the door.

4

"Will you hold me for a while?"

Charlie slid to her side of the air mattress that he'd scrounged and wrapped his arms around as much of her as he could reach. *Being a little taller would come in handy in moments like this.* "Can I do anything for you?"

"Just this." Tracy had been hurt while under the drugs and had come to the next morning.

Discovering what had been done to her was bad, but she was grateful not to have the memories of it, like Becky did.

“I can’t believe she did this!”

Tracy, tired and sore, slapped him in the back of the head.

Charlie jerked, gaping in shock.

Tracy wanted to stay annoyed, but the laughter spilled out of her mouth before she knew it was coming. And then it turned to tears.

Tracy’s sobs hurt Charlie in new and terrible ways. If his mom didn’t have a great reason for all of it, he was leaving.

Tracy was too depressed to argue with him. She rolled out of his arms and onto her side, shaking as she cried. They’d won and she didn’t even remember being hurt. *So why do I feel like I lost something that I can’t get back?*

When Charlie stormed from the tent, Tracy didn’t notice.

Charlie wasn’t expecting to find two Eagles guarding his tent. He immediately misunderstood. “I’m not dangerous to her!”

Shawn snorted. “You’re the worst of the lot kid, screaming at her like that.”

“Especially when we’re here to guard your snotty ass.” Billy didn’t want to be out in the cold. He wasn’t afraid to let it show.

“She let females be hurt!” Charlie protested. “She sent them out there!”

“And you think you’re the only one who wants answers?” Shawn snorted again. “Grow up. You got off lucky. Jeff certainly didn’t.”

Charlie was being hit with their thoughts and their words. He hated them for making sense, for being right when they said each of the fighters had agreed beforehand. His inability to fix things for Tracy was a wound he couldn’t heal in himself either. “I don’t understand!”

“Tomorrow should bring some answers.” Billy tried to be nice. “Until then, do what the rest of us did when we’ve provided the service you have waiting now. Love her and bring her back. And for Pete’s sake, don’t leave her alone.”

“That’s the biggest rule.” Shawn added his support. “The mind does terrible things when you’re left alone to blame yourself.”

Charlie was calm enough now to begin asking questions about the right and wrong things to say.

The two Eagles helped him eagerly. Angela needed her son. They would try to help the boy see that the sacrifices were steep, but the cost of doing anything less than what she had would have been more than any of them could pay.

Chapter Thirty-Two
Consequences



1

“**M**y name is Angela and I’m a descendant. I’ve always had abilities, though I didn’t know about my true heritage until I came to Safe Haven.” Angela was on a makeshift witness stand, in front of three hundred survivors who wanted Adrian’s death. It was in their minds.

“When I joined this camp, Adrian recognized my gifts and took me under his wing. He started teaching me to be strong, to fight for myself. Like everyone else, I fell for the line that he was doing it all to save our country.” She looked out at the upset faces. “He was exactly what I needed, like he was for the others who came here in bad shape. There wasn’t anything I wouldn’t have done for him.”

“Did you know he was lying about the government?” someone shouted out.

The guards moved that way, but Angela stopped them. “They have a right to question their leaders. I’ve always meant that.”

The guards stepped back.

Zack stood up. “Did you?”

“No,” Angela answered without guilt. “I don’t see everything and the future changes with every choice someone makes.”

“But he was a traitor.” Zack glowered. “How could you miss that?”

“How could I miss Cesar shooting me?” Angela sent back. “It isn’t just Crista who paid that price, Zack. You remember the rest stop, don’t you?”

All of those who had been there shifted uneasily. Remember it? They were still having nightmares about it.

“I’m not perfect. Looking into the future isn’t simple. I don’t always see everything. It’s how we’ve been able to have assassins in camp.” she couldn’t help the defensive tone. “Not knowing if I’m a target when I come from my tent each day hasn’t been fun.”

Zack slowly sat down, but his anger hadn’t calmed.

“Adrian hid things well. He used distraction on me, as he did with the Eagles and everyone else. When I would catch little things, he’d deny it or make sure that Kenn was there to stir shit up and take my focus off it. I didn’t actually see his

scheming until after I was shot.” Angela took a sip of the water bottle, and lit a smoke. She still had the pack Donner had given her. “I should have died there.”

She paused, remembering the ugliness and the sense of incompleteness she’d been sentenced to end with. “Adrian wanted to save me, to use his gifts, but it would have exposed him to everyone.” She glanced at some of the most sensitive people among them. “None of you were ready for that. He knew I wasn’t either.” Angela shivered as she recalled that moment. “When I made the call, he knew I had accepted that Marc would probably die while fighting the first troops the government sent out. He connected us and showed me everything.”

“You’ve known he was a traitor since before Marc came back?” Jax was furious. “How could you do that?!”

“How could I not?” Angela responded calmly. “I saw everything that’s happened. The first battle, this one, and then us leaving for the island that Kendle came from. I saw us putting down roots, growing. We were happy and healthy, relearning peace, and then they came for us again.” Angela’s voice broke. “Not even the descendants survived. They came in from four sides of the island and squeezed us into the middle, like I did to them here. You’ve seen how effective that is. I saw us winning this war and dying two years later. I had to stop it.” Angela waved.

Shawn quickly brought Adrian out with a hand on the cuffed man's arm.

The crowd muttered and stared in confused anger as he took the seat by Angela without meeting any of the eyes trying to catch his attention.

“Adrian didn't give us his full story yet.” Angela leaned back in her chair. “There wasn't time before because I had to keep Donner on his toes. We'll do it now.”

Every face focused on Adrian, many praying he could explain what he'd done, that he had a reason they could accept. After all he'd done for them in the beginning and all he'd taught them to do for themselves, few of them actually wanted him dead as much as they wanted him to be able to justify his actions. That was what Angela had been hoping for.

Adrian grabbed the pack of smokes on the table between them. “I wasn't supposed to be here to face this. That's the first thing you need to know. I told her to let me die when we brought Conner out of Little Rock.” Adrian lit the cigarette and then reoffended everyone by taking a long swig from Angela's bottle of water.

“My mother was in the same position that Angela was in while she faced Donner. My father was the enemy; my mother wasn't powerful enough to stop him from placing me in the labs. All children from descendant relationships are studied to determine their gifts and by those, their place in our society is assigned. I was chosen to hunt other descendants because I can call them together.”

Adrian's tones were too full of pain and anger to deny, but it was hard for him to keep going. This exposure, the answering for every choice he'd made, was his biggest fear.

"You've done this for all of us." Angela wasn't gentle, though the urge was strong. "Every person here has been brought down as low as a soul can go, and then clawed their way back up to being free of the chains that held them. You're the only one left."

Adrian loved her even more for recognizing that, but he also hated her for it, like everyone else who had briefly turned against the people who were trying to help them. It was always easier to hate the messenger than to face the message. "I spent my childhood learning how to lead a hunting team and being trained for battles against our kind." He glanced at Marc. "Mental battles, where I challenged alphas, took their packs, and then handed them over. I did that for twenty years, waiting for the time my mother promised me would come. At times, I forgot about her words, her goodness. I sank into the evil half and wallowed in it. I was good. My name became known; the higher-ups started sending me in to clear specific groups they thought might go rogue."

Adrian crushed out his cigarette. "I destroyed rebellions that might have challenged the government and forced the truth to light."

"Why?" Angela asked quickly, before the crowd could erupt in shouting.

“Because when the truth came out, the world was supposed to be destroyed. Those in charge were willing to annihilate the United States and go below ground. It was already planned.”

“Is that the only reason?” Angela knew better.

“No. I didn’t want things to change. And it wasn’t because I liked my job. I loathed it! I knew from my mother’s stories that I had a hard destiny ahead of me and I didn’t want it.” Adrian shoved out the rest like a bad bowel movement. “I didn’t want to lead! I never have!”

The crowd gasped. That hurt more than his betrayals. It was the one thing they had been sure of—that he wanted the job they’d gifted him with.

“When the war came and brought society down, I was on my way to my father. I needed to see who he wanted killed next.”

“That’s where I saw you,” Samantha was sitting at the table with the rest of leadership. “I put it together before Angela did, that you had once been on the government payroll. I didn’t tell anyone because I was hiding the same secret.”

“Except you hadn’t been hunting our kind.” Adrian wanted to be sure she didn’t suffer any of the blame.

“No.” Samantha sighed. “But I’ve been thinking about it and almost any of the sudden storms I told them about could have been from one of our kind. I didn’t know anything about descendants then.”

“They made sure of that with the special people.” Adrian delivered more of the truth. “Those

who can control physical gifts are rare among descendants. The government likes to keep them in the dark from childhood.”

“Tell us about the future your mother saw.”
Angela got them back on track.

“She knew the world would end. It was her nightmare. She was committed several times because of the warnings she tried to give.”

“What was your role in that future?” Angela kept things moving. These were things Adrian had never discussed with a single soul, and here he was, baring it all to hundreds of condemning survivors. It wasn’t easy; she needed him to get it all out.

“When my mother realized she would have to send me to the labs, that my father wouldn’t exempt me from the experimenting, she tried to run away. We spent time on an island, where she called on the Maker to show her what to do. The vision she received told her to make me a double agent.”

Adrian continued over the immediate protests of a lame scheme to save his skin. “She said if the world didn’t end, I would have committed so many sins that I could never be forgiven. She also said it was only one life and the changes we would make would be worth my sacrifice.”

Angela identified so much with Adrian’s mother. She’d known her son would be turned evil, and she’d found a way to give the world hope because of it.

“She said if the war did happen, the government would send me out to gather descendants who might

be trouble. She said I would be surrounded by power that was incredibly loyal to me for helping them and their weaker members survive the holocaust. She was right.”

No one shouted now, but they were furious that he knew of their love and had been betraying them the entire time.

“She said when I gathered enough of you into one group, the government would start to notice and that I should make the choice as soon as they threatened my life. She knew I would need all of you to keep me alive. The government only deals with rogue descendants in one way.”

“She knew you would find enough of us to fight them?” Jennifer was next to Samantha. All of Angela’s team was at this table, waiting for it to be over so they could have that private meeting Angela had promised them when they’d agreed to her crazy plan.

“Yes. She said if the power was too weak, we couldn’t win and to hand you over and keep looking for a stronger group. I was set to do that all the way through the beginning. Even as far back as Wyoming, when we started to draw the attention of the Mexicans.”

“Was that intentional?” Marc was in the rear of the crowd. It was as close as he wanted to be to Adrian for these details.

“Yes.” Adrian had to raise his voice to be heard over the fresh anger. “The government wanted the guerrillas stopped and I had a small army of Eagles

who could do it without them having to send troops out. By then, I knew we had Angela's gift being hidden here and I wasn't concerned with losing. It also gave me more time to stall." He looked at Angela. "She had me by then. I'd chosen to try the insane scheme I was given by my mother. Angela was the reason why."

Angela stopped herself from smiling. "You love me."

"More than I'll ever be able to say."

"And you would have given everything up if I'd been willing?"

"Yes. We would have disappeared and left Safe Haven to die."

"Because I wouldn't, you fell into your mother's plan and started making things happen?"

"Yes."

"Tell us her plan now." Angela hated Marc's wave of self-doubt. He hadn't done anything wrong; he hadn't missed anything. Adrian's mind was a steel trap forged through decades of fighting descendants. There was no way any of them could have gotten through enough of his doors to find the truth unless he wanted them to.

"She said there were two ways to make sure the government couldn't restart the world and hold it hostage again. The first one was to send a descendant into the bunker to take over. Descendants would lead the country and eventually the world. The other was to battle the government until there were too few of them to recover. That

choice allowed the freedom our country was built on and it had higher odds of success. The bunkers used to be heavily fortified with our kind. There was also a chance that during the battles, someone could get to the bunker and end the new war with fewer casualties.”

Angela got a fresh cigarette from the remaining three as Adrian paused. It was almost her turn again.

“The plan was to make everyone here so dangerous that the government would come in force. If they only sent out a few hundred men each time, we would have been in small battles for the next decade, which would have given them time to reclaim topside. We had to force a huge battle that would even the numbers. The next fight would be where both sides sent in everything they had left and that’s exactly what happened. They have no men left to send after us now. Because Angela had the guts to finish my mother’s plan, we’re all free.”

“Is that it?” Zack didn’t hide his loathing. “That’s his excuse?”

“His confession.” Angela gestured. “The only choice we have to make is on his punishment. There’s no question of his guilt. Or mine, for that matter.”

The crowd wasn’t against her now. The shouts of not guilty for her were numerous. The shouts for Adrian’s death were loud.

“In a few minutes, we’ll vote on it. First, we have to decide on leadership.” Angela braced.

“Before we do that, I’ll take questions if anyone has any.”

This was the hardest part for Adrian. He’d known that if he was here for this moment, it might color the crowd into condemning her as well.

“Why did you agree to do things his way?” Seth was still unhappy with the things she’d ordered her females to do.

“Because it was the only thing that would work. Men respect strength, power, and little else. I showed them who was stronger.” Angela waited, sure more was coming.

“But we lost so many—”

“More than we would have if I had lined two armies up and let them battle it out to the death?” she asked sharply. “We lost roughly forty irreplaceable Eagles and camp members. Friends and lovers.” Angela sighed, allowing her pain to bleed all over everyone in the room. “It would have been triple any other way and we wouldn’t have gotten this new breeding stock to join us. Did you see that nearly a quarter of the soldiers have already hooked up with a Safe Haven woman or one from the Indian camps? We’re about to repopulate our country with patriots and that’s the only distinction that’ll label them. We’ve started to conquer the race problem.”

“I don’t understand.”

Angela hated to say it so bluntly, but she was too tired to be tactful. “Adrian’s mother understood that if there were no separate races or classes, there

wouldn't be a race problem. It was a mistake to divide us this way. Intentional or not, that era in human history is nearing an end. We won't see it in our lifetime, but we'll know it's going to happen."

"What about the—"

"They won't matter in the end." Angela was growing weary of obvious questions. "When the mixed people outnumber the pure bloods, the pure will fall silent and then out of sight and then out of existence."

"Is that a good thing?" Neil had to ask. "To interfere with the natural design?"

"Don't you understand yet?" Angela grunted. "That's our job as we begin the new world. We're fixing the mistakes and to do that, we have to go to the root of each problem. Why do people hate each other so much and why are they so prone to killing each other? Because we're so different. Take away some of the differences, you take away part of the atrocities."

"And that will—"

"No. Even if we'd all been one people from the beginning, it wouldn't have solved the issues. We have a lot of work to do to make this happen." She looked around the room. "Unless you vote me out of here, and I have to tell you, I'm tired already, so we either do it my way, the way that will give us a future of peace, or I need to be banished. I can't walk that line anymore."

“How about greed and theft, and other violent crimes?” someone called out in the uneasy pause. “Do you have plans for those as well?”

Angela met Adrian’s eye, ignoring the waves of anger coming from Marc. “Yes, *we* do. I won’t promise they’ll work, but my record is good so far. If that changes, I’ll resign and someone else can take over our great plan.”

“Are you saying Safe Haven’s goal should be world peace?”

“That’s crazy!”

“We can’t do that!”

“Why not?” Angela shot back. “Every other group we’ve met wants to survive. They aren’t working on fixing a damn thing, and while we’re waiting for a new government to draft new laws, the old ways are settling right back into us. You know what I mean. The pettiness, the politics, the violence. We have to stop it.”

“Why us?”

“Because there is no one else for the next fifty to a hundred years who could do what we have already begun. Wouldn’t you like your name next to: Helped give a peaceful future to the world?”

After the bloodshed they’d all been a part of, Angela’s vision was hard to resist.

“Any other questions for me before we vote on leadership?”

Most of those gathered understood she wanted the vote on herself first so she could save Adrian if she kept leadership.

“What about your threat to send smallpox across the country?” It was one of the things that had bothered the doctor the most.

Angela pointed at the crate under her table that had been with the camp the whole time, under Tommy’s watchful eye. “I would never do that to our country. I knew the bunker was going to make contact. If Jeff had hit the button, the rest of the charges would have gone off, trapping the remaining soldiers next to us, where we could wipe them out with our gifts. It was a bluff.”

It was a relief to hear it.

“More questions?”

Marc slowly moved to the center of the crowd. “I have one.”

Angela stiffened. This was the moment when Marc could wreck it all. Though she knew he’d made peace with the witch, Angela didn’t know what choice he’d made.

“What will happen if we hang that traitor?”

“I’ll die,” she answered simply. “And so will you. So will Charlie. There are things coming that we still need him for.”

“You’d save him anyway.”

“Yes, I would.”

“And you’d lie to save him.”

“Yes, I would.”

“Then why should we believe you that he’s still needed? How can we be sure you’re not making it all up to save him?”

“I don’t need to do that!” Angela shouted, surprising them all. She shoved back to her feet, letting her anger be felt. “If I want him alive, there’s not a person here who can take him from me!”

Angela moved toward the crowd; they flinched back in fear, some of them getting up to run.

“I’ll honor all the votes.” Angela spun around and went back to the table, then by it. She headed for the rear door. “If he dies today, I’ll still keep fighting for Safe Haven until the same happens to me. Hold your vote.”

Angela stormed from the hall and ran into a small crowd of Eagles who quickly surrounded her with their bodies as she headed for her room.

The crowd’s panic left with her. Marc was able to get the ballots passed out, aware of the hateful glowers nearly all of them were giving the man who’d been left alone to face their anger.

Marc resignedly motioned a few Eagles that way and continued working the crowd. Like it or not, he had to accept that she wasn’t lying. If she wanted Adrian, all she had to do was let her witch out.

“Pass those up and we’ll start counting.” Marc roamed the mob that was whispering and muttering as they made their choices. He had little doubt they would choose to keep Angela in charge. It was the vote over Adrian that he couldn’t get an estimate on. Most people he moved by still wanted death by hanging, but Angela’s warning about more danger

coming was hard to ignore. She'd never been wrong.

2

Angela was only in her room for a couple of minutes before her somber team began arriving. Angela understood they weren't going to wait until after the vote. They wanted to know now.

"Be patient." Angela glanced toward the door.

An instant later, Peggy and Hilda joined them, followed by Dari, the leader of the new descendants.

Angela waved; the door gently shut. "Dari came for the answer too. She's not one of us, though. Her group is leaving."

Dari nodded respectfully. "Yes. My people and I have voted as well. While we applaud your efforts, we have no faith that humans can be reformed. We wish to create our own laws and cultures."

Angela sighed unhappily. "I assumed that when you voted for my death."

Angela's team didn't need to hear more.

Becky and Cynthia sent out their rage together.

Dari collapsed; blood trickled from her mouth.

"Her group is also corrupt." Angela sighed. "We'll have to handle that."

"We will." Jennifer helped Samantha drag the body away from the door.

Angela took a deep breath and gave them the details they'd been hoping for. "I did it. The woman's name is Marcella. She's the first."

The females cheered, but quietly, aware of the fine line that all of them would now be walking.

“And no one knows?” Peggy was old enough to understand how some of their males might react.

“Those in this room do.” Angela didn’t tell them there were others. The males who knew of this part in her scheme were the men who’d helped devise it.

“Then we’ve done it?” It was important to Tracy that what she’d gone through had been for something.

“Yes. Women will now get their chance, providing that’s what fate wanted.” Angela tried to listen to the voting while talking to her team. “If we were wrong, then I expect Marcella to be killed quickly. She became rather...obsessive over the idea the instant I planted it.”

“We’re ready!” a guard called from outside the door.

Angela strode that way. “We’ll leave that mess for after the result of Adrian’s vote. Handle her group during the aftermath.”

The women stayed behind to discuss exactly how that was to be done.

Angela went back to face her verdict.

3

Angela: 87%

Marc: 10%

Adrian: 3%

Angela reread the numbers in surprise. She had honestly expected them to want Marc now. She looked up at the quiet, almost grinning crowd. “Are you guys sure this shouldn’t be 87% for Marc? He’s the good one.”

Marc chuckled. “That’s my Baby-cakes.” He was relieved at the vote. He didn’t want leadership of everything.

Angela took a moment to wander through the people, seeing that Adrian had been taken back to his cell. Even those who had voted for Marc or Adrian were content with the outcome. Except for Kendle and Kenn, of course. Even Tonya had voted for her, though as a member of her team, Angela wasn’t sure how much that had colored it.

Marc went to the front of the room. “We went ahead and voted on Adrian.”

That got Angela’s immediate attention.

Angela didn’t show anger that the moment was already gone, but Marc knew she was upset. “We couldn’t do it all your way, not with him. We chose his death.”

Angela closed her lids and tried to think of a way to stop it.

“We picked hanging.” Marc felt her horrible pain. The witch was making sure he got it full strength. “But we know you have the power to overrule it, as the guardian.”

Angela had never loved Marc more. He’d given her a way. “Why would you do this? You hate him.”

“That’s awfully mild for what I feel. And that’s what you’d come to feel for all of us after a while.”

“I wouldn’t do—”

“We know better.”

The crowd thought he meant them, but it was the witch and the demon that Marc was referring to. “We chose to leave his punishment up to you.”

“You said your justice wouldn’t be gentle and we’ve witnessed it.” Greg’s tone was ugly. “Will you make sure he feels as bad as each of us do over his betrayal?”

“Yes, I will.” Angela’s eyes glowed. “He deserves the death you all want. I’m sorry I can’t give it to you.”

“Will you make him pay?”

“Make him hurt!”

“Do it where we can see it!”

Angela felt Adrian listening and refused to allow her pity to interfere with this final stage in their damn grand plan. She hoped to never have to create a new one. “My word on it.”

“Then start now.” Marc waved for Adrian to be brought out to hear his sentence.

Angela was connected to Adrian in every way now. His torment was almost more than she could take. There were no doors, no walls between them. There never would be again.

It’s okay, Adrian soothed over his own anguish. I knew this would come. That’s why they have you to guide them.

I’m sorry.

So am I. For everything.

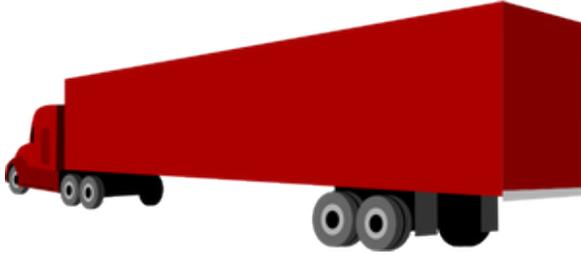
But it had to be this way?

Yes. Now take your place as leader and hand out my sentence. I've more than earned it.

As soon as Adrian came into the room, Angela's voice rang out with horrified finality.

“Adrian Mitchel, you are hereby banished from Safe Haven Refugee Camp. If you ever step foot inside our gates, for any reason, the nearest camp member is to shoot you down like the rabid dog that you are. Case closed.”

Chapter Thirty-Three
Aftermath



1

“So what happens now?”

At Neil’s question, everyone looked at Angela, confident she already had plans in place for the next steps of their survival.

Angela glanced around and saw the same desire she held in her heart: a peaceful camp settled somewhere for the winter. “Get packed for the trip we voted on before the soldiers came. It’s time to start Safe Haven Settlement.”

A huge cheer rose through the awning; the bubble flashed to life at the emotion. Crimson-killing green and gold swirled through the shield. Streaks of blue mingled with the bright, happy colors of a satisfied population.

Except for the woman lingering nearby, waiting for the moment that Angela would deliver what she had promised.

Angela turned around to stare at her rival.

“You can’t do it, can you?”

Angela didn’t blink. “No. There is no cure for this new sickness. The plan was always to kill you.”

Kendle lowered her head, terrified and glad at the same time. “Please.”

Angela placed a hand on Kendle’s arm. “Not even if you had slept with them both. I need you on my team. I’m a woman short now.”

The reminder of Crista’s death brought sobriety to the mood.

Angela dropped her hand. “Control it, feed it, and learn to adjust. Or kill yourself, because I won’t.”

Kendle thought of a hundred things to say. “Thank you.”

Angela knew it was for saving Adrian’s life, not for the place on her team or the welcome that Marc had arranged for her when he’d come back.

Angela’s face lit up with deep strength. “It’s my honor. I mean that. Now go take your place with my team. You’ve earned it.”

Adrian was being led from the room by a group of Eagles that weren’t holding back on what they thought of him. Angela turned away from it. “I want him outside our gates in the next ten minutes. Give him the clothes on his back, one empty gun, and a

knife. A true survivor doesn't need more to start out with."

"What about Conner?" Adrian might not be dead, but he wished he was and that was almost enough for now. In fact, the more Marc thought about it, the more this sentence seemed fair. Adrian would suffer constant torment instead of a fast snap.

Angela went to the front of the room again. The crowd slowly quieted as they remembered they weren't finished yet.

"Conner Mitchel has been arrested for a moral violation. Because there is a pattern and because of who his father is, I chose to hold a camp trial."

Conner came through the door his father had been taken out, face swollen from crying. He looked even younger than he was.

Nice touch. Marc frowned. *Like father, like son.*

"Tell the camp what you've done." Angela gestured. "If you don't, you'll be found guilty anyway and we'll go straight to sentencing."

Conner had listened to his father's advice. "I was following Candy around. I like her. I've been watching her since Lee died."

"What else have you been doing?" Angela knew the camp needed a real reason for this trial.

"Playing with myself while I spied on her."

Now the camp understood all too well. The shouts were ugly.

Angela let them vent for a moment so Conner would understand the seriousness of his actions. She needed him scared. Angela motioned the object of

his affection to stand up. “Did you know Conner was following you around?”

Candy looked stunned. “Not a clue. I’m not a... Are you sure it’s me?”

She glanced at the boy and in that moment, there was no denying it. The instant she’d come into view, Conner’s eyes had glazed over and a sickly smile had creased his face.

“Do you want to press charges?”

Candy, who found it creepy and had an idea of what that type of behavior could lead to, nodded reluctantly. “Yes, I do. Make him the first example for other stalkers.”

Angela motioned them to bring Conner over to her. “Is there anything you’d like to say in your defense?”

Conner thought of a lot of excuses and ways to beg, but in the end, his father’s warning was the clearest.

“She’s in a hard spot over you, because of me. Tell them what they need to hear.”

Conner cleared his throat and looked at Candy. “I’m sorry. I couldn’t control it. I’ll stay away from you if they let me stay. If you’re in the mess, I won’t be. When you go to bed, I’ll be on a shift on the other side of camp. I’ll stay away.”

Candy didn’t feel the guilt he was hoping for; she didn’t even respond.

Conner’s fear came through. “I’m not like him. I really am sorry! Please don’t blame me for what he did.”

Angela felt the mood shift and took over. “Unless anyone has more, I will hand down the sentence now.”

No one spoke. She took a second to scan their thoughts for the needed level of punishment. She found that most of them were willing to forgive and forget what they viewed as a minor transgression now that he had apologized and shown remorse. His vow to avoid Candy had also helped. Angela once again admired Adrian’s cunning.

“We find you guilty of a moral violation. Because you took your obsession outside your tent, you are conditionally banished from Safe Haven Refugee Camp. Join your father.” Angela left the room amid the shouts of both approval and the opposite, sure that once people thought about it, they would realize his sentence wasn’t as harsh as it seemed. Conditional banishment would allow him to still receive some of the benefits of Safe Haven and also give him the time alone with his father that he’d wanted all along. It was a win for both sides on the teenager’s trial.

“What does conditional mean?” Marc wasn’t willing to let it go.

“Because of his age, in time he can be evaluated for reentry to the camp, after requirements for rehabilitation have been drafted.” Angela went to the front stairs, where Adrian was already being loaded into Marc’s truck for an escort to the perimeter.

“Will he make it and come back?” Marc wanted to know if he needed to have the Eagles ready to shoot that one too.

“Yes. Conner’s love for Candy and friendship with Charlie will bring him around.” Angela took a step down as Adrian was shoved into the vehicle by angry men who still thought he was getting off lightly.

“And will *that* one be let back in some day, like Conner?”

Angela studied Adrian, seeing his hope for her answer. She shook her head. “No. What he’s done cannot be forgiven.”

The escort vehicles began to roll.

Satisfied, Marc hit radio. “Those are Eagles in that truck with him. Rocks and bullets will bring out the Ghost. I don’t advise it.”

All up and down the crowded street, rifles and handguns lowered; stones were subtly dropped. Marc’s anger was almost as terrifying as Angela’s.

Angela wanted the last sight of her to be burnt into Adrian’s mind. She slowly turned and slid into Marc’s arms. “I love you.”

Marc knew and approved, dipping his head for a soft, lingering kiss that sent fire into his eyes. *You taste good!*

Angela laughed.

Adrian leaned his head against the truck and wished he were dead. Marc hadn’t even let him have that.

Do it! Angela commanded mentally.

During the chaos of Adrian's departure, her girls would eliminate the last threat to their camp.

Gunfire rang out nearby. They all turned to watch the female Eagles rushing over the descendant camp, shooting and throwing a final judgment.

Many of the witnesses immediately assumed Safe Haven descendants would be controlling their own kind as well. It seemed to release the final layer of pressure among those who had remained. The rotten fruits and vegetables people had scrounged began to pelt the rear window, aiming for Adrian.

Angela put a hand on Marc's arm when he would have ordered them to stop. "The Eagles know who it's for and you picked vehicles with the strongest glass we have. Let them vent."

Marc happily twined their fingers. "You're the boss."

2

Angela keyed the mike, sitting in the lead vehicle of their short, crammed-in convoy. "This is Safe Haven Refugee Camp. We are leaving Lookout Mountain, headed east. We have won the war. Freedom is ours!"

The radio began to light up with emotional responses and questions, but Angela flipped it off, sure Kenn would cover that. He and Tonya had been waiting outside her truck door a few minutes ago. She'd quickly silenced his waiting tirade.

“If I had told you to destroy that basecamp, you would have wanted to make a plan, recon, gather a full level of men, and the best weapons. I got the job done with...” Angela eyed Kenn from head to boot. *“Two hand guns, a k-bar, and Marc as your backup. You didn’t need all that other shit, so I didn’t give it to you.”*

She’d sent the couple to cover the dead radio that Kevin’s absence had given them. After things settled down, Angela planned to restart the broadcasts for survivors, as well as news reports and the music. After that, Adrian’s dream of radio survival classes that would help those in their camp and those not here, could be realized. She would honor his sacrifice by bringing all the other smaller dreams to life. His notebooks were full of ways to repair the damage of the past and she intended to follow through on each one. It would take a lifetime—exactly what she’d sworn to give when she accepted this amazing job.

“I caught something I’d like to ask about.” Jennifer was in the bunk behind her.

Angela nodded, pushing her boots off. “Shawn and Greg know everything. I went to them when I first decided it could work.”

“You told two men?” Jennifer was shocked. She hadn’t mentioned a word of it to Kyle. She had waited for this moment to bring it up, while he was busy directing the move. She’d assumed they would have a silent conversation.

“Yes. I had to know how men would react to the news if they found out, so I could account for it.”

Jennifer caught the wording. “You mean there was a second plan? One for if they *couldn't* handle it?”

“There may have been the start of one, but after I talked to Shawn and Greg, I realized something. Men are tired of always leading and then always getting the blame when things go wrong. If we can do a better job, they'll adjust.”

Jennifer was relieved by that. She didn't plan to slaughter Kyle in his sleep, like the images suggested.

Angela chuckled. “Neither do I. I like my men alive when I kiss them.”

Jennifer blushed. She'd been thinking about Kyle's mouth.

“Go on with your observation.”

It took Jennifer a moment to remember what she'd wanted. “Oh, uh, right! You said we're going to change the world. I know that starts with the people around us and we've now eliminated several groups of survivors who could have interfered. Was that part of the plan too?”

“Smart,” Shawn murmured.

“Yes, she is. It's why she's here instead of Samantha or Cynthia.” Angela found Jennifer's eye in the mirror. “It was all part of my plan. The only thing that I didn't cover was Donner being obsessed with reaching the Maker. Everything else was in there.”

Jennifer stewed on it. “Did you put Kyle in danger so I would realize how I felt about him and stay to help you do this?”

“No. I needed him driving the van. He’s meticulous on time and always has been. I did see what could happen from it however, and made the arrangements.”

“You did that with all of us, studying our reactions and then planning around them for the best outcome?”

“Yes.”

Jennifer asked one more question. “And now that we’re going around taking out rival groups and the bunkers, controlling the radio, choosing who lives and dies, are we the new government? Did you just assert Safe Haven rule over the entire United States?”

“Very smart.” Shawn snickered. “Kyle is so in over his head.”

Angela chuckled with him. “Yes, he is.” She leaned her head back and propped her feet on the dash. “Get me to our new home by sunset and I’ll tell you which Eagle to ask for a one-night stand.”

Shawn laughed. “What if I get you there an hour before sunset?”

Angela blew him away. “I’ll tell you which one will sleep with you for the rest of your life if you want her to.”

Shawn hit the gas.

“I sold us out. You know that right?” Greg looked over at Marc, who was bringing up the rear. “I can’t keep throwing up walls whenever you’re around.”

Marc had been puzzled by Greg’s defenses, but he hadn’t punched through, assuming the man was hiding good feelings about Adrian not being killed. “What is it?”

“She came to me not long after Adrian put her on our team. She told me what she was planning and then asked me how I felt about it.”

Marc understood he meant Angela and went into alert mode. “What plan? This battle? Adrian?”

Greg looked over with a frown. “Putting women in charge. She got some of the bunker females to convert to her ideas. They’re out there right now, spreading it.”

Marc sat back, dumbfounded. *That explains everything!*

“Are you...pissed?”

Marc started to laugh uncontrollably.

Greg stayed quiet, worried.

Marc slowly got himself under control, but inside, he continued to roll on the floor at the irony. Angela had hidden it from him because she didn’t think he’d want women in control. It was hilarious.

Adrian saw the two vehicles flying up on him and pulled over across the road. He didn't know if it was someone who might be a threat to the relocating camp. He wanted to check them out.

Adrian stood near his open driver door, grateful to Kenn for providing him with wheels. The Marine had also made sure he had a kit and a radio.

The two small cars were rusted, but seemed to be capable of good speed. Adrian was already considering the possibilities before they came to a stop. The Sergeant in the driver seat was someone he could use.

As the small group of soldiers got out of their vehicles, Adrian had to wonder if Angela had refused them entry so he wouldn't be alone.

"She told me you needed us more than she does," David told him as soon as they were in speaking distance.

I love you! Adrian sent.

Angela didn't answer, but Marc did.

That's your only pass. You've been banished. Don't break it or I'll come back for you.

Adrian growled in fury. He wouldn't even be able to talk to her? "No! No!"

Laughing, Marc finally closed the mental door between them that he'd kept open since the trial decision. He would never again trust Adrian to do the right thing unless he had something to gain from it.

“Did we do the right thing?”

Jeff shrugged, reaching down to flip the radio off. “Hard to say.” He glanced over. “Do you want to go back?”

“Not really.” Kevin already felt more relieved with it just being the two of them to watch out for. “Do you?”

“No.” Jeff could feel Angela scanning for him and slowly spoke to that voice inside. *Can you make it so she can't find me?*

Yes.

Do it please.

For a brief second, there was a feeling of lost joy and then his ears popped and Jeff couldn't feel her scanning them anymore. *Will she know?*

Yes.

Can she reach us in other ways?

We cannot avoid the calls that she will send out, but that does not mean we have to answer.

Jeff was satisfied with that. He had an awful plan brewing in his mind and he couldn't have anyone getting wind of it until he made his choice. If he did it, they wouldn't see it coming.

“Are you okay?”

Jeff shrugged again. “As much as I can be. You?”

“Yeah, just disappointed. I put in a lot of time there.”

Jeff thought about the high level position he was giving up and managed to keep a snide remark to

himself. Being around so many rookies in Safe Haven had given him better control. "I can take you back." Jeff was almost sure he would later wish he'd done so.

"No, unless you want me to go. And no biggie if you do. After what I've gone through, being alone doesn't sound all that bad."

Does he mean that? Jeff asked.

Yes. Kevin thinks you're too uptight for him, that he doesn't need a grandfather.

That snapped Jeff's control. He turned to his passenger with a glower. "I'm not that much older than you!"

Kevin gaped in shock. "How did you know what I was thinking?"

6

"There they are!" Marcella kicked her horse, glad of the masks they'd made for their mounts. The grit was so thick they could hardly see. "Get them!"

Marcella drew up a bit to let the other women have a turn. She had killed the last two stragglers from the bunker. These men had wandered too close to the all-female den. When they'd realized it and fled, Marcella had ordered their first hunt.

Two of her women shot the man they could see, while three more of her girls rode their ATVs over the fleeing draftees. Marcella was sure these men had followed them from the bunker.

“There was one more! Find him!” She held up her torch. The fire would become their signal. Nothing else broke through the grit and ash.

Marcella pulled her facemask tighter and whirled her mount around to go back and search for prints. They could probably let the man leave, but it already went against their fanaticism to let a man roam their turf. That sex didn’t belong here now.

“This way!”

Marcella followed the call and found the remaining soldier surrounded by her group. The females jeered at the man, who tried to break through, but couldn’t due to the lack of an arm. Someone had recently cut it off. The blood trail was thick.

“End it.” Marcella’s tone calmed them down. “We don’t enjoy our work that much, ladies. Remember to respect the duties we’ve been given.”

“Respect,” they chanted obediently.

Marcella nodded .

Her new XO, Stephanie, lunged forward to drive her knife through the panicking soldier’s eye.

The women cheered as the body fell, but not so loudly that it would offend the Maker. Marcella had told them everything. As secretary at the bunker since the war, she’d gone through every document and file the base had and even some in other bases when she could access their data banks. She now knew more details about the conspiracy than anyone alive did. Marcella wasn’t a descendant, but she was extremely intelligent and she’d been given a goal

that no one else in history had ever achieved. “I’ll be the first of millions.” She turned her horse around to head back to their underground shelter. “I will honor her.”

Marcella thought again about that powerful voice in her head, about how it had whispered for long minutes on how to accomplish such an enormous task. Marcella waved the torch to gather her girls around close enough to hear. She would begin step two right now. “I want a camp vote on leadership in the morning. I want women with me, who are with me. If you vote me out, no problem. I’ll go find a group that does want me.”

Most of the females she’d grabbed from those fleeing the bunker were much younger and easy to manipulate. The older woman was Stephanie, who already knew her place in Marcella’s pecking order.

The girls argued about her leaving, promising they didn’t need a vote.

Marcella was confident she could carry out all the steps of Angela’s master plan. Once she found a few descendants to help her, it would go faster than even her benefactor might have imagined.

7

Angela keyed the mike. “That’s our site for the night, ladies and gentlemen. We’re going to stop here overnight. Do not get out of your vehicles. If you were a member of Safe Haven, you already know it’s standard procedure. If you are new,

remember it. If you get out of your vehicle before we've cleared it, you are on your own to handle anything bad that comes from it." Satisfied she'd gotten her point across, Angela doled out the waiting list of orders she and Jennifer had worked on for the two-hour ride here. "Set camp in the clearing. Center fire goes by the boulder shaped like a big pair of balls. Eagle teams six and one will provide a perimeter around our vehicles. All other teams will clear the area by a thousand feet outside the tape."

The area filled with activity.

Angela took the moment to observe the general moods. They all seemed grateful that they no longer had to worry about the government coming for them. Angela was finally able to release the breath she'd been holding as she stepped from the truck and found herself facing her team. The men were busy; these women had automatically taken up the slack to come over and watch her six.

"We always will." Jennifer closed the door. "Where's our new member?"

"Right here."

They all looked up to see that Kendle had moved to the top of the semi-trailer. She was kneeling down with a rifle in her hands.

"I'm not sure we can trust her." Jennifer frowned. "She's not one of us."

"I know." Angela waved it off. "But I do trust Adrian with my life. He said Kendle belongs on the hardest team in Safe Haven. That's this one."

“He told me something too.” Kendle didn’t look at any of them. “He said if I wanted to be like you, I had to love you enough to pick up the details. I thought I’d give it a try.”

Angela smiled, one of the few she’d had through the entire battle. “There are a lot of adventures still waiting for my army. I’m glad to have you.”

Kendle sighed, already starting to feel Angela’s pull. “Push me easy, okay? I still think it would be better if you shot me.”

Jennifer nodded. “So do I.”

Kendle snorted. “If I can come to feel that about you, I might not even want anything else.”

Angela’s grin stretched. “That is the plan, dear.”

Kendle rolled her eyes. “Another plan starting. Wonderful.”

“Who said this one has ended yet?” Angela headed for the clearing as her girls groaned and followed. They kept their hands on their unsnapped holsters, as they’d been trained.

The men who’d held those classes eyed them proudly. Female Eagles wasn’t just a female accomplishment. A lot of work had gone into the role of teacher and there was more to come.

Angela stayed in the center of the chaos, directing it herself for a change. She enjoyed the feeling of being able to control something like this so easily now. After what she’d done to the bunker, getting camp set up was a breeze. It also gave her the opportunity to watch some of the results of her hard work. Like seeing Theo and his team working

with Candy. She'd asked to help them set up the bathrooms. Theo was currently showing her how to make sure the water tankers were ready to dispense what precious liquid that they had left.

Jennifer took out her pen and notebook. "Trip to the spring?"

"Yes, but not until the day after tomorrow. I want us under shelter before the next storm hits."

"Should be three days..." Samantha concentrated. "Yeah, three days. I'll watch it."

"Food supplies?" Angela fell into mini-meeting mode.

"We have one full month, at three meals a day, for three hundred people. Are we sending the teams out tonight for that?"

Angela shook her head at Samantha, lighting a smoke as she watched the Eagles signal for the supply vehicles and bigger campers to be driven in. "No one leaves camp tomorrow after we're settled. Skeleton crews on everything."

"Why?" Cynthia frowned as her stomach growled.

"We're having a party." Angela forced a smile this time. "We've just finished one of the hardest, bloodiest eras of the new world. We need a night to remind us of what we've been fighting for."

That sounded great to everyone who heard it; the camp finished going up in good spirits as the word spread. It was really over. Angie had ordered a party. She wouldn't have if it weren't.

Tensions began to fade as the showers and mess opened after the bathrooms. Li Sing hurriedly got cold food laid out while his assistants got a hot meal started. Angela had told them to butcher a cow this time. They'd done it at the carpet warehouse to leave the gore with the other messes they expected nature to clean up.

The only unhappy people in camp had lost a loved one. Angela left them alone. Zack and some of the others needed time to grieve. Until they wanted to talk to her, she would treat them the same and not push for more than they could give. There was still a chance that a few people here would take off on their own, like Jeff and Kevin had. Angela thought maybe those two would end up coming back, but she hoped it was for the right reasons and not because they had to.

Canada hadn't seemed like a bad idea for her either, when she'd been waiting for the vote results. She hadn't been able to see the outcome of her trial beforehand because Marc hadn't made his choice yet. Once he had, it became clear and then she'd known what to use on the camp. If he had gone the other way and insisted for Adrian's death, Angela would have done exactly what Marc had feared when he thought it through. She loved Marc, but if it meant Adrian's life, Angela would have saved him and had to leave herself. After all she'd accomplished, she wasn't going to walk away empty handed or even watch someone else lead these people. From there, the future would have

collapsed for everyone, but she had known she wouldn't be able to watch him die, even though he deserved it.

The vow they'd made was more serious than she'd led Marc to believe. He was extremely quick on the uptake. She knew it wouldn't be long before he sent his demon out for answers, just to verify her story. It was the way Marc worked and it was quite effective. Angela planned to use that brain of his to ensure that she was never alone with Adrian, even if he had information she needed. As long as she had limited contact with him, she could still syphon off his knowledge. She would miss a few of the finer details by handling it that way, but once everyone saw she intended to have no contact with their banished leader, the rest of the bad vibes in her camp would fade—like the government.

“I'd like to make an adjustment to that plan.” Marc was standing nearby. He looked at her guards. “Give us a minute?”

Angela let Marc lead her to the woods on their right, aware of her team trailing them. They expected her to be distracted. Angela suddenly realized what Marc was about to do.

“It's what you need, right?” Marc had made his choice, but he had to be sure it was required.

“It's not required. You'll cover me.” She stepped into his arms. “No contact unless it's needed, Marc. Not mental or any other. I'll honor that.”

“I know you’ll try.” Marc held her back so he could see her face. “I also know you’ll do anything to help these people. I won’t have you lying and hiding things from me anymore, not even for them.”

“So what do you want me to do?” She let a bit of her pain bleed through. “I’ve banished him, stripped him of not only his camp, but of every single person who idolized him. Even now, Kenn’s not sure if he’ll help him anymore. I took everything except his life and I’m the one who will still feel that with him!” She spun around as the tears wanted to fall, finishing his thoughts. “And it’s because you can’t share, yes. I know I can’t have both, yes. I chose you, yes. Don’t make this any harder for me than it already has been.”

Marc was stung, but he could also see it from her point of view. She’d stayed loyal despite amazing odds and she would continue to honor his wishes by not sharing her love with another man. He didn’t think it was too much to ask for, but he was only in love with her. If he had felt this way about Kendle too, he would have found it hard to pick between them.

“Thank you for being able to understand that without hating me. I didn’t mean for any of it to happen.”

“But his love is the reason all of this happened.” Marc pulled it from her mind. “That’s why you care so deeply for him. He gave up everything he needed and wanted, to provide these people with a future.”

“Yes. And now he’s hated. It breaks me to see him so disrespected.”

“He’s bad, Angie. When are you going to see that?”

“He matches that side of me, Marc. When are you going to understand *that*? He fills things in me that you never will because you’re decent. He’s an oozing stack of slime and I need him, or I’m so alone that you can’t imagine.” Angela walked away.

Marc studied those words, trying to understand. It wasn’t easy for him because he still saw her as one of the good guys, even after she’d taken so many lives and begun to change the order of the world. She was still his Angie.

She’ll always need you for that, the witch spoke up when Angela didn’t. She needs him for the other side. There are places you can’t go without being corrupted and she will not let that happen. Instead, she intends to bottle it up and hope no one shakes her enough to blow the top off.

Marc had already made his choice; he sent it with the command of an alpha even though he knew she was strong enough to laugh it off. *Don’t ask, don’t tell.*

Angela stopped and turned around. She looked at him for a long time.

Marc was almost sure she would refuse his concession. He was hoping for it.

“I stand by my word. Keep him away from me.”

Marc let out the breath he’d been holding. “Thank you.”

Angela turned away without answering. Sacrificing her needs for others was in the job description. She'd been doing it her entire life and she saw no reason to change it now, especially not when she had already seen the future. The next few years would be hard even without Uncle Sam breathing down their necks. She needed Marc's love to see her through it. If fate was kind and the last of her vision could be changed, she would never have to call on this moment and use the free pass he was currently assuring her that she had whether she wanted it or not.

Marc wasn't taking any chances on driving her into Adrian's arms, but he didn't understand how determined she was to stick to the deal she'd made. The scientists hadn't been able to reverse a corrupt descendant and neither had Adrian that she knew of, but that didn't mean it couldn't be done. In time, she might even be able to forgive herself for the awful choices she'd made. When she'd told the jury she hadn't known until the calls went out, she'd been lying. Her first earthshattering moment of contact with Adrian had taken them through a flash of the future neither of them had fully understood or appreciated then, but it had been clear that Adrian wasn't the good man he'd been pretending to be. Right then, she'd been tempted and bribed with information, power, and eventually, adoration. Adrian had manipulated all of them from moment one and she'd known. He was an evil genius. She'd wanted to learn everything he had to teach.

That hadn't changed.

Chapter Thirty-Four

Coming Home to Roost



1

“Has anyone seen Dog?”

Marc’s query caused Shawn to sigh. “I have.”

Marc made his way through the crowded mess to the center table. “I haven’t seen him since we left the lodge. He said he’d find his own way back.”

Shawn didn’t like his job right now. “Dog wanted me to tell you he’ll be back before we leave for the island, but he has scents to chase right now.”

“He left?” Marc was dumbfounded. “Without saying goodbye?”

Shawn sighed again. “He asked me to give you something.”

Marc leaned down, expecting a whispered message.

Shawn grabbed him for a tight bear hug and then quickly shoved him back. “He said he’d always wanted to do that.”

Shawn quickly left the mess of curiously staring people, knowing the word would spread fast.

Did you know this too?

Angela was just as surprised as Marc. *No.*

Will he come back?

Angela closed her eyes as her table went quiet, realizing they were missing something. Around them, the mess of people continued to mutter and chat about all that had happened.

Yes.

When?

There is snow on the ground, but the camp women do not look different than now. Not long.

Marc was relieved.

Angela rubbed his arm as he came to sit next to her.

Marc knew she wanted updates and flipped open his book. He’d never expected Dog to stay with him forever. He would have to be glad that the big animal would return.

“Room for us?”

Angela forced cheer into her voice. “Of course.”

Everyone at the table knew it was faked and respected her more for it.

Tracy stayed standing. She was on watch over the mess. Her bruised face was a constant reminder of what they'd gone through.

"I'm sorry."

Angela shook her head. "Your feelings weren't wrong, just how you lost control. I don't hold it against you." Angela looked at him. "Do you hold it against me?"

"Yes, I do." Charlie felt the table go cold, but he didn't take it back. "I'll work through it like everyone else who feels you went too far."

"All 17% of them" Angela shoved up from the table. "It's an amazing approval rating for any leader."

Angela motioned Tracy to follow and left a frowning, glowering table.

Charlie frowned. "What?"

"Boy, you need to be turned over my knee!" Marc swore quietly. "I almost had her in a good mood so she'd sleep."

"I can't lie to her!" Charlie protested. "I don't like what she did. And why does 17% make her so mad?"

"She's not mad, Charlie. She's hurting. A chunk of her population doesn't want her as their leader anymore." Marc felt her pain too clearly. "But she loves every one of them."

"He's too young to understand." Kyle often had the same issue with Jennifer over the deeper layers of adult emotions. "Just keep him away from her for a while."

“Agreed.” Marc’s tone became set in stone. “Until he can show some respect for her position and her pain, it’s contact by my permission only.”

Charlie started to react badly and then caught himself as he realized that was part of what they meant.

“When you can control yourself, that will change.” Marc stood up to go after Angela. “Until then, how about you spend the evening doing Tracy’s shift? Send her to a hot shower—alone.”

2

Marc caught up to Angela, seeing she’d already sent Tracy toward the campers.

“It’ll help with soreness.” Angela tried to smile. “Thank you. She wouldn’t have taken the night off if I’d tried to give it to her.”

“She doesn’t want special treatment.”

“No. She’s tough.”

Marc saw she wasn’t heading for an obvious part of camp and slid an arm around her shoulders.

Angela burrowed into his welcoming warmth, wishing she could feel the peace that was settling over the rest of them. Even Marc was calming. He’d already shoved the soldier back into his cage.

“I need permission to leave camp.” Kendle had trailed them from the mess, under the disapproving eyes of the guards.

“You don’t need it.” Angela didn’t move from Marc’s arms. “Come and go as you please.”

“You know where I’m going...”

“Yes. Nothing will change for you here, as long as you walk the line.”

“He told me that. I had to be sure.”

“Then go. I’ve already informed the gate guards to let you through.”

Kendle left without a single glance at Marc. She wasn’t stupid enough to make eye contact in front of Angela after witnessing the destruction she could hand out when provoked.

Marc suddenly felt like a rookie. He held her back to look at her in astonishment. “You knew all along! You planned it this way so he wouldn’t be alone!”

Angela stared for a long moment, considering, and then turned away without a response.

Marc followed her in a daze. Angie had known Kendle was coming. Charlie had warned them. He’d said Adrian would like the island woman.

Angie had planned all of it! To save *him*.

3

“Do you guys want to talk about it?” Samantha asked the question reluctantly. It had been perfect for her; she didn’t want to hear it hadn’t been that way for them. That would mean she couldn’t do it again.

Samantha noticed the silence, and looked back and forth between them. She saw red faces and averted eyes, but no desire to end their new

closeness. “If it gets to where you don’t want to, I need you to tell me.” She led them through the camp that was starting to settle in for the night.

“We, uh...discussed it after you crashed.”

Jeremy gave him an encouraging look, but Neil wasn’t sure where to go from there.

Jeremy was forced to pick up the slack. “We kinda figured that this, uh, well it solves the jealousy issues.”

Both men braced for her anger.

Samantha let out a sound of relief. “We should celebrate. Let’s go dance.”

“What?” they answered in perfect harmony.

Samantha grinned, curling her arms around theirs as she walked between them. “We won, you know? We deserve to dance. I hear the music starting.”

Neil and Jeremy allowed themselves to be led to the small dancing area that had been made with gravel and then roped off with the last of the yellow caution tape they’d had since the beginning of Safe Haven.

Jeremy gently pushed her into Neil’s arms, detouring to the lost-looking woman standing near the musicians. “Are you okay?”

“Sure. Why?” Cynthia’s voice was too bright.

Jeremy followed the instincts he’d learned from his time in this camp. “Come on. You need a dance.”

Cynthia went willingly. Daryl was on duty and she was feeling lost.

Jeremy kept a reasonable distance between them, mindful of the surprised glances they were getting. “Tell me what’s on your mind, pretty lady.”

Cynthia rolled her eyes, but couldn’t stop the smile. “I’m okay. It was a long run.”

“Don’t we know it!” Neil agreed. Samantha had immediately inched them closer when Jeremy led the reporter onto the gravel dancefloor.

“We care about you.” Samantha meant that. It wasn’t all jealousy that had brought her over. “Lean on us when you need friends.”

Cynthia rested her head against Jeremy’s shoulder where he could feel her struggling not to cry.

Unsure of what she needed, Jeremy was relieved when Samantha took Cynthia’s arm and led her to a quiet area. The two females perched in the branches of a tree.

The men stayed alert below, scanning the shadows. They hoped Samantha could help the reporter, but from what Neil had discovered about her coming child, it didn’t look good. There was one descendant here who could change the natural order of things and it would take a lot to get Angela to agree. Not to mention the timing. Most of the women were due in the same two weeks, but there was no way Marc would let Angela try to help them until after their own child was born. If Cynthia delivered first, without the magic of Angela’s touch, the future couldn’t be changed. Samantha had given

them all the details they'd asked for and then a few they hadn't wanted to hear.

It will curse Angela again. She's trying to fall back into being good now, but if she has to do this, it will prove she can't come back. When she knows she's damned, with no hope of atonement, she'll cross every line she's ever dreamed about, including Adrian's.

It seemed like Cynthia's child was doomed. None of them wanted to imagine what Angela would do if the child was born without being altered. She wouldn't allow evil to flourish here, no matter what the age.

4

"He won't be content with her for long."

Kenn frowned. He was sitting on their sleeping bag, rubbing Tonya's feet. "You mean Adrian?"

"Yes. Kendle isn't enough for him."

Kenn didn't need to ask what would happen once Adrian sent Kendle down the redline.

"Just my opinion..."

"Go ahead." It still surprised Kenn that her opinions mattered. There was a sharp mind behind those hungry green eyes. Kenn found himself listening to her, often.

"That one wants to be the boss. She isn't going to stop there, but Adrian will only be satisfied with it so long as it doesn't interfere with Angela's plans.

As soon as Kendle crosses that line, or pushes him too hard, he'll be done."

"Maybe." Kenn couldn't see a way that Adrian would be allowed back into camp. Letting Kendle serve with Angela was as close to it as he would get. Kenn thought Adrian would hang onto that tiny bit of comfort for as long as he could.

Tonya ran a hand up his bare back. "Do you have duty?"

"No. *The Ghost* does."

Tonya raked her claws this time, drawing a slight flinch. "Want to pick up where we left off last time?"

Kenn's face lit up as Tonya pulled a dark wig on over her red tresses. With curls and a satin sheen, it was eerily similar to Angela's hair.

"I've been a bad girl."

Kenn lunged, taking part of the tent stakes up as he landed next to her. "Yes, you have!"

5

Angela opened her eyes to find the tent gone; her bedroll was on top of the cliff she'd gone to sleep thinking about. Facing west, she was able to see across the entire country.

A giant cloud of flames was spreading across the landscape. Angela glanced down to find a volcano spewing a steady geyser of lava and black clouds. Her magnified view could see bright orange

streaks below the surface. Another blast of lava shot into the air, making her flinch.

Volcanic ash was coming again.

After a minute, Angela felt the witch pull back to wherever she went when Angela didn't need her. A minute after that, Angela herself was back asleep.

Marc held her closer. How long would she remain with him and the camp before she broke? How long would she feel like she had to be with him to repay the debt she felt she owed? A few more months? Half a year? Not a full one, he was sure. He wouldn't be able to pretend for another 365 days. Angela had outgrown him. He had nothing left to teach and that spelled doom. She was running rings around him and everyone else except for Adrian. It was only natural that she would want to be with her own kind.

6

Before dawn had broken the ugly sky, Angela was up and dressing. She began to fill Marc in on her dream as she slid into her jeans and boots, and then her shirt. She knew men liked the look of a woman wearing jeans and a bra, and she wanted Marc in a good mood for this. "I have to take a walk. I need you to go with me."

Marc was busy staring at the skin he could see and nodded absently. "Sure."

"I don't want the camp to know."

Marc's head snapped up. "To Adrian?"

“He has something I need. I wanted to send you, but I have to be sure he isn’t lying.”

“Why can’t you scan him from here?”

“The bubble is interfering because of so much hatred for what he’s done. It won’t let his thoughts through to me.”

Marc liked hearing that and didn’t argue further. “How did that happen?”

“I planned on it.”

Marc believed her. It worked perfectly with everything else she’d done. There was no way she could be tempted if she couldn’t even hear him.

“Exactly.” Angela pulled on her coat and guns. “You ready?”

Marc had already been dressed. He hit his radio as they stepped outside. “Mini-meeting in the mess for all team leaders, XOs, and command positions. Fifteen minutes.”

The tent area cleared quickly. It was easy for Marc to lead Angela toward the rear of their perimeter without notice by anyone except the tired level six guards Angela had insisted be left on duty. Marc hadn’t asked why.

Angela took over the lead as soon as they were behind the cover of the trees, following Adrian’s bitter thoughts without needing directions.

Angela found him by the creek. Marc remained at a distance, respecting her for asking him to come along even though she didn’t have to.

Angela didn’t waste any time. “Can you give us a minute, Kendle?”

The brunette dropped the beer back into the cooler and stomped off, feeling unwanted. “You’re the one he’d rather see anyway.”

Adrian’s eyes never left Angela. *My Angela*. He slammed his walls into place. “What?”

Angela dropped to a knee by his chair, ignoring it all. She had bigger issues. She filled him in on the dream. She showed no surprise when he handed her the small stack of files and notebook from under his seat. “You had it, too.”

He nodded, sweeping her for signs of empathy. “Weeks ago and then again last night, with you.”

Angela was flipping through the pages, worry easing. “This is great.”

Adrian shrugged, but didn’t look away, though he could feel Marc’s anger growing. “It felt like I missed something.”

Angela tucked the information under her arm and rose. “I’ll work on it.”

Adrian kept his mouth shut, staring until she was out of sight.

In the upper corner, where he was protected, Conner snored in uncaring slumber. After he’d had time to consider his punishment, he’d realized he now had exactly what he wanted—to be alone, with his dad in charge. He didn’t care that their camp only had two real members. This was enough.

Angela went to the mess for the meeting, walls tightly in place. The smell of Adrian that floated up from the pages didn't break her heart, nor did that tight, neat script which warned her not to push the sheep, only the shepherds when she made her preparations. It was the dog tags inside the folder that almost cracked through her shell. He didn't feel right wearing them without his honor.

Angela's horror swept over the slowly waking camp in a cool chill that sent people to make sure flaps were zipped and doors were shut.

Angela took her place, nodding thanks to Kenn as he sat a cup of hot tea in front of her.

"Honey is all we have now. Sorry."

Angela liked it sweet, as did many of the camp. She nodded to Jennifer. "Add it to the list. We have to keep them in the luxuries as long as we can."

"Keep up. I'm busy today." Angela brought up the list she'd fallen asleep working on. "I want all the tents replaced with thicker canvases within a week. The team who makes that happen can pick their shift for a week. I want a generous digging crew to start collecting soil. If we hit a full dump load, at least 10 tons in our tri-axels, I promise to send the magic users out on gathering missions. They'll find a ton of things we've run out of, like sugar, coffee, and paper towels. They'll scour the land."

Moods were brightening as Angela went on.

Angela wished the 17% would stop staring in dislike. She could feel them. "In two weeks, we're

going to get snow, if not sooner. I want those caves cleared, stocked, and ready for us to move in—in ten days. We'll use all manual labor forms available to us.”

Angela took the tray from Li with a curt nod and then flashed a smile when she saw he'd brought her pancakes. She took the time to grab one, roll it up and dip it, then snatch a small bite. “Mmm. Damn, he can cook. Where were we? Oh, yeah, snow. We need as much rock salt as we can get our hands on. A truckload of it would be ideal. That will require a trip north and it should be the strongest Eagles and the best shots. Nothing good waits up there, but we have to have the supplies. Once things settle down, there are a number of items we might get from that run. That team leaves in three days.”

Her two center tables were now busy writing and comparing notes and jobs. Angela let them go while she sucked down a few more quick bites. She felt like she could eat a plateful.

“It sounds like a lot going on for those ten days.” Becky frowned. “Who has your six?”

Marc started to say he did and felt Angela's head swivel toward him. He sighed. “Looks like I have a different job. Shawn and Greg did a good job before. They can cover it.”

That was good news for the two Eagles who had thought they were still in Marc's line of fire.

“Great. We'll have a second meeting on all of this tonight after we're settled in the permanent area.” Angela took another bite.

“Do you want us to go check it out beforehand?” Jennifer was still a little restless.

“No. We stay together for the move. There’s a blank spot when I look ahead. Keep the guards awake as we travel. Kenn, get on the radio doing those new observation quizzes. And that reminds me. We’ll restart Eagle tryouts and classes as soon as the ash storm passes. Get something drawn up that includes promotions for every person who fought in this war and pulled their duty.”

Now that it was over, their population had increased through four camps that had requested to merge with theirs and vowed to follow their rules. Angela had all of them in the QZ now. She planned to let them out in small stages that wouldn’t disrupt the normal flow she was trying to reestablish. The soldiers would be shadowed for a long time when they were cleared.

“The new rule for the camp is no one goes out exploring alone. If they’re with a fighter, all the better. We have less sheep now; most of our camp can take care of itself. We will keep guards and cameras on the supply trucks, the weapons and gear, and the food and water. When we get fuel, then we can worry about guarding our fuel.” Angela ran through her mental list and got on the next set. They would stay like this for all of those ten days and then the workload would ease and some of the living could take place. “Next, is new assignments. We’ll do leadership first.”

She dropped a small paper on the table. “This is the new chain of command. I want it posted as soon as we’re done here. Someone tell Doug I want him updating the bigger board we brought from the lodge. Once an hour, people will be able to come by and get news.”

“What type?” Cynthia’s newspaper hadn’t stood a chance under Adrian’s leadership.

“You’ll start with updates on amounts for the contest. The amount collected from each site, who has the most hours in for individual lessons, who brought back more than their share of supplies. These are the days that determine the pecking order of every Eagle in my army, regardless of what they were promised by the former CO.”

That was big news. The sound of scribbling became loud.

“After we get into the caves, you’ll be doing that for items found, food grown, animals raised, and other things we need our camp to be excited about. If they have fun shoveling pig shit while racing the guy next to them, it gets done faster, there’s a possible reward for it, and afterwards, there’s camp praise when we’re scarfing down the BLTs.” Angela got in another bite of her now cold breakfast. “Remember these things I’m telling you. Leadership changes fast during an apocalypse. The next person to fill these shoes could be anyone at these two tables right now. Pay attention to the details as if you already know that you’re going to be cursed with it. Dig for the extra details and every

Eagle in Safe Haven will follow your lead.” Angela stood up, wanting a second plate before they took off. She glanced around the table, sending out confidence. “In ten days, we will have this entire camp inside those caves and preparing for winter. If we do it in that time, I’ll allow each of you to ask me for something you know I don’t want to give. And if I can, it will be yours.”

“Must be bad.” Tonya was still scribbling notes.

“It’s worse than that.” Angela’s words finally succeeding in scaring most of them. “Mother Nature just remembered we’re still alive. She’s very unhappy about that.”

8

“This is Safe Haven Refugee Camp. We roll out in five minutes. If you get out of sight, you will have to be placed in the quarantine zone again, also known as the QZ. While we load up, the boss has asked me to remind everyone of our basic rules. She said now that the time for war has passed, we must learn to follow law again. These are the Safe Haven Rules of Conduct and Penalties: Abuse (Mental, physical, and verbal) is forbidden here. Punishable by banishment. Fighting, property damage, and violence for any reason but self-defense is not allowed. Punishable by hard labor or banishment. Sexual Assault is a capital offense! Punishable by death, or branding and banishment...”

Kenn continued to read the entire list as the camp loaded into their vehicles. It was a peaceful start to what would hopefully be their last time doing this for a long while. They would spend the winter in one place. The relief that came from that allowed for joy even in those who were grieving. It was impossible to hold in that feeling after they'd been literally on the road for nine straight months.

Samantha shifted the truck into the wrong gear and threw her hands up in frustration. "I can't do this!"

Neil hurried to grab the wheel, thinking of Seth's explanation on Becky's wild driving. When he straightened them out, he calmly began to instruct her again. "Hit the brake like we worked on first, but do it—"

Grrr!

"Easy," he finished, listening to the sounds of an engine almost at its limit. "Good. Now hold that position until I come around, okay? Ten seconds."

Sam nodded, trying hard to control her annoyance. When she lost her temper, things got out of hand.

Neil slid under her, making her laugh.

Samantha wormed her way out of the seat and moved to the passenger side. She'd told him she was too scatterbrained right now for a lesson, but he'd insisted.

Neil breathed a sigh of relief and got them rolling again, to the approval of their rear convoy guards. He and Samantha were carting an empty

trailer she wanted for the next garden setup. He'd thought it was a good time for her to try driving the big vehicle again. *Boy, was I wrong.*

Samantha closed the door, not saying anything. She had been trying to track the coming weather when Neil suggested the lesson.

Neil got them up to speed and left her alone, glad to still have the truck. Samantha had a knack for endangering that type of transportation. Maybe he'd talk to Jeremy about switching to a minivan or something else as pathetic for top level Eagles to roll around in. She'd be safe with that, right?

Neil watched the rear sentry jeeps fall in and then close the gap to the bumper of the truck. Jeremy stayed so close, the one he was driving disappeared in the mirror.

Neil snickered mentally. He'd suggested that Jeremy drove like an old lady and even now, when they couldn't do more than 40mph on these turns, the computer hacker was determined to prove him wrong. Neil wasn't sure if maybe that's why he and Jeremy were able to adjust to this setup when other men couldn't even consider the idea. Their need for new adventures was an unquenchable thirst that had been held back by the social limits of the old world. Now that there was only the basics of right and wrong again, it was finally okay for them to be curious explorers of whatever they wanted. They were using that precious free will.

"I find you both amazing for being like me." Samantha smiled softly. "We're the Runners."

“Do you think she’s right? Can we change things so all that old shit doesn’t restart?”

Samantha shivered. “I hope so, Neil. If not, I’ve sold my soul to the devil.”

She chuckled to let him know it was a joke, but Neil knew there was a bit of truth to that as well. Angela was promising them the moon and stars. She would be given time, but if she couldn’t produce the required results, she wouldn’t remain their leader. The crowd would always look to the one who could give them the most and everyone now knew there were other descendants out there who might be able to do more or better.

Samantha snorted. “Not in this country. We’ve got the best of the lot.”

Neil heard the slight edge of idolization and shifted his thoughts to a safer topic. “When are you off duty again?”

“I’m clear until dawn, then I’ll be at the training tent with the rest of her team while you guys recon our caves.”

“She has you girls on something special again?”

Samantha didn’t answer his nervous joke. She wasn’t allowed to.

Chapter Thirty-Five

Close



1

“Wait. Slow down.”

Marc did it carefully, using the radio to notify the convoy behind them. He peered through the blowing grit in the late afternoon dusk, but saw nothing.

“There’s a woman with a little girl.” Angela pointed. “Up on the right.”

Marc eased forward, knowing she would tell him when to stop. Marc was sure she was already trying to communicate.

“Stop here.”

The truck rolled to a smooth stop; Angela darted out and into the grit before Marc could ask who she wanted to go with her.

Marc swore under his breath as Shawn and Greg ran after her. He began issuing instructions on the radio. The cars and trucks behind them were pulling into those two lanes like they'd been taught for an unscheduled stop. It allowed Marc a narrow view where he scanned and caught a glint.

It's him. He won't ever stop following.

Marc wanted the conversation with his demon, but he also wanted to keep to his word. He directed the demon toward their new goal. *Her hair only came back part of the way. How do I give her more? Is there a better time, method of delivery, length of time? Hell, what if I eat something special?*

Like what? his demon asked.

Marc considered and shook his head. He couldn't find a suggestion that didn't sound stupid. There was still too much he didn't know about their kind.

He has to answer your questions, the demon pointed out. *She told him to never deny you any piece of information you ask for.*

Marc quickly shut the door on the private questions he'd always wanted to ask. He didn't need Angela to learn some of those. Marc concentrated. *Check in or I'm sending in your full team.*

Sorry, I scared her by stopping so close. Had to catch up. Shawn's with me.

Where?

Twenty-five feet to your left. In a garage.

Marc could hear her impatience and let it go. He knew she could take care of almost anything that might happen, but it wouldn't ever stop his need to protect her. Slipping into the role of boss, Marc hit his mike. "Did either of you remember to turn on your radios?" They were short wave, close-range, walkie-talkies—a new addition from Marc.

Greg answered right away, sounding amused. "We're here. We have two new females. We're headed back now."

Marc saw them a moment later and let out the breath he'd been holding. Shawn was carrying a small child while Angela helped a tall, thin woman wearing a long, open robe over jeans that he could see were filthy.

Angela was speaking rapidly, trying to ease the woman's fear. Greg brought up the rear, head constantly rotating. The group went to the small van behind Marc.

He sighed when he saw Angela climb inside and give a motion to get them rolling. A second later, Shawn slid into the passenger seat, shaking his head. "She's gonna kill me yet."

"I know the feeling." Marc grunted. "What's your beef?"

"She told me I'd meet my mate today. She didn't tell me the woman would have a kid and a husband."

"Oh, damn." Marc tried to be sympathetic. "That hurts."

Shawn stared out the window without seeing anything. “You know what sucks the most?”

“What?”

“She’s gonna become an Eagle, I already know it. You should have seen her going for the Safe Haven security deal as Angela laid it out.”

“So that’s good, right? Having the same line of work is easier on a relationship.”

“But I didn’t pay attention to the specifics when the rest of the guys went through this! She’s gonna twist me around her finger and I’ll have to pass in my guy card!”

Marc laughed. “Join the rest of us. We’ll do anything for the right set of titties.”

The rest of the ride was filled with the type of male bonding that had been going on for centuries and forged some of the strongest friendships the world had ever seen.

2

In four separate vehicles, descendants stiffened in unison.

In the first vehicle, Jennifer turned to Angela with glowing eyes. “Don’t take this one. It’ll bring us trouble.”

“What happens if we don’t?” Angela demanded, both of them ignoring their fearful new companions.

Jennifer's witch blended through in ominous tones. "We might be able to save them, but it will always cost the blood of our people."

Angela turned to Tara. "Ask for your justice and we shall consider it."

Tara paled. "I can't pay y-you."

"We wouldn't take it even if you could." Now that the boss had made the choice, Jennifer would do her duty as Angela's right hand. "I'm Jennifer. Who is it you wish my boss to put out execution orders for?"

In the second vehicle, Charlie looked over at Tracy with glowing orbs. "Stay close to camp for a while."

Tracy nodded, shuddering. "I will. My word."

Charlie placed a hand over hers, connecting their minds.

Tracy gasped. "You're not supposed to know about that yet!"

Charlie chuckled, eyes still crimson. "I'm her son. I have a lot of gifts too."

For a brief second, Tracy wished she had power. Then she remembered how haunted Angela had looked at mess last night and decided her life was okay right now. In time, this run would be a hard memory and a badge of honor. She'd done her duty.

In the third vehicle, the vet perked up, listening eagerly to the woman trying to barter with Angela. He waited almost breathlessly for Angela to make

the choice. If she said no, he would remain in the shadows. If she said yes, that would be the start of her sword of justice being sent out to cleanse the land, as she'd promised. He would be able to serve her openly then, alongside her other adoring killers.

In the last vehicle of the miles-long convoy, Samantha's shoulders stayed tense. The woman and her child were trouble.

Jeremy came to stand by her door during the stop. He started to tap on the window.

Neil shook his head.

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

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

"Angela's going to ask us to do something." Samantha frowned. "It's as hard as what we've left behind."

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

"Only if you kill them all." Samantha was a bit dazed from the clear connection to the future.

Angela was usually the one to experience this; it was terrifying. “If you miss a single target, we’ll be at war again, with *my* kind this time.”

End of Book 5

What would you like to do now?



[The next book in this series](#)
Link goes to my website.

[Deleted Scenes](#)

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Deleted Scenes

Inside the camper, Charlie leaned over the edge to gently scrub the front of Tracy's over-soaped hair. He was watching the water run down the crack between her damp, towel covered breasts.

Tracy slid under the water and let their hands rub as they rinsed her hair. It was a morning ritual that Charlie had begged her for; she'd found no reason to deny him such a simple turn on. She was covered and there was a wall between them.

"I could be over it in a second," he whispered in her ear, feeling the need for more this time. She'd said she wouldn't let him touch her yet, but the rebellious teenage hormones inside said he could change her mind.

Tracy felt his power swirl over her and settle against her back as she turned toward him to protest.

He closed his eyes and the sensation grew stronger, as if he were standing behind her. He brought those mental arms up and slowly ran them over her shoulders.

The towel slid from her wet body. They both froze as need and fear filled the camper.

"It's okay," she soothed, aware of nipples like rocks. "Breathe, honey."

Charlie laughed, unable to keep the presence behind her as he took in her glistening body without clothes.

Tracy held still, letting him view what he was eventually going to have. “You like?”

Charlie nodded, sweat breaking out on his neck.

Tracy knew she shouldn’t encourage him at all in this moment. “Make it quick or we’ll get caught.”

Charlie’s eyes widened as he picked the images from her mind. He hesitated, not sure if her viewing that part of him was a good idea. What if he wasn’t built the way she was used to?

Tracy sensed his withdraw and understood as much as a female could. She leaned against the wall and rested her cheek against his. “I won’t look, okay?”

Charlie was ecstatic when she turned around and gave him a pose that had been in his dreams for weeks. Matt had explained what would ease that distraction. It had only taken once to understand the attraction. Conscious of time ticking away, Charlie stepped into the stall with her.

Angela motioned a guard over to keep people away from that camper and then headed for the front gate with guilt riding her harder than it already had been. Another piece of the darkness puzzle had cleared. It was heartbreaking.

You could stop it, the witch stated quietly. Save her.

No, I can't. An amazing destiny waits for them, a lifetime of serving the greater good. I won't interfere.

The witch fell silent, worried about her host. Angela's behavior was almost the complete opposite of how she'd been when the war came.

The demon slipped back to resume studying the data scrolls she'd returned with. There was something going on that the witch hadn't been told or allowed to see and it was terrifying. The darkness on Angela's soul was growing; the witch had no idea what to do next. If Marc couldn't help her, no one could. Donner would have her.

Deleted Scene #2

By the time Kyle made it to his last stop for the night, he was nodding off behind the wheel again.

Marc recognized it and waved Adrian into the driver's seat.

Kyle collapsed gratefully on a rear bench.

"You okay?" Marc moved aside so the next load of supplies could be brought onboard. It was deliveries for tomorrow. They'd be stopping at so many camps that only a van or truck would hold it all.

Kyle yawned. "Well, Marc. I'll tell you something, if you don't get pissed."

Marc already knew, but he held up a hand anyway. "Word of honor."

Kyle opened bleary eyes and locked onto Marc's grinning face. "That woman of yours is a real bitch. You know that? A real, honest-to-god, ball-busting bitch!"

The other men laughed and agreed.

Kyle shook his head in wonder. "I didn't know how hard she is to please. I thought you were a lucky bastard every night."

"He is!" Adrian slammed the plastic-wrapped crate down and left the filthy van.

Marc's laugh followed him into the cold night air.

“Can’t you get off him?” Kenn hated feeling Adrian’s pain.

Marc stopped smiling, becoming the cold, distant leader Kenn had loathed serving. “No. He earned this every time he put his hands on her, kissed her against her will. And you earned it because you made sure they had time alone for him to do it.”

Kenn lifted his middle finger.

Marc’s surprised laughter rolled into the night.

Adrian clenched his fists. Those were his bonding moments that Marc was stealing, his men and women to command! The rage grew hotter inside Adrian. He hadn’t wanted to be attracted to Angela. He hadn’t planned all of it, despite what Marc thought. The feelings were real. He’d tried to fight them.

“Too damn strong.” He started loading the stack of empty pallets into the small shed behind the tiny campsite. “And she feels it too. Not all my fault.”

They were on the move a couple minutes later. They quickly caught up to Tonya, who had orders to walk down the middle of this rocky, bumpy road. All the men assumed someone would meet her, but there was no way to tell if it would be one of theirs or the enemy.

During their argument, Tonya had been forced to tell Kenn her role and show her weapons. He hadn’t been able to argue the plan on merits, only on his emotions. She’d refused to return to Safe

Haven. As a result, Kenn had stopped talking to her. Marc thought Tonya getting a dose of the old Kenn was a good idea. He had little doubt that the redhead would reevaluate her relationship while walking through the darkness, but Kenn wasn't smart enough to know that's how a woman worked.

Tonya didn't raise a hand as the van went by her. Instead of being scared or unhappy with her role, she was extremely grateful to Angela for the chance to prove herself. When it was done, if they survived, Kenn wouldn't be allowed to treat her like anything except an equal and that was all she wanted. If he still whined and acted like a child about it, she would tell him how it was and he could take it or leave it.

After thinking about it, she'd realized Angela was right. Her baby was Kenn's way back in with the camp and the Eagles, but Tonya wasn't going to let him use their child's coat tails any more than she would use his now. That was the behavior of the old Tonya. She didn't intend to be that ugly creature ever again.

Deleted Scene #3

Shawn stared in surprise at the woman and her daughter. He could see the signs of abuse, desperation, and a long journey of which they were likely the only survivors, but it was the glow around the woman that had snared his attention. He couldn't look away from her.

Tara stared back, also in shock. The stranger was cute and well-built from what she could see, but it was the warmth in his eyes already waiting to greet her that was startling. She didn't know him...
Do I?

Shawn scooped up the little girl without much thought. She didn't weigh much.

The child slapped Shawn lightly on the cheek. "Hello!"

Shawn recoiled, almost dropping her. "What the hell?"

The little girl clung to his arm and managed to kick him in the shins.

Shawn let go, hopping on one foot. "Stop it! No, really! Quit!"

"Missy."

Tara's voice slammed into Shawn like a bullet and he forgot to cover himself. The little girl shoved her knee up.

Shawn hit the ground, still staring into Tara's stunning brown eyes.

Angela bent down to give the girl a short piggyback ride while Greg helped Shawn. He would need a minute to recover from that first meeting.

Note from the Author

Dear Reader,

Another LAW book has ended. Sorry about that. You know what Riddick says: “It all had to end some time.” I do hope you enjoyed this edition. In the next book, we’re going to see how Safe Haven gets their shelter ready for the long winter that’s coming, while forging a new place in the minds and hearts of their fellow survivors. Angela isn’t going to be satisfied until she’s improved their lives and if that means killing a few to save the many, we’ve already seen that she’ll do it.

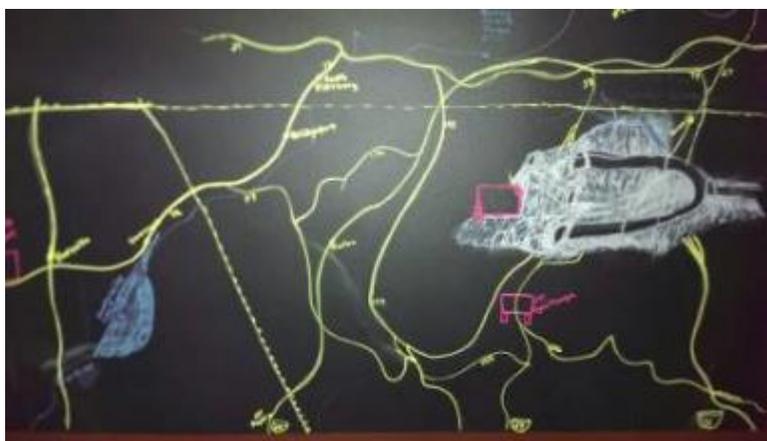
I’m off to format now and find an Advil. I think I dropped my fingers a week ago and I should probably try finding them. You folks have a wonderful week and remember:

“Respect the stone. Love the stone.”

Waving at you,
Angie

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

Author's Chalk Map



Book 6



[Carved in Stone](#)

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Neil shook his head.

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

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

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

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

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

“What are you talking about?”

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

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

“The woman we picked up asked for sanctuary with Safe Haven. She also asked Angela to send out descendants to do battle with her former captors, who are chasing them. When these other descendants come, they’ll see all our power and we’ll end up at war again. This time, it’ll be with magic instead of guns. The camp will have to run or they’ll be crushed between the two sides. If the new descendants come here, you have to disobey orders, Neil. Don’t let them go and gather their people. I don’t think we can win against that.”

“They’ve sent a scouting team?”

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

“Alone?”

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

“If we kill their scouts, won’t they come after us anyway?”

“Angela didn’t search that far ahead, so I don’t have an answer.”

“But you’re confident enough to ask me to go against my orders, my training, and my honor?”

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

“We do know how to make it appear like someone else did it...” Neil snapped his mouth shut.

He loved Samantha and he trusted her, but he wouldn't make this choice in mere minutes.

“I'll talk to Angela.”

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

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

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

“Yes, please!”

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

2

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Shawn?" Marc drew patience and Shawn's attention simultaneously. "What are you talking about?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

“What else?”

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

Marc liked that feeling. “Okay.”

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

Marc was realizing being Angie’s XO would be a lot of work and responsibility. After witnessing how gifted she had become, he’d been having doubts about how much she actually needed him. If she had a list this size for him now, that meant there was a lot more waiting.

“We also need to gather all the numbers on food, water, fuel, and the other items on my list. She

wants this one done by morning if possible. I'll get people on it as soon as security is in place."

"Security's already up." Marc increased speed as the dust cleared. "She sent a crew last night."

Shawn mentally scrolled through the people in their convoy. "Kevin's team?"

"And the ants."

"That's great! Camp will be up quick."

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

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

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

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

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

"Good." Time would tell if Shawn could be his or not, but that was a good start. "I'm used to

government food, so give me whatever we have the most of each day. Save the best stuff for the camp.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Marc sighed. “Just tell me.”

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

3

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

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

“Maine!” Missy blurted before her mother could answer. “We’s from Maine.”

Tara gaped at Missy.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Tara shrugged. "I was born in a lab. I didn't have parents."

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

"I'm sorry."

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

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

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

Stung, the witch vanished.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“And if they were already...damaged?”

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

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

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

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

Missy arched. Power flooded the cabin.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

though. “Corruption isn’t allowed, not even in children.”

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

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

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

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

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

“Did he see you?”

“Yes. He’s not far away. We can feel him.”

“He wants me,” Missy stiffened. “He has questions.”

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

“He wants to know about death.” Missy tucked Angela’s necklace inside her Eagle Jacket. “He wants to talk to my angel.”

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

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

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

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

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

Angela shuddered. The images Missy was replaying were as bad as the carnage Safe Haven had left in its wake—maybe worse, because the Canadian corpses included elderly and children. Missy’s father appeared capable of killing without

remorse. Angela wouldn't know for sure until he arrived, but as of right now, the tall, sandy blond man in Missy's memories was on her new list as a priority target. "What's your father's name?"

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

There was instant recognition for Angela and Greg.

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

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

"They're with him." Tara's voice was a resentful mutter. "Always. If not, I might have been able to kill him by now. They're his personal defenders and they're sick. They actually *want* to die for him, for the honor." Tara stopped talking as coldness permeated the air.

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

"We're pulling up now. Prepare to stop and make your way into the assigned areas. The map is in the glovebox or with your front passenger. I repeat, *drive* to your assigned place. Vehicles left

without drivers will be shoved off the side of this cliff.”

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

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

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

Jennifer let out a grunt. “Fine.”

“You’ll tell Kendle?”

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

Angela grinned. “Yes, I do.”

“When?”

“Now would be best.”

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

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

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

“Copy...” Kendle's groggy tone said she'd been nudged awake.

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

but he was also a traitor and they couldn't forget that, or worse, actually forgive it.

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

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

"She lied."

Jennifer felt her stomach drop. "Excuse me?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

"She sees...events."

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

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

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

Angela gave Jennifer a pointed glance.

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

“Now, would be better.”

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

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

Jennifer smiled at Kyle as she passed by him and got a leer in return. She blushed and continued, aware of the snickering and approving murmurs. The camp had flipped completely since Angela’s rescue. Jennifer suspected her request for another son had traveled throughout the camp, but mostly,

it was Kyle and Autumn who were changing minds. Watching him care for her newborn was enough to soften anyone.

Jennifer tapped on the door before entering the noisy living area for the youngest kids. She spent a moment with the happy children, but she didn't linger to help Peggy get the gum out of the hair of two of them. Both of those kids were sporting vivid red orbs as they sat with their coloring books. Jennifer wondered if Angela had this issue covered yet. Descendant kids were powerful.

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

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

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

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

That explains the smell. Jennifer frowned. "You don't sound okay."

"I'm not." Cynthia's tone sharpened. "What does the *boss* want this time?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

Jennifer’s voice lowered. “Kendle.”

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

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

“Boss wants you on the new arrival.” Jennifer refused to stare at Kendle’s scars. She now knew the source of them and thought Kendle was incredibly strong to have survived. It didn’t make her like the

island woman, however. It would take more than pity to accomplish that.

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

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

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

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

It should have felt odd to be taking orders from someone so young, but Jennifer had proven herself deadly and it showed, even in her stride. She no longer appeared scared of the world or those in it. Only the people she loved could be used against her now and she guarded them fiercely.

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

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

Kendle staggered, but kept them upright.

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

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

"You're gonna watch over me?"

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

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

Jennifer and Cynthia cackled.

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

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

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

All the females swallowed their protests as Angela left.

Angela went to Shane.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Marc knew to let Angela answer that.

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

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

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

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

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

“I’m good. And you?”

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

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

In her mind was the huge construction project he’d glimpsed in Jennifer’s thoughts. Only this was ten times the size, with shiny gold threads stacking into a starless night. It was a massive undertaking. He surveyed the rafters and beams of light. “What is it?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Can I ask you something, boss lady?”

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

“Do you know how old I am?”

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

“Angela.”

She rotated slowly to find him standing with his hands resting on his guns, and afternoon sun

melting over him like a honey topping. Angela blinked. *Hungry again, are you?*

Yes, momma.

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

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

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

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

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

"I don't understand."

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

Marc shoved into her thoughts. *Tell me.*

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

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

And they won't?

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

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

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

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

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

Anyone who failed to pull the trigger would wish that they hadn't hesitated.

4

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

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

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

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

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

Angela wasn't concerned over the delay. "I have plans for everyone." She swept the site, approving of the QZ going up first. The new people

hadn't all been cleared yet, but she didn't want them out at the same time anyway.

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

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

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

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

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

"Take Scott and Josh, and get up on this mountain. You're searching for a clear, or at least

flat area, to set a snow gathering operation. Gear for it is in trucks four and ten. When you find the right area, mark it, leave three sniper kits, and then get home for a hot meal and a good night's rest."

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

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

"Tell Hilda I'll knock out six hours a day, no matter what, once we're inside."

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

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

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

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

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

Marc concentrated on a thinning trail of dust behind the convoy. He sent his mental grid out and found his target within a mile. Adrian and his new faction of soldiers were settling in on a nearby ridge that had a clear view of Safe Haven. He would be able to use his binoculars to spy on them, on Angela.

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

Marc made a quick note in his book, then went back to scanning the area. The road going through Safe Haven had two branch-offs, one of which Adrian had taken to get to his site. Marc made

another note. The sky was gritty. Samantha had already warned them of a coming storm. They would have to check out the cliffs for a flood path.

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

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

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



Carved in Stone

Book Six

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