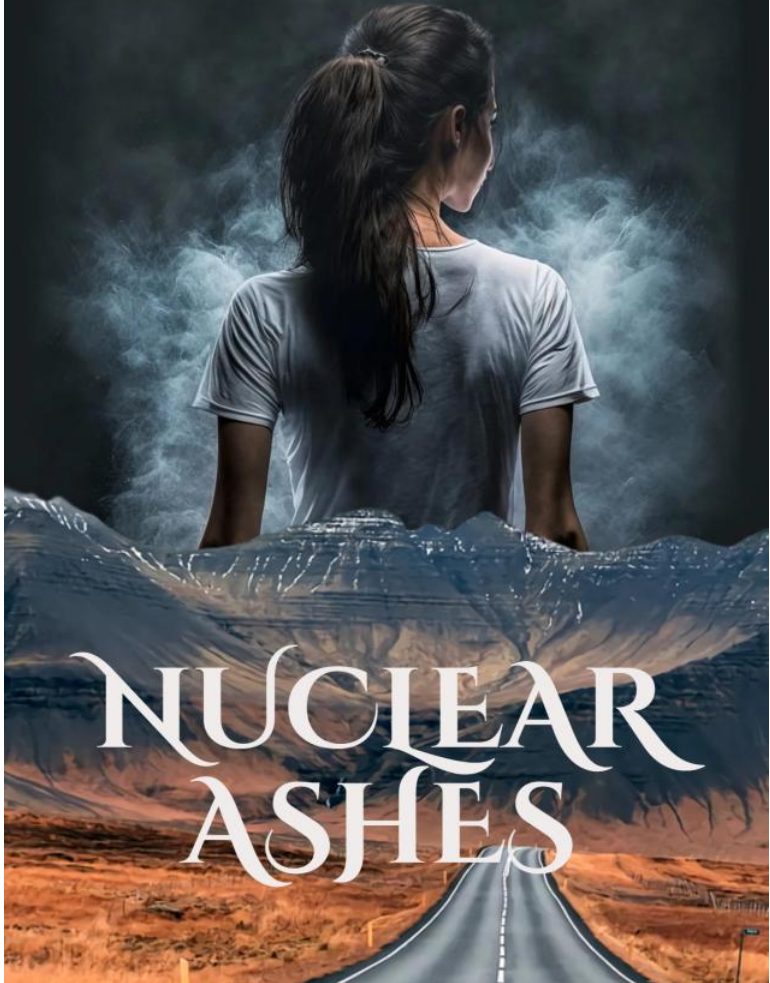


ANGELA WHITE

LIFE AFTER WAR BOOK #3



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by
Angela White

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Table of Contents

[Settling Down](#)
[It Was My Honor](#)
[The Younger Generation](#)
[Protection](#)
[Lines In the Sand](#)
[We're Special](#)
[That Sinking Feeling](#)
[Honor Guard](#)
[Honor and Confusion](#)
[Tiger By the Tail](#)
[Twice the Men](#)
[My Baby!](#)
[Fighting For It](#)
[Give Me Your Line](#)
[Chosen, Not Used](#)
[The Wire Coming Down](#)
[You Caused This](#)
[Rookie Rules](#)
[All That Buzzing](#)
[This Is Safe Haven](#)
[Required Blood](#)
[Those Late Nights](#)
[Deeper and Deeper](#)
[A Major Pain](#)
[The Right Bait](#)
[Just Keep Moving](#)
[Your Ship](#)

Mergers and Mayhem
Close

Strong Enough

Are you strong enough?
Can you hold your doubt?
Do you care enough
To take the untamed route?

Is your heart beating faster?
Are your muscles tensed for flight?
Did you bring your gun?
That's the only defense against the night.

Have you locked up your loved ones?
Seen to your things and self?
Have you begun to understand?
There's no such thing as wealth.

Are you tired of the lies?
Are you ready to show your skill?
Do you have what it takes...?
Can you kill?

The battle is nearly here.
Our road is fraught with danger.
In each apocalyptic street,
Lurks a desperate stranger.

Are they a threat?
Maybe, a friend.

Someone's clean slate
Yet always, the same old end.

Are you strong enough?
Can you control your fear?
Are you ready to feel alive?
'Cause Mother Nature's here
...and she's pissed.

Part One

Aftermath:

The consequences of an event.

Chapter One
Settling Down

May 17th

1

Kenn stopped in the open door to Angela's room, ignoring disapproving looks from her guards.

"You'll live. That's good." Kenn scanned her wounds. *I hate seeing that on her now. I wish I'd been along to stop it.*

The thought drew a surprised stare from Angela. She could feel how much he meant it. "Yeah. Thanks."

Kenn was unable to take his gaze off the breathing wound. It was uglier than anything he'd ever done to her.

"That doesn't absolve you!"

"I know... I didn't come to fight."

Angela watched him, while he watched her. They'd been through a lot together, years of hell, but the war had ended it. They were both free now. "I'm telling the camp about Charlie's parentage."

Kenn stiffened. "Most of them suspect anyway. They think you had an affair." He took the next step toward peace with the past. "I'm sorry for saying it."

Silence lingered in the small room at his

admission.

Kenn leaned against the doorframe and stared at her with an unreadable blue gaze.

Angela lifted her chin and carefully stood up.

“Ugh.” The thick twinge when she straightened ripped a groan from her lips against her will. She didn’t look at Kenn, hating it that he was seeing her weak.

“You’re on light duty in a week?”

“Providing John clears it.” Angela took her first steps while the overprotective hens were out of the room. It had been five days since her boots had even touched the ground. It felt good to be standing, to be alive.

She inched toward the window. The room they had her in was an office, now cleared of everything except the stiff couch, two chairs and a desk with photos of a smiling family. The room had one door and one window. *An escape route.* She flashed to the country club. Fire was her biggest fear—one she wasn’t sure she even wanted to try taming.

Sunlight, bright and rare, beamed in as she looked through the yellowed blinds. Safe Haven appeared, with hundreds of happy survivors. The weight in Angela’s heart eased a bit. *I’m home.*

Angela watched Marc take the dog leashes from Charlie, freeing the boy to come in again. He was so good, so pure.

Being with his father might have given Charlie that type of personality too. Hopefully, there was still time for some of it to rub off.

Behind her, the room was filling with tension. She realized Kenn wanted something. “What is it?”

Kenn winced. He’d assumed there wouldn’t be magic with her so weak. “Do you think... Is there some way...” Kenn clenched his hands. “Can you forgive me?”

Angela turned, gaping. That was something she’d never thought to hear from him.

It was something Kenn had never thought he would say and actually mean. Hoping for her to die on the trip to Safe Haven had been easy. When it was a real possibility, the truth had come like a shovel to the knuckles. He wanted her power, but he’d thought he was immune to her charms. Then the war came, and he’d even tried to leave his past behind, but she’d made it here. And then earned a place at Adrian’s side! It was the Angela he had first glimpsed working in the kids’ unit at the hospital, settling into her new career. She’d been vibrant, a glowing beacon of hope for his dark soul. He’d loved her. *I still do... Damn it!*

Angela was picking up his thoughts clearly now. The ugly darkness she was used to was gone, replaced by the heavy chains of guilt. Her nearly dying had sent him soul-searching. She wouldn’t destroy that progress. “Yes. In time, I think.”

Kenn opened his mouth, grateful.

“Well, I won’t!”

Charlie was standing behind Kenn. It was hard to guess how much he’d heard, but clearly, it was enough. Weariness swarmed over Angela. She

braced her wobbly legs. *Maybe it is too soon for all this.*

“You always get off!”

The open hatred in Charlie’s words was a surprise to the Marine, but not to the mother.

“I’m gettin’ real tired of that. You don’t deserve forgiveness!” Charlie sneered. “Until I’m an Eagle, I guess there’s not much I can do about it.”

The teenager left with an angry stride that was very unlike the obedient boy the camp had gotten used to.

There was a pause after he left. Charlie’s words had opened a new dilemma. Would Adrian let the teenager into his army? What was the age limit? Was there one?

Kenn started to follow the boy.

Zack stepped into his path. “Leave him alone. You’ve done enough damage.”

“Move!” Kenn started to bump shoulders and found Zack’s gun in his chest.

Zack scanned Angela. “You should lie down.” He glared at Kenn. “And you should get the hell out.”

Adrian viewed it from the front door in satisfaction. She’d won them all over, even the stunned Marine slowly lowering his fist. Kenn was also now hers to command, though she didn’t know it yet.

Adrian watched her motion Charlie out of the line of fire, and then refuse his request to go get Marc. He had come right back upon hearing Zack

challenge Kenn. *She understands Charlie needs to see this too*, Adrian thought in approval. It was amazing to find someone who could lead so instinctively. Angela was exactly what he'd begged fate to send.

Kenn's tense body relaxed. "Go on then, shoot me. You still won't get my place."

"I don't want it!" Zack spat. "I want you exposed for the lying pig that you are!"

Kenn stared. He didn't understand why Zack had flipped on him. "Why?"

"Because our camp XO always has to do his duty first, or we die." Zack motioned with the barrel of his gun. "Jeff overheard Adrian right after the brother snuck into camp and was killed. He said Angie could have been stabbed and shot!" Zack's finger tightened, expression twisting. "You once told me you were the best rifleman on your base. Why did she get hurt at all?"

Kenn hadn't seen this blow coming.

The listening men crowded closer, giving Zack a full team of pissed-off, mixed-level support.

Zack wasn't aware of it and he didn't need it. He'd found out the night before the slaver mission and vowed to handle this as soon as he could. "If you'll do that to a female, to an Eagle, you don't deserve to be his XO. You should be banished!"

"Or maybe dead." Allan flanked Zack. "If you had your own team, it might have already happened."

"That's why he doesn't." Lee joined the

impromptu jury. “And why he resents all of us so much. Even the rookies are more worthy than he is. At least they try to get along.”

Zack slowly lowered his gun. “*Angela* should have your place.”

Kenn had frozen, determined to take his punishment like a man, but now, he shoved his hands into his pockets and leaned against the doorframe, no longer caring about their audience. “I have his right because I belong there. You don’t have to believe it. Adrian does.”

“Then maybe he’s wrong!”

Outside, the camp was growing quiet, becoming aware of a problem.

“Maybe so.” Kenn flashed that hard, new expression they were all starting to be cautious of, to respect. “But you wouldn’t even be an Eagle right now if it weren’t for me, so your opinion means exactly shit.”

Zack’s arm rose again. “That’s not true!”

“It is.” Kenn swept the other furious men, ignoring the gun. “The same is true of most of you. I’ve added to his army, and I’ve always pulled my weight. I’ve even saved the camp, all of them, at least once. I’ve bled and sweated, and built, the same as you have.” Having the day for it, Kenn surprised all of them. “And I’ve made mistakes, ones I’m trying to fix. If it’s too late for that, or I find I’m not strong enough, I’ll resign.”

“It’s too late.” Zack gestured. “Look at the mess last night!”

Kenn shrugged. "I'd like to see how you would have done so much better with everything going on."

"I want you gone."

"You don't get to make that call."

All eyes went to Adrian, but the blond was staring at Angela. He lifted a brow.

She shook her head. "He stays where he is."

Faces tightened at her firm answer.

Zack's anger fled, leaving a tired hatred. He spat at Kenn's boots. "You're a piece of shit."

Kenn let out a harsh grunt. "Fuck you, boot."

Everyone waited as Zack considered attacking anyway.

"You'd better kill me." Kenn glared. "That is the only way I'll go."

"Maybe he'll have help with that." Allan hadn't drawn his gun, but his hand was resting on the holster. "If you had been doing your job, Rick wouldn't have gotten close enough to try killing Adrian. You let your personal shit endanger everyone in this camp."

"Too busy plotting and planning to do your job." Zack's voice deepened. "It's been quiet because we had more important things to handle, but now that the slavers are gone, you should be, too."

It was a powerful moment for the Eagles, but for Kenn, it was only the rest of his lies collapsing.

"Take a vote, then." Kenn knew the outcome.

Allan looked to Adrian, who was in the

doorway. “He still has your support?”

“Yes.”

There was no hesitation.

Allan hadn’t expected any. “Until he doesn’t, we’ll follow, but the second he gets out of line, we’ll kill him.”

“I’d expect no less from the men you’ve become.” Adrian’s tenor was full of careful control. “Now, you’re truly my Eagles.”

“We are that.” Zack glared at Kenn. “As long as he walks your line, things will stay the way they are, but we’re watching now, and we won’t let even one fucking thing slide.”

Kenn had known it could get this bad when the truth finally came out. It would be open season on his place now, and the competition was only a part of it. The Eagles would help each other, make their own picks and form groups of support. It was quite likely that a month from now, Neil or Marc might have the XO slot. Despite the words that had been said and everything that had happened, Kenn refused to believe Angela might get that place. The Eagles would never allow it, not when so many of the men wanted it.

Head starting to thump, Adrian moved away from the main door and turned toward the camp. The members couldn’t hear what was happening, but thanks to the glass front windows, they were viewing it. The warehouse was in the center, near the bonfire. He’d wanted Angela to feel surrounded by the golden light he was throwing out in thick

waves.

Angela was reeling from the open emotions. The loss of their men wasn't helping. Daniel, Frank, and Cris had given their lives. Judging from the small work crew driving up the nearby hill, they would be buried tonight.

Angela heard Kenn leave and stayed at the window. The constant ache in her shoulder was draining her energy. She planned to sleep for a while before it got dark. When Adrian put their men to rest, she would be there to pay her respects—even if she had to ask for a wheelchair ride.

Knock-knock. “Is this a bad time?”

The curt rudeness of the past was gone, replaced with a cautious respect.

Angela carefully chuckled at the irony. Just a few days ago, the answer would have been completely different. “No, Cynthia. Come in and close the door so we can talk.”

Samantha watched the door shut with resignation. After saving her life, Cynthia had every right to be Angela's XO. That didn't stop Samantha from wanting that slot.

Samantha noticed Hilda and Peggy hassling Adrian and detoured that way. Obviously, they'd expected him to do a better job of protecting Becky.

“No, I won't.” Adrian swallowed his personal anger at the women. “I trust Seth to handle the duty he accepted.”

“I'm going in there!” Peggy started to walk around Adrian.

Finally acting like a mother, Samantha thought. It's too late.

“No.” Adrian stepped in front of her.

“I’m going, and you won’t stop me!”

“I will.” Sam joined them, hand on her gun.

Hilda and Peggy gaped. They had expected Samantha to be on their side because she was female.

“Let the Eagles work.” Samantha patted her gun, bruises glaring at them. “It’s what *we* do.”

Adrian grinned at her open declaration of joining his army.

“What happened to my daughter last night?” Peggy pointed. “Was she beaten, like you?”

Sam wanted to shout the truth, but she did what any Eagle would have. She ignored the woman and walked away.

Samantha’s guard, Kevin, denied Peggy when she would have grabbed Sam’s arm. He stepped between them. “I wouldn’t do that. She hasn’t had any sleep yet.”

Peggy glared at all of them, promising retribution.

Samantha stepped by with a casual nod to Adrian and received one in return. Behind her, she heard the chatter of angry women heading for the QZ anyway.

Samantha hit the button on her belt radio, the first time she’d used it. “The QZ is under full quarantine until further notice. We’re not sure what the contaminant is yet. No one allowed in or out.”

“Copy.” The QZ guard’s voice was amused.

Adrian and Kevin shared pleased looks. If the other females who signed up were like Angie and Sam...*and Cyn*, Kevin added wistfully. If the others were as smart, Adrian’s army was about to be unstoppable.

A minute later, the rookie guard on the parking area refused the two pissed women entry to the QZ.

Smirking a bit, Samantha continued on her way to the women’s tents, ignoring the ache in her jaw and the stares at her bruises. *You should have cared more when it might have made a difference, Peggy. You deserve to worry.*

Samantha was shocked at the callous thought. *Don’t I have any compassion for a hurting mother? A fellow woman?*

No, not in this case. Becky had been crying for help, but her mother had been too busy to notice, let alone to react in time to save her. Becky had learned a hard lesson. Peggy deserved no less.

2

“She’ll be okay?”

“Yes.” Charlie handed the bottle back to Matt. “John said she can do light duty, as long as she keeps healing so fast.”

The two teenage boys didn’t bother with lowered voices despite the late hour.

“That’s good then, right?” Matt wanted things back the way they’d been. It was harder to steal a

bottle when the Eagles were so alert.

“Yes...”

Matt belched. “Are you mad your mom got hurt?”

Charlie considered, vaguely thinking Matt didn’t always stutter. “No. At least, I don’t think so. I’m pissed at Kenn.”

“Because he hit her before the war?”

“Because he never has to pay for what he’s done! Someday, that will change.” He held out a hand. “Open the next bottle.”

Matt dropped his eyes. “Sorry. Couldn’t get it this time. My s-source...dried up.”

“You mean he kidnapped two of our women and got himself killed!”

Matt was shocked. “If you kn-knew I was helping Rick, why didn’t you tell?”

“For the same reason you didn’t tell anyone about the things I can do.” Charlie shrugged, too upset to lie. “I didn’t want to lose my friend.”

“Yeah.”

After a minute, Charlie broke the grim silence. “Does Adrian know?”

Matt paled. “I haven’t heard anything yet, but I wasn’t given a schedule this morning...and I might be under guard. Yeah, I think so.”

“What about your dad?”

“Not yet.”

“I could show up when he’s flipping out, try to take some of the heat off you.”

“No.” The pimply teen let out a harsh sigh. “I

earned it. I'll pay for it."

"Like Becky."

Both boys shuddered at the images. They were old enough to imagine what men did to women. They hadn't been good friends with Becky, but she was their age. It was frightening to think she and Samantha had been alone with a slaver.

"You wanna go with me to check in? Maybe my d-dad heard something from Kyle."

Charlie followed Matt from the tent, aware of Eagles giving them suspicious looks. Yes, Adrian knew. Matt's punishment would come.

The boys ducked under the canopy and saw Adrian and Mitch in conversation at the rear of the com truck.

Ray, the Eagle on duty here, waved them on. "Bad time. He'll need to cool off."

"He's been doing what?! I'll kill him!"

The boys fled toward the opposite end of camp. Mitch continued to spout threats.

Ray approved of Adrian's casual talk down that would keep the boy from being beaten. Matt's drinking problem was partly his father's fault. He had no right to hurt Matt for the methods used to achieve his needs. Mitch had done the same, only his desires had been attention and respect.

Across the way, Dale paused in his digging chore and delivered a quick smile.

Given with a slight tilt of the jaw, Ray's heart picked up. He'd met Dale right here in Safe Haven, and that was where they were staying. Dale hadn't

been cut out to be an Eagle, but there was a place for him, a purpose other than being one of the camp members. Maybe Dale would be good on the fire crew. It was a respected place, more than enough to earn acceptance.

Off duty soon? Dale sent through code.

Ray shook his head, motioning. *No. See you after mess?*

Dale nodded quickly.

Ray gave him a lingering smile that sent a flush of happiness over his lover's cheeks. Ray knew it was likely to cause trouble, but it beat the hell out of ignoring Dale unless they were alone. Honesty, even if it got him thrown out, was the line Ray had chosen to walk.

3

“You need to lie down.”

Angela didn't protest when Marc slipped a hand under her good arm and guided her back to the couch. She'd only been up for an hour, but her body was swearing it had been longer.

Marc helped her into a comfortable position and handed her a bottle of water, not letting himself run through all of the things she and Cynthia could have been talking about. Deep down, he was sure he knew. “I should wake you, right? For the service.”

“Before that. I'll need time to get ready.”

Marc settled into the chair next to her bed. “I brought you something.” He handed her a purple

gift bag. “Picked it up a couple weeks ago.”

She removed the trappings to reveal a long, thin box with blue velvet covering. Inside was a beautiful gold chain with a small silver pendant in the shape of an A.

Angela took it out of the box with a smile that filled his heart.

“It’s beautiful.”

“I saw it in a display and thought of you.”

Glad to know it hadn’t been taken from a previous owner, she held it out. “Put it on me?”

“Nope,” Marc denied in mock regret. “John said not even a bra strap for a few more days.”

Angela blushed and dropped her arm. She wasn’t wearing one now. Her chest grew pointed under the thin shirt John had given her.

Marc kept his eyes on hers, swallowing a crude offer to hold them for her. Some days, being a man was hard.

Angela caught the thought and flushed darker. “Can you, uh, give me a few minutes?”

Marc snickered, sending a chill through her gut. “Sure, Baby-cakes.” He moved for the door. “I’ll *hold* that thought.”

Angela gasped. “So not fair!”

Marc pulled the door closed before she could recover and fire back. As he went, he motioned a man over to stand guard. When they finished securing the perimeter and putting out the animals, Dog would also be here, ready to eat anyone who came close. The wolf wasn’t any happier about her

injury than anyone else was.

Angela listened to the settling camp with one ear, and the thoughts of those moving around the warehouse with the other. The mood was half-glad, half-furious. She didn't think it would take much to spark the fuse. She also didn't think it would take much to put out the fire.

The camp thought she was dying. If she attended the service, they would understand it wasn't as serious as rumor implied, like when Zack's team had rioted or when she'd been stabbed. The Eagles would know better, of course, but they would spin the story because it served the greater good.

Pain, thick and heavy, dragged at her. Angela let sleep carry her away for a brief respite. Marc's gift stayed clutched in her grip.

4

The radio crackled. "Kyle's back, Boss."

"Copy." Adrian headed for the QZ, getting there in time to see Kyle pull in.

Kyle didn't look at anyone. He didn't check in or nod to his teammates. He didn't even acknowledge the waiting QZ guard. He got out and went to open the passenger door of his truck.

The girl climbed down slowly.

Mutters went through the Eagles. The other slaves had said 14, but wearing Kyle's sweats and Eagle jacket, Jennifer didn't even appear to be that

old. The clothing swallowed her, leaving only a child's face and a stomach that looked ripe enough to pick.

Kyle grabbed his kit and gently put an arm around the teenager, helping. It would have been fine except for what the Eagles had been told and for the way he was ignoring everyone.

His handling also drew notice from Adrian. It was too familiar, too caring, too openly done. Adrian saw the frowning Eagles on duty, the scowling camp members who were close enough to see it, and understood Kyle wasn't going to be talked down from his choice. He'd come prepared for a war. He was doing it this way to draw first blood.

And what about the pregnant urchin that had drawn his highest man so hard and so fast? Adrian studied her closely, searching.

He picked up nothing but energy. Some of it was dark, but enough of it was bright to tell Adrian what he needed to know. *She's one of us.*

"We may have to do something about that." Neil came to Adrian's side. The urge to roll back out of camp was strong for the trooper. There was nothing here for him but guilt. "After what I've done, caused, the camp won't take much of it."

Adrian didn't offer comfort. Instead, he set up another lesson. "Do you think so?"

Neil shrugged. "The other slaves we rescued have had nothing good to say. He might be in over his head, enough to not see the consequences."

Adrian regarded Neil coolly. “Like me, when it comes to wanting Angela?”

Neil forgot to breathe.

Adrian didn’t punish more than he had to. The trooper would be doing that to himself for a long time to come. “What did Kyle say, when you went to him about me?”

Neil forced himself to answer, suddenly afraid he’d just lost more ground than he could recover. “To trust you.”

Adrian watched Kyle help the girl into the nearest empty QZ tent and drop the flap against prying eyes. “We’ll honor him the same way. Leave them alone for now.”

“You got it...” Neil moved away, frowning.

Adrian glanced over his camp in tired contentment. Another of his needed few had come, and this one would lead the camp into the next level of progression, the next level of survival. It was another moment of feeling like fate was on their side.

It made Adrian’s determination stronger. When he was finished, this camp of survivors would all be Eagles, even down to the children. The color of their skin, their sex, or even age, meant little other than a new challenge to the camp’s prewar mindset. It was the individual light inside—the personal value that had allowed each of them to be a survivor—he always appealed to, but it was the same red blood that pulsed through each of their veins. That’s what he needed them to recognize. When they did, they

would become a country united again, able to withstand.

Chapter Two

It Was My Honor

1

The sound of the final mission member reaching the warehouse woke Angela. Cheers and crackling radios were loud.

She found Marc in the dim corner, hand on his gun belt, and knew he'd been standing guard over her.

"It's Kyle. Easy."

Dusk's orange glow washed through the shadows, bringing details to light. She loved that sexy jaw, those full lips. She smiled, stretching gingerly as desire rose. It was another welcome feeling. "You need sleep, too."

Marc grunted in response. He'd been thinking about how he had watched her sleep on the trip to Safe Haven, and about how being without the sound of her breathing when they'd been separated had nearly broken him. *She's my world.*

Angela didn't push, reading his dangerous mood. His acceptance was also clear. After this, he wouldn't hold her back anymore. He would be by her side, helping to give life to Adrian's dreams.

"Yes, I will. For *you.*"

"Eventually, it will be for them, as well."

Marc didn't grunt this time, quelling a sharp response to keep from upsetting her.

"So that's how it'll be? You'll close yourself off?"

Marc snorted, loving her sharp mind, and hating it at the same time. "Like I could do that unless you wanted me to."

Angela sighed. No, at the rate her gifts were growing, none of them would be able to keep her out. It was isolating.

"Are you ready?"

Angela let him help her onto her feet. It was time to pay respect.

Marc stayed on Angela's right as they reached the mess, aware of an entire camp watching their exceedingly slow progress through dusk's glow. He had thought she was hurting at first, but quickly realized that she was showing people she was okay enough to linger. Despite her good act, Marc didn't think she should even be out of bed, let alone walking around.

He looked down to find Angela's gaze on his arm. He'd chosen a black tank top because of the coming work. She was staring. He flexed.

Angela drew in a quick breath as his muscles tightened into a thick rock. *Sexy!*

Marc swept the parking area, hiding a snicker.

Angela tried to ignore the daze, following his line of sight to find Cynthia standing her first shift with a team. Cynthia would have to work her way

up, the same as anyone else. Killing Cesar hadn't guaranteed her place with the Eagles, only Adrian's approval to try. He had made that clear.

Cynthia nodded to her, face expressionless.

Angela returned the gesture, still marveling over the swift change in loyalty from not only the reporter, but also from herself. *Cynthia* had saved her life. It was shocking.

"Do you need to talk to her again?"

"No."

"You sure?" Marc was trying to give all the support he'd denied before, eager to make up for his mistakes.

"Yes. I will talk to Sam though, if she's here."

Angela allowed their hands to brush. Even when they were alone together, he stayed covered, but she needed human contact now more than ever. The black muscle shirt he had on revealed hard skin and the ability to protect her, ruthlessly, if necessary. *He's still my John Wayne.* That gunfighter's walk and those matching ivory handled Colts only added to the impression.

Vaguely aware of Angie's gaze running over him, Marc was doing his own silent checks. He was becoming Adrian's go-to man. The Eagles now wanted him to challenge Kenn for the XO slot. Some of them were being open about it.

Picking out an unguarded corner, Marc motioned to Tucker, who reluctantly went to cover it. Marc wondered where the rookie's fresh bruises had come from.

Finally feeling more comfortable with the authority Adrian insisted on giving her, Angela keyed her mike. “Man on point to the parking area.”

“Copy.”

Marc understood she wanted Neil to know who had that spot, even if it was temporary. She was still worried. Why else would she personally be concerned with their security? She was only an elevated level one, though if she wasn't injured, Marc was positive she would pass her tests. As it was, she wouldn't be taking them with the other Eagles this time. John had already ruled it out.

“It's part of my job now.” Angela steadied her legs and ignored her shoulder. “I haven't picked up anything new. I'm just being careful.”

“Okay.” Marc was still bothered by it. He had hoped there might be some downtime for her, time they could spend together, but it didn't appear that fate was going to give them much of it.

The camp was eerily quiet as the couple reached the mess, full of a respectful awe that one of them found embarrassing.

The other thought she could become addicted to it.

The entire camp had been draped with black crepe paper. Every camp member was wearing black clothing to show their respect. Even the table covers in the mess were dark colored. Angela felt her heart swell with renewed love for them. The Eagles hadn't done this and neither had Adrian or his pets among the women. This was the camp

telling the Eagles they were wanted, that when they gave their lives, the herd wouldn't just keep grazing. Their fighters would be remembered.

Seeing Samantha wasn't at the mess, Angela continued to the empty center table amid cheers. As she neared it, subtly grabbing the edge for support, the camp members who were there surrounded her.

Marc uneasily let himself be edged away. With a quick glance at the two snipers on the area, he hovered along the far wall and waited for her to be finished.

Marc understood that if he agreed to fight for Kenn's place, these people would love him that way too. It was heavy information to carry around and not act on, because he now knew the way to Angela's continued affections was through these people. If he did important things for them, she would want him more. But it wouldn't be right to use her emotions that way. He also knew that all was fair in love and war, and this was both.

Angela let the camp run on for a long minute, understanding they needed it, but she didn't give them much in the way of conversation. The service was about to start.

On the hilltop behind Safe Haven, the lines of torch-bearing Eagles were supplying escorts through the darkness. Three of their men were waiting, about to become a part of this apocalyptic landscape forever.

The camp members sensed her sorrow and fell silent, moving back. They hadn't been there. They

didn't know exactly how their men had died, but she did, and it was haunting. She would never view another battle scene the same way.

She glanced at Marc. *I'm ready.*

The silent words brought him to her side.

Angela allowed herself to clasp his bare arm for support as they walked.

Marc sucked in a tight breath at the contact, need surging for an instant. Even in a moment of sadness, he wanted her.

Angela slowly led them toward the hill, shoulder throbbing. With so many moving torches, the steep incline ahead of them appeared to be on fire with tiny rolling flames.

"This is such a hard new life. We'll have to do this again."

Marc knew what she needed. He could give it now. "You'll save as many of them as you can."

He felt her shoulders stiffen in determination and was sure that V was standing out in her chin.

"Yes, I will."

He bent down to place a gentle kiss to the top of her head.

Angela smiled happily. It was okay for Marc to show how much he loved her. She was ready for that now.

As they reached the bottom of the hill, Marc noticed the beads of sweat breaking out on her pale skin. He started to ask if she wanted him to push her up in the wheelchair and caught Cynthia's motion as she left her post to the next shift of Eagles. The

reporter made a gesture that got Marc's heart thumping.

He raised a brow. *Really?*

Cynthia surprised him by knowing the hand code, using it to answer.

Yes. She'll love it.

Marc drew on his courage. If Angela rejected him in public, he would survive. Right now, she wanted to be at the service. This was the easiest way.

Angela tensed when Marc's hands went around her, under her, but she didn't protest the gentle move from the ground into his strong arms. He tucked her close and advanced, cushioning her body from the jarring climb.

The pain of remaining straight subsided. Angela rested her cheek on his shoulder. "Mmm. Thank you."

Marc was bathed in soothing light. He had Angie, a son he was bonding with more every day, and a set place in the chain of command. Life, for him, was amazing.

The camp was gathered at the top of the incline. The countryside below was mired in darkness and fog, but the hill was alive with light as the torch-bearing Eagles escorted people to the gravesite. Three ornate boxes with newly carved gravestones were waiting next to six-foot holes. All that remained was to put them into the ground.

The camp was a mix of relieved, angry, triumphant expressions behind lines of mourning

Eagles. Losing three of their own made the threat of death more real to the men serving Safe Haven, but it also brought a satisfying sense of awareness. The slavers had gotten further into America than any other foreign army ever had. They'd tormented people through 13 states, more than 2000 miles of towns and cities, and the Eagles had eliminated them.

Adrian stood in front of the caskets, profile a mask of respectful sorrow. He and the other Eagles were standing together in full gear. It gave a sense of them being a private society inside Safe Haven. The camp didn't understand, but it was clear that the Eagles were different, stronger.

Unlike funerals of the past, where words took up most of the service, the ceremony now consisted of only a single sentence.

Adrian slowly raised his torch as three long, brilliantly stitched flags were draped over the coffins. "It was my honor to serve with you."

Behind him, the Eagles did the same, torches rising, lips repeating. Some of the camp members did it too, but most were aware that they didn't really belong to this other hard group. They were only glad the dark intelligence of Adrian and his Eagles was on their side.

Zack broke the respectful silence. "Escort duty, one o'clock. Teams two and three."

His own team, and Kevin's, rushed to surround Angela as Marc carefully put her on her feet.

Angela didn't thank her honor guard. She was

too emotional to respond. Days ago, she had bonded with the men in those coffins, won them over and trained with them. It was hurtful to think she would never hear Cris's jokes again or Daniel's laugh. She would never argue with Frank again.

Angela stepped to the coffins, not caring about the drama coming through the crowd for this minute. She had too much grief in her heart. "It was my honor."

As she stood there, two more darkly dressed people joined her guard, not giving the senior men time to refuse.

Cynthia and Samantha flanked Angela, ignoring the mutters. It was the first plan they'd made together, reluctantly agreed upon with hand gestures and glares.

Adrian noticed the teamwork. His men wore many expressions in response to the open declaration, but when the two females only stood guard and didn't speak, the men allowed it. Those who knew of the coming power shift expected these females to eventually be to Angela, what Kenn and Kyle were to Adrian.

As Angela left, her rookies stayed close.

Walking on the right flank, Samantha was aware of how powerful the sensation was. She was also aware of the fear. Not of failing, but of losing this when the camp found out who she'd been. She and Adrian had the same secrets, though she was sure his would destroy these people. The camp had complete faith in their leader. Adrian had delivered

them from every threat that had crossed Safe Haven's path. To find out that he'd been a part of the danger from the very beginning would be a blow they wouldn't recover from. Samantha was trying to find a way to keep it all hidden.

Next to her, Cynthia was just concentrating on doing this duty right. They hadn't gotten any training yet, only rookie gear and a slot in the tryouts, but the reporter wasn't worried. This wasn't like babysitting kids. This was keeping the wolves at bay while Adrian and Angela rebuilt their country. It was worth getting dirty for.

Slowing as the ache sank deeper into her shoulder, Angela pondered the differences in the thoughts of the two females openly showing their loyalty to her and to Adrian's dream. One selfish but good, the other riding both of those lines, each would be strong examples for the camp. There would be times of chaos, Angela didn't doubt it, but she was also positive there would be moments of stunning glory and she couldn't wait to start teaching them to be Eagles... *Mine!*

Marc trailed the three women, observing the guards and camp members. It should have felt wrong to be left in the rear, but he was smart enough to know that he was seeing one of the proudest moments of Angela's new life. The happiness flowed from her, reaching out to calm those she passed. No longer fighting the pull, Marc sent out his own wave of light, as he had with Cynthia when she'd come from Adrian's arms. Angie wanted the

camp settled down so the mission teams could do the same. He would help.

Adrian also understood Marc was now on board, but he couldn't help a faint twinge of jealousy as the new couple went by him. *They're the future. I'm the past.*

2

Kyle and Jennifer made the short walk from the medical camper with slow steps. She'd just found out that twins, at least, were in store for her. John wasn't sure how many heartbeats he'd heard.

Aware of Eagles and camp members watching them, Kyle still couldn't stop stealing glances at Jennifer. In his robe, she was all soft brown hair and glowing skin that smelled even better than Angela's vanilla.

Across the QZ, a group of former slaves were talking with a few of the camp women lingering on the other side of the caution tape. The way their cruel glances stayed on him and Jennifer told Kyle their topic. It wouldn't take long for this to get out of hand.

Jennifer, who was picking up the mistrust of the men and the dislike of the women, sent out a wave of distress.

Kyle stopped, turning to her. "Yes?" He waited, dazed, for her order.

Jennifer pulled back, realizing she had hit him too hard. She was getting more food and energy.

Her gifts were already stronger.

Now that she wasn't pushing that bright light, Kyle could think again. It only took a few seconds of replaying his thoughts to discover what had upset her. "You don't have to pull me in that way. I won't abandon you."

While she stared at him in concern, Kyle strained to build the mental block Angela had told him about.

Jennifer slipped into Kyle's mind, needing to know if he meant it. She found the stack of bricks. He was building a wall against her. *Cute*. He didn't understand that there was no barrier strong enough to keep her out.

Jennifer dropped her empty water bottle on the ground.

Kyle frowned.

Jennifer looked at him questioningly.

Kyle glanced toward the slowly burning garbage can.

Understanding these people took care of their trash, Jennifer retrieved the bottle and tossed it into the can. She automatically glanced to Kyle for approval.

Plans and terrible ideas began forming in Kyle's mind, one of which he immediately tested. "Good girl."

Jennifer smiled at that—not a grin of contentment, but a grimace of familiarity that made Kyle snap his head toward the tents. She had a weakness. She was conditioned to respond like a

slave. He could use that. *But I won't. I'm not like him.*

“All men are like him.” Jennifer was still snooping in his mind. “It’s why the world fell.”

“I’m not. I serve the greater good.” Kyle ripped his attention from her light. What would Adrian do with this one? Unlike Angela, Jennifer would use her gifts to get what she wanted.

Unless someone takes charge of me...

Jennifer’s voice in his mind was young and lost. *I don't want to be bad.*

Kyle was snared, but not for the reasons Jennifer assumed. He heard the evil behind the manipulation and responded—it was an echo of his. Adrian had almost passed him by. Kyle had always known, and the wound had never healed. What would Adrian do with Jennifer? Would he curb her light until she could control it? Would he recognize her value the way he had with Angela? That thought was ugly. Jennifer, who’d clearly already been through too much, could be the next female Eagle lying in a deserted warehouse with a bullet hole and lighter burns. *No!*

“Women can be fighters here?”

Kyle groaned at the eagerness. *Damn it!* Adrian would put her to use as soon as he could.

“Yes.” Before she could comment, Kyle blurted the first distracting question he thought of. “Does Cesar have a lot of kids?”

“No. They kept turning up dead. He thought it was his men trying to take control, but the mothers

made the choice. They'd rather their children were smothered than to have them live as slaves."

"Cesar's the father?"

"...yes." Jennifer didn't know for sure who the father was, him or the Kelly brothers, but the odds on Cesar were the highest.

Not calling her on the evasion he picked up, Kyle let his thoughts run where they wanted as he stopped by the door of a large camper.

"This isn't a tent." Jennifer was instantly reminded of the semi she'd called home for so long.

"This is my new place. I haven't even slept in it yet. Help yourself." Exhaustion was pulling at Kyle. He opened the door for her, then pointed to a large green tent nearby. "I'll be in that canvas."

He left before she could protest or thank him.

After a minute, Jennifer climbed inside, closing and locking the door with a flash of pain. She hadn't been inside walls since the war.

Jennifer noticed the dome light over the small stove. They'd had one like that at home, before the war had destroyed her.

A thick layer of homesickness and grief swept the teenager, crushing her all over again. She sank into a chair and didn't try to stop the tears that came.

Kyle got a change of clothes from his pre-stocked tent and went to the shower, glad no one else was there. All of the women and kids had been checked out by the doctors, cleaned up and fed, and given a place to sleep while waiting for their test

results. Kyle hoped they were resting comfortably, but he doubted many were. Being freed physically was a lot easier than escaping mental prisons. Like the graves waiting for him to pay his respects, and the men waiting for comfort on their future as Adrian's top team. Kyle planned to do those things as soon as he'd had some sleep. He would still cover his duties, but his heart was no longer in them. He only wanted one thing now.

Kyle stayed in the water for a few minutes over the time limit, letting the water beat on his tired, sore muscles. His body was ready to sleep for about 12 hours, but his mind was racing. He was going over it, planning it all out, but one thing mattered more than anything else.

What if she doesn't want me, even after I give my all?

When Angela grilled him, Kyle would say the expected thing—he would let her go. But he'd known, lying there with Jennifer's big stomach moving against his hip last night, drawing out hidden longings, that it was a promise he wouldn't be able to keep. If Jennifer couldn't love him, he would have to leave Safe Haven or ask Adrian to handle it. Come boots or bullets, she wouldn't be held against her will again. *Not even by me.*

3

Marc studied the medical camper through his scope, uneasy as he waited for Angela to come out.

Kyle and Jennifer had been gone for a while, and Anne too, leaving Samantha and Cynthia to restlessly prowl the QZ. Angela had insisted on stopping in. With her multiple guards, Marc hadn't argued about leaving her there while he took a short shift. He'd expected her to come right back out.

"Should have known better." Wasn't she in pain? It had only been days since she'd been shot. She shouldn't even be... Marc keyed his mike. "Rookie to the medical camper."

"I've got it."

Cynthia sounded like she'd been looking for an excuse to check on Angie. He spotted the reporter a second later, coming around the corner of the camper.

She wasn't far away to get here that fast. Marc was pleased.

The good vibe faded as radios crackled.

"John to the medical camper! Now!"

Marc leapt to his feet and ran down the hill with his rifle still in his hand.

4

Angela opened her eyes to see several people frowning down at her.

Realizing what had happened, she groaned. "Aw, shit."

"Yep." Adrian glared at her. "You are hereby relieved of *all* duties until cleared by John."

"And that's going to be awhile." John washed

her blood from his hands for the fourth straight day.
“You’re gonna heal, even if it kills you.”

“Thank you.”

Marc’s gratitude drew agreement from the rest of the worried people in the room. Charlie, Cynthia, and Samantha had refused to leave.

Angela let out a harsh sigh, too weary to fight. Her top stitch had loosened again. When Kyle left with Jennifer, she’d tried to replace it herself. She had passed out during the procedure and left a bloody mess for them to walk into.

“Okay.” Angela conceded wearily, eyes closing. “You’re the boss.”

“Yes, I am.” Adrian felt the heavy weight of the last months begin to ease. He turned toward the door. *I think I can sleep now.*

Chapter Three

The Younger Generation

Near Hutchinson, Kansas
10 days later

1

“Ugh!”

On duty outside, Marc listened to the muffled grunt with a hardened heart. After two weeks, he was handling Angela’s pain better. John had just checked her wound and headed for the QZ camper, where they now did the things that required access to heat or water. The convenient upgrade made things much faster when testing the new arrivals.

“Uh!”

Marc still winced at the second low moan Angela couldn’t smother while she dressed.

“Did you take a pill yet?”

Anne’s voice sounded strained to Marc. He was sure the nurse wanted something.

“No.”

“I think half of one of these would be all right, then.”

Marc heard the sound of a bottle rattling.

“If you think it’s okay, that would be nice.”

The edge of submission, of being in agony and

knowing relief was finally coming, had Marc knocking back his anger again. He hated it that Angie had been reduced to surrender, that she was hurting, and he couldn't help.

"Spit it out." Angela's voice demanded it weakly.

There was a pause, and then a soft snort.

"Marc is mine, not John's or Adrian's. He won't carry tales."

Marc grinned. *So much for eavesdropping.*

Anne's answer was so low that Marc had to replay it to understand what she'd said. *Will you help me become an Eagle?*

"Yes."

"The men won't like it."

"No."

"It'll be hard for the camp, too."

"Yes."

"Do you think I can?"

"Anne..."

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be, control it."

Marc heard Anne sigh.

"I'm not sure about doing this."

"I know."

"Then why would you—"

"Because you need to survive. They all do."

Marc saw John look his way and met the man's gaze with sympathy. John still didn't realize how fully Adrian meant the word *we*, despite being here all this time. It encompassed every living, breathing

member of his herd. *Charlie.*

It was a thought Marc hadn't allowed until now, but it was obvious what would happen. Charlie would be in Adrian's army too.

"I already am." Charlie came from the shadows, looking and feeling better than he had before they'd defeated the slavers. Keeping Matt's betrayals to himself hadn't been easy.

Marc didn't scold him for not revealing the duty sooner. He slung an arm around his son's shoulders. "We'll get through it, boy—together *this* time."

Charlie closed his eyes, absorbing his father's light, his comfort. Having a dad meant a lot. Before, when he'd had Kenn, he hadn't cared one way or the other. Now that Marc was in his life, Charlie understood why his mom had grabbed him and refused to let go even at so young an age. Marc was goodness and light, more so than Adrian was, and Charlie already knew the difference in that power. Society might need hard, ruthless men, they might follow them willingly during times of crisis, but most humans would only give unflinching loyalty to those they could trust during peace. Marc would have been that type of leader.

"How long have you been in Adrian's secret service?"

"Almost since the beginning." Charlie didn't feel the need to keep hiding it. "He has this way of drawing you in." Charlie looked up at his father's frowning profile, speaking low so his voice wouldn't carry. "He wants her. As much as you do."

I've read it."

Marc winced, arm dropping to his side. Had he really been hoping that only he and Adrian would know? "She's not interested."

Charlie wasn't able to get directly into his mom's thoughts—she had them locked against his tinkering and prying—but he'd caught flashes that concerned him.

"Would you like proof?"

The teenager nodded, bracing for a memory, but Marc only leaned down and whispered, "She calls for me in her sleep."

It was simple, but the heat behind it made the boy recoil.

"Yuck!"

Marc smirked. "That's valuable information for a man to have about the woman he wants."

Marc noted a whirl of dust rising near the QZ, and mentally calculated how long before senior Eagles would move closer. That much dust meant more than just one car.

Charlie stored the words. "You got anything else like that? Stuff I could use now?"

As much as he wanted to, Marc didn't grin. "Sure. Depends on what you're searching for, though."

"There's no one I like that way, just curious about reading them, like you a—" Charlie's head snapped toward the incoming trucks.

Marc adjusted the volume on his radio, gut boiling. Wanting to know how Angela really was,

he'd turned it down when he took up a position outside her tent so he could listen to her conversation with Anne.

"I'm warning you! We will open fire!" Mitch's frantic voice echoed over the radio.

Marc's free hand went to his holster.

"No way..." Charlie's eyes grew foggy as he stared at the four trucks speeding recklessly around the west entrance to the QZ. "Not good."

"What is it?" Marc responded calmly, as if he were training a recruit. He forgot to use the alpha tone he'd learned with Angela, not accustomed to handling Charlie as a descendant.

Charlie went that way as if being drawn by strings, ignoring Marc and everyone else.

Need you! Marc's concern made the connection easy to find.

Angela came from the tent behind Marc.

Nearby camp members surged her way. They demanded her attention.

Marc quickly took her right.

"Stop at the tape!" Mitch ordered over the radio, sounding sober and scared.

Marc was glad to see Adrian come from his tent and head toward the QZ, after a fast glance to verify that Angela was protected. She had heard the message, but Adrian had been the recipient. Marc wasn't leaving Angela's side yet. The last time he'd allowed that, she'd almost died.

Marc slid a gentle arm around Angela's waist. "Easy, folks. Let her breathe."

Eager to find out what had pulled their son, the couple deflected the crowd's excited well wishes as quickly as they could, both casting anxious glances toward the now over guarded quarantine area. The sense of trouble arriving was clear.

The QZ was now a permanent fixture in the back corner of the camp. It was outfitted with a shower and bathrooms, a supply truck and three extra guards that moved closer as the new people neared. Off duty Eagles also picked up on the unease. A full complement of men waited in that deadly V formation as the trucks finally stopped in a wide spray of gravel and dust.

Charlie went straight to Adrian's right, not waiting to be called. While his mom recovered, this was his job. It hadn't been made official, but the teenager knew.

The scruffy newcomers got out of the trucks with hands near weapons and wolfish leers slanted across sore-riddled mouths.

"Well, ain't this a sight!" The largest among them grinned, resting his huge hands on double holsters. "It's gonna be a good day, Badger!"

The men getting out of their dusty trucks around him cackled at the reference to the old world, at his scornful joke.

"Told ya I saw a lot of lights last night!" Badger picked at a scurvy sore on his lip. His other hand twitched restlessly as he waited, but his eyes stayed on his boss.

The man in charge broke away from his group,

strolling toward Kyle, who was in the front of the V with his Glock in hand.

“I’m sure glad to find a group this size.” The man leered, sharp glance going over what he could see of the camp. “Thought there wasn’t any survivors ‘round here we hadn’t supplied yet!”

The traders wore worn guns that Kyle assumed had seen a fair amount of use from the way they were slung low and ready. These were killers. *But you’re not trained.* Kyle saw how the men left themselves open as they swaggered closer. *Not like we are.* “This is a military refugee camp. State your business!”

“We’re merchants.” The big man sauntered closer, thick rings flashing in the dim sunlight. “We roam the wastelands and offer things that men need—for the right price, of course.”

“Things like what?” Kyle waited for the kill order he felt coming. Adrian hadn’t sent Charlie out of the area yet. That meant the boy was picking something up. Blood was about to spill.

“The future.” Badger flicked a scab into the dirt. “You guys don’t have one without owning at least a few of what we’re selling.”

Kyle saw Charlie’s lips start moving, telling Adrian what it was that the men were guilty of. An icy chill of battle came down over the QZ.

Until he knows when to keep the match from the fuse, there won’t be any mercy while he’s on duty. Kyle got ready to react. *These men were dead the instant Charlie felt them.* Kyle chose to help things

along. “Okay. What are you selling?”

Adrian studied the traders while Kyle listened to the list of supplies the men claimed they could lay their hands on. It was all wrong. Adrian didn’t need the teenager at his side to verify it. He would use the boy, though. Adrian leaned closer. “They sell people?”

“Yes. They didn’t bring them along... Don’t always deliver, either.” Charlie’s words were full of disgust and anger as he searched.

“We can get a whole silo of corn or a barn of tobacco, but not both in one visit,” the trader leader told them.

Kyle and the trader continued to barter.

Adrian found Angela nearby. When he raised a mental brow, she gave reluctant agreement, watching from the tape with Marc and Dog. Consent or not, Charlie was already looking through their evil.

Given permission, Adrian entered Charlie’s mind. *I need you to figure out where they’re holding the hostages. Then the Eagles will kill them.*

Instead of the fear or revulsion he and Angela were both half expecting, Charlie’s surprised expression changed to eagerness.

I don’t hide it as well as my mom. You’ll have to distract them so I can search for the kids.

Adrian’s hiss of fury was covered by the sound of arrogant footsteps on the gravel as the other traders flanked their leader. *They’re selling kids!*

“We have three locations for water towers, but

like with the silo, only one big purchase at a time. And you'll have to pay up front, of course."

Adrian felt the inevitable coming and didn't fight it. This was his job. He asked the last question that mattered. *Weapons or women? What do they want?*

Charlie's mouth twisted as he began breaking through deeper mental barriers. *Their females are in trouble...* Charlie shoved harder.

The man he was reading became aware of him, but it was too late to stop.

They came...

I'll kill them all, boy. Tell him to give me what I came for!

Charlie flinched back in stunned panic. That wasn't Adrian thrusting an order into his mind. *The trader knows! He...he...*

Seeing the panic of youth, Adrian put a hand on Charlie's shoulder.

The calming blast of energy allowed the teen to speak through his rage. "A doctor. They came for our doctor!"

Adrian drew his gun, stepping in front of the unvested teenager.

"Damn you!" Exposed, the leader of the traders spun toward Charlie.

Adrian shot the man in the head.

The Eagles opened fire.

Adrian shoved Charlie down as the man's partners returned the favor.

"Men in the beds! Men in the beds!" Charlie

crawled to where Adrian's leg kicks were directing.

A second group of traders appeared from under tarps in the beds of the trucks, shooting and shouting in abandon. This group ran into the QZ as if they'd been in it before, firing at the Eagles and camp members in view. They found cover behind a tent, a camper, and the water trucks.

"Intruders!" Mitch screamed from the nearby com truck. *"All off duty Eagles to the QZ!"*

Radios and alarms blared across Safe Haven, interwoven with shouts and gunfire. Under that, the sound of furiously running feet thudded across the dusty Kansas ground.

Kyle fired, breaking the formation as he advanced into the QZ. There was only one tent left there—his. Two of the traders were using it for protection.

No longer shooting, the men were without their leader and looking for an escape. Despite the visible security, they hadn't counted on anyone fighting back.

Kyle walked straight at the two men, picking out what he needed—a leg exposed, the side of a shoulder he could hit, and those amazing golden eyes lying at the bottom of the flap.

She's clear. Fire!

Two heavy thuds echoed as the men fell.

Kyle slung his arm out, taking down the center pole. The canvas collapsed, clearing his line of sight.

Fire! Kyle pulled the trigger an instant quicker, slug hitting the man by the medical camper. The trader's bullet slammed through the edge of Kyle's boot and ricocheted out the other side.

Kyle barely noticed the lucky miss, busy putting another round into the man—his chest this time.

The trader dropped to the ground in a bloody sprawl.

Kyle fired again, rage demanding it. This shot went into the skull.

Around him, Kyle's team picked off the wounded.

Kyle turned, training in control.

Left? *Clear!*

Right? *Clear!*

Adrian and the others? *Clear!*

Anyone left to kill?

Kyle searched.

The influx of Eagles was more than the traders had been prepared for. Hoping to do a quick shoot and snatch from the QZ that they'd probably studied for the last week, the attackers were now pinned down behind the water truck instead.

Kyle scanned again.

John was watching from under the shower camper, along with Anne and Charlie. Adrian stood in front of them, firing quick slugs that kept the remaining infiltrators pinned down from that side. No other threats remained.

The other side of the water truck suddenly exploded with shouts.

“Hands up!”

“Drop ‘em!”

“Surrender or die!”

Bang!

“Fire!”

Bang! Bang!

Bang!

Bang!

Kyle nodded in satisfaction. Neil and his team would make sure there were no survivors and it would happen in full view of the camp. *The time for hiding how good we are is over.* If the people living here in safety didn’t like the protection that was provided, they were able to leave, mostly because of how lethal Adrian had taught his army to be. Death was always the price required for freedom. No war could ever change that.

Satisfied the QZ was clear, Kyle motioned his team forward to take care of the cleanup. “Wear the gloves.”

Before he joined them in the nasty chore, Kyle found Jennifer’s wide gaze. She was still on the ground, waiting to be comforted and then told what to do.

Kyle turned to his duty instead of responding to her silent call. *She’ll be fine without me. She’ll be fine without me.*

Jennifer watched him walk away with wide eyes and stomach cramps. She wasn’t in labor. She’d just dropped to her knees too fast and pinched something, but her mind was in chaos. She’d come

to depend on him so much in just two weeks and he was every bit the killer that Cesar had been.

Kyle didn't look back.

Jennifer didn't send out a second wave of need, but it was a struggle. What if he woke up during the times that they were apart? What if he realized what a burden she was?

Jennifer dropped her head. *I'll be fine without him. I'll be fine without him.*

Adrian jerked a hand toward the panicking camp. "Shut off the alarms and sing to them!"

Kenn rushed to obey.

Neil came from the second battlefield behind the heavily leaking water truck, soaked and splattered in hard dirt chips that were melting into muddy furrows.

"Double the watch and do a full perimeter check—inside and out." Neil directed his team. "On the way, organize a catch-and-carry for whatever water's left here."

"Why did you do that?" Charlie glared from Adrian's feet.

Adrian ignored the worried parents to answer their child. "Because of Rick, I can't take the chance."

Charlie didn't move yet, though John and Anne were being helped out from under the camper. The teenager was trying to handle the newest emotion to grace his hormones—bloodlust. He wanted to be drawing it himself. "What about the kids they're

holding? I didn't have enough time to get a location."

Adrian's heart squeezed into a hard knot, but he forced his mouth to provide the answer that was expected. "Your mom will help me find them when she's stronger."

"And if she can't?"

"Then I carry that guilt, not you." It was enough for now, while youth and shock had him distracted, but Adrian knew a more detailed answer had to be in place for next time.

Charlie's young gaze flicked over the bloody bodies. He slowly crawled out and stood. "They're not all dead. I might still be able..."

Not asking Angela this time, Adrian moved aside. "You follow orders or go no farther in my army—ever."

Adrian stayed close, gun in hand, as Charlie walked onto the battlefield without responding.

Badger was lying on his side near the supply truck. Blood pooled under him from wounds in his stomach, leaving a path. He'd been hoping to play dead and crawl away later.

The heavily bearded slaver flinched at the crunch of boot steps, hand coming up. "Don't!"

"Tell us where they are!" Charlie hoped the location was the first thing the trader would think of. His death was close.

The man's face was ugly with sores and fear, but there was no remorse. "Fuck off, freak!"

Adrian lifted his gun.

Charlie knelt in the line of fire. "I can heal you."
Adrian started to jerk Charlie back.

Angela stopped him with two words. *He's lying.*
Impressed and absolutely horrified, Adrian
dropped his hand and made sure only the closest
Eagles would see whatever happened.

Frustrated by the man's panicked, painful
thoughts, Charlie let his inner witch bleed through
for the first time, blue eyes turning deep crimson.
"Your life for theirs. Where?"

The man sucked in a lungful of air through the
terror and the agony. "Outside Wichita. Kids like
you, locked in a boarding school."

Charlie didn't pull the heat back. This man was
bad, and the hunger of the witch he'd let come
forward was incredible. It rode him in heavy, gut-
twisting seduction...

Charlie. Angela's voice in his mind was careful,
cautious. *Must you become a killer already?*

The boy groaned. "I can just take a—"

But should you?

It was a hard battle.

Adrian waited, wondering if he'd made a
mistake by bringing the teenager in so soon.

Badger sensed what was coming. "The school's
guarded. You won't get in without me!"

Charlie slowly pushed the hunger away, barely
aware of the trader now trying to cover his tracks.
He turned around with a faint tinge of red still
lingering around his pupils, set to ask Adrian for
what everyone else wanted.

“Not yet.” Marc denied it.

Charlie’s tinted gaze swung around. “When?”

Marc shrugged, voice set. “A year, at least, maybe two.”

“And until then?”

There was none of the rebellion they’d all, except Marc, expected. “A few of us will donate time. We’ll give you layers of training above what your mom received. That fire has to come under control.”

As he stepped back, Charlie didn’t flinch at the single shot from Adrian’s gun. Knowing he would be an Eagle and fight alongside his parents was all he cared about right now.

Marc trailed the teenager after exchanging a quick look with Angela. The intense dismay in it said he didn’t want Charlie fighting, for her to find a way to slow him down.

Angela understood the feeling, but she didn’t start searching for another path. Charlie had made his choice, and like her, he had the right to it. Angela realized she was going to get what Marc had gone through while watching her make a team, and grimaced. She had a feeling she would have more sympathy afterwards. Charlie was just as determined as she was.

“What would Adrian have done, if I’d killed the trader?” Charlie asked as he and Marc left the area.

Marc frowned. “You’d probably be considered a threat and put under guard.”

“Why?” Charlie’s voice rose. “The man was bad!”

“Two wrongs. That phrase makes sense.” Marc steered them toward the empty training tent so Charlie could work off some heat. They would start doing this regularly.

“Not usually to Adrian.” Charlie pointed. “*He* makes his own choices without worrying over the consequences.”

“Not true, boy. Adrian doesn’t order a single damn thing without planning it out five levels beyond.” Marc grunted, loading weights onto the smaller bench. “He accounts for everything that can go wrong and makes his choice after he has it all covered.”

It was clear by Marc’s body language that he didn’t want to defend Adrian to his son. The Eagles close enough to hear the conversation respected him for doing it anyway.

“But he hasn’t had it all covered. Look at what’s happened.”

Marc grunted again, bitterly this time. “Believe me, I did, and I was wrong. I hate his methods, but sometimes things happen that no one can account for.”

Charlie sighed. “Adrian calls them fate’s wild cards—like Kenn and my mom.”

“I’ve heard that. Wonder what he calls himself?” Marc switched on the power for this tent.

Charlie’s tenor lowered into adult concern. “Damned.”

Marc didn't know what to say. The truth (*He is, boy. More than anyone I've ever known.*) seemed out of place.

They fell into the workout, listening to the sounds of the camp being put back in order while worrying over what could have been.

Marc was concerned about his son getting hurt. His son was afraid he might like hurting others.

Left out because of her injury, Angela had time to study the scene. Her heart was still trying to regain a normal rhythm.

She watched Billy and Kyle drag the lead attacker's body to his own truck and heft him into the back of it. Kyle didn't speak to his men and they weren't including him in their looks of victory.

Kyle slid into the truck and followed the others out of camp for the dump and burn. As he drove by, he swept his knocked down tent with enough personal torment showing to make Eagles frown at Jennifer.

"They won't accept her until they have their team leader back. I hope he knows that."

"He knows." Adrian was also watching that team. "It just doesn't matter to him right now."

Angela wasn't okay with the situation, but Adrian seemed to be, so that must mean it was for the good of the camp. Angela planned to watch and see how this newest mystery fit into the intricate puzzle. She had no doubt the illegal couple was about to be at the head of a sharp change for Safe

Haven. *Hope I get to help.* Angela stretched her sore shoulder carefully. *Can't take much more of just staring at my damn tent.*

Adrian looked at Angela, at her ugly but healing stitch line, and gave a reluctant nod. "Light duty, in here."

Angela smiled. "Finally!"

The recovering doctor immediately moved deeper into the QZ, making Adrian chuckle. He didn't bother to assign her a guard. This was the safest area in his haven right now.

John and Anne were busy tending a camp member who'd been trimmed. Angela moved toward Jennifer, but her mind was still half clenched in a ball of terror. Charlie being in the battle zone had rattled her so badly that all she could do was smother him in protection. It was what she should have tried to do for herself at the rest stop and then she probably wouldn't have been shot. *I'm a rookie. It's a mistake well-learned.*

"What should we do?"

Angela's gun was out before she had a chance to think. She hadn't realized Samantha and Cynthia were on her flank.

Angela pulled the fire in and holstered as the two women hastily retreated. *My Eagles. My first orders.*

Samantha and Cynthia had reached the QZ at nearly the same time but stayed by the tape. When Angela headed in, they'd shared a stiff look of agreement and followed.

Worried heart easing a bit more, Angela began looking around. “Um. John will need his bigger bag... Have a new water truck brought in for the QZ shower so Kyle’s team can get cleaned up after they burn the bodies. Send someone else to deliver trays for Charlie at lunch mess...”

Angela offered a few more small things and let the two females awkwardly divide the list while she went to make sure Jennifer was okay. Her change in status was open now, but Angela doubted many people would recognize it yet. There were too many other things to distract the camp, like Kyle and Jennifer, and even Seth and Becky, who were finally beginning to draw notice by how often they were together. Everyone was still adjusting to surviving the slavers.

Pleased with Samantha and Cynthia, Adrian turned toward the camp, certain his calming words were needed there. He wasn’t upset over the attack, not like he would have been a month ago. Their progress was obvious, but since eliminating the slavers, more and more of the future was becoming clear. The offspring of his army would be incredibly strong—even more so than their sires—and he had the honor of training them. Fate might be a fickle bitch, but when she was pleased, her generosity was staggering.

Neil came to his right. “Permission to go to Wichita and search for the kids?”

Adrian shook his head, thinking if they didn’t find water soon, it could mean trouble. The liquid

was precious and that QZ tanker had been full this morning. “I need you here.”

Neil opened his mouth, and then closed it without saying anything else. He left with slumped shoulders. Unlike the rest of the teams who were excited about the coming level tests, Neil and his men weren't participating. They had little to look forward to.

Adrian understood the need to go, but they were only 50 miles from Wichita and already gearing up for a trip into that city. The camp was hoping for a new load of convenience supplies, like batteries and music, but Adrian was hoping to find fuel and water. They would add a search-and-rescue for the kids, but Adrian wasn't sending a team out yet.

Neil still hadn't settled down, though it was all over. Finding out about Becky's rape had screwed with his sense of worth. He'd been leaving camp every chance he got. Those opportunities were frequent, as calls from survivors needing escorts were coming in almost daily. Many of these were minorities. Now that they'd beaten the slavers and proved they were capable of defending their members, other races were finally starting to join. It was helpful that anyone considering asking for shelter could see a few other dark-skinned refugees in this mostly white camp. It went a long way in calming old fears.

It was also helping Joseph, one of the few black men in Safe Haven, understand Adrian's words to him back in Wyoming. Guilty of expecting their

leader to fix it all quickly, the professor had also become a convert. He was now regularly seen escorting the nuns. Camp rumor said he had a thing for Missa, who had recovered enough to occasionally join the group for their morning activities. Scuttlebutt also said she wanted nothing to do with Joseph or any other man. Only time would tell if she might recover in that way.

The kids from the airfield were also a mix of races and fitting in well with the camp's younger crowd. The college kids liked to have fun, but they were also old enough to want to help with the dream. It wasn't uncommon for them to show up at the workouts and meetings—hopeful shadows in the background that Adrian would bring into the fold. Mixing races together before the war had been a trial-and-error process that had to accommodate the chains of the past. To fix centuries of such negligence and abuse wasn't something Adrian expected to achieve in six months or even six years, but he was incredibly proud of the progress he had made so far.

The women and children from Cesar's camp had been cleared and put with a small group of camp females for their day-to-day lives, to help them settle in. That was the way Safe Haven had always handled new arrivals who were abused. The few exceptions to this were either Eagles or leadership. It wasn't missed that Kyle's camper and tent hadn't left the QZ even after he and Jennifer were clear.

The camp members had found out that Jennifer

was carrying Cesar's children, but it was pointed out that several of the new kids were offspring of the enemy. It hadn't taken long for the majority to accept them as what they were—victims. In the next few months, Jennifer would give birth. If it came sooner and the babies didn't survive, that was fate. New life was always welcome in Safe Haven.

Adrian realized he'd misjudged a bit though, thinking the herd wouldn't be able to handle that or all the awful things the Eagles did on his command. Part of their acceptance was pride. Safe Haven had come out on top, but the rest was the effect of the former slaves telling stories and convincing people without meaning to. There honestly hadn't been another choice.

The rest stop had already been looted when Adrian led the camp by it, but the carnage was clear. For Safe Haven, it was the sight of the sombreros and the bullet-ridden rest stop that finally made the end of the slavers feel real. For the Eagles, it was the stains from Angela's blood lingering near the door.

For the former slaves, it was that once golden corvette, charred and crushed under Adrian's semi. These things sank into people's hearts and unlocked the chains to their terror. It was over, thanks to Adrian. A few people still viewed him with resentment—Tonya, Mitch, Peggy—but the Eagles and the camp were firmly behind their line-walking leader. He had brought them through the fire with only a slight burn. If Angela had died, things might

have gone differently, but fate had been kind.

2

“We’re not taking the level tests this time around.”

It wasn’t a surprise but hearing it from Kyle sent fresh tension through the team that was disposing of the bodies down a hillside a few miles from camp. Other than curt answers, none of Kyle’s team had spoken to him in a week. He hadn’t expected their support, but the isolation was nearly intolerable. “Let Daryl know what event you want to oversee.”

Daryl, who was smothered in guilt over the way he’d graduated to second in command, said nothing. He thought their team was being unfair to Kyle, but if he spoke out, it would be viewed as sucking up. Right now, they were reluctantly accepting Kyle’s decision to have Daryl replace their fallen XO.

“What event are *you* covering?” Shawn sneered, implying Kyle wouldn’t be there.

Behind them, bodies burned hotly.

Kyle’s tone didn’t change. “I’m not.”

Shawn tried again. “Got better things to do now, I guess.”

“I have duty over Angela.” Kyle moved toward the trader’s neat truck. “Marc is testing this time around and he doesn’t trust anyone else to keep her safe.” Kyle climbed into the driver’s seat and got set to roll back to where his heart now waited.

His men exchanged worried glances. The team

leader they knew would have struck back at the open challenges.

“What the hell’s wrong with him?” Morgan had never expected this from Kyle.

“We need to talk to Adrian.” Shawn hated his own suggestion. Going to the boss over your Eagle leader was a huge no-no that violated their unspoken code to handle things in-team.

“Maybe call a vote?” Crone was the only one eager to see Kyle replaced.

“I’ll handle it.” Daryl chose to do what he thought was right. Seen as sucking up or not, it was part of his new duties to support their team leader.

“How?” Shawn thought he should have been given the XO slot.

“I’ll start with talking to him instead of throwing challenges.” Daryl’s tone was pointed. “We’ve looked up to him the entire time we’ve been Eagles. Why does that disappear without him even getting the chance to explain?”

“You think it’s all innocent?” Crone was snotty.

Sure that it wasn’t, Daryl didn’t lie. “No, but I do think there’s a reason to his madness.” Daryl slung the bag of tinder over his shoulder, glad it didn’t smell like the small pellets of shit that it was carrying. “He isn’t breaking any rules, you know. We’ve watched the shadows on that tent more closely than we ever did Rick’s. We’d know.” Daryl’s tone grew harder as the others absorbed that light blow. “Kyle may want her, but he won’t cross that line until it’s legal. And yes, I’ll bet my new

place on it for those of you taking notes and wanting the slot.”

The six other men shared leery glances. They were relieved not to have to talk to Adrian, but it was obvious they didn't trust Daryl as their XO yet. They all wanted life back the way it had been before winning had taken away a third of their team.

Chapter Four

Protection

1

“**J**udging by the lack of marks, I’d guess it was Eagles this time, instead of camp members.” John ignored the sudden nausea that sank into his stomach as he gathered a tray of supplies. It had been a busy day for medical care. “They don’t leave me as much evidence.”

Dale’s shoulders slumped further. “Yeah.” He and Ray resembled each other enough to be related. That helped with rookies and new arrivals until they saw the lingering glances and soft brushes, and then they understood. Most glared, but more than a few would remark on it. Only once had there been a different reaction. When the vet had seen them, he’d started joining them for evening meals. Dale had assumed the vet was also gay, but he would never ask. He was just glad to have someone else sitting at the table with him and Ray.

“Eagles did this?” Ray was furious. As Kevin’s XO, he had a lot of interactions with the other Eagles and Adrian. He no longer had problems with the senior members. It was the incoming rookies Ray usually had to set straight.

“No, not since you got hurt...”

“Saving Adrian,” John finished.

“Explain *this time!*”

Dale and John both shut their mouths.

Ray scowled. “Don’t worry over it. I’ll know before I hit the rack tonight!”

“No.” Dale put a hand on Ray’s wrist. “Don’t do that, okay?”

Ray tried not to relent. “Then tell me.”

“Sometimes the rookies say shit to me.” The failed Eagle couldn’t hide his hurt. “And sometimes they want to see a little queer blood.”

“Who?!”

“I won’t tell you that.”

“Why not?”

“Because it’s like you said the other night while we were at the movie. I don’t have a real place here yet. When I do, they’ll leave me alone.”

“They should anyway!”

“Yeah.” Dale dropped his head, chest heavy. *Isn’t there ever going to be even a little happiness for me?*

Ray felt Dale’s misery peak and moved closer.

“Hey. Damn. Are you okay?”

John left the tent to give the couple a moment of privacy—one Ray would take advantage of to offer comfort. John personally believed the males had the right to love whomever they chose, but the idiots getting a free ride in Safe Haven weren’t about to accept that view. The three men who’d beaten Dale in the shower didn’t have a set place here either.

John was angry, stomach aching loudly. His feet

took him straight to Adrian's tent.

2

"Is it a variation of Stockholm Syndrome, in either case?"

In the hour that John had been here smoking and relaxing, they'd moved onto other topics.

"Improbable." John was calm now, but his mood was still sour. "Bonding after a crisis takes strange forms. In time, they'll both recover and choose what suits them. I expect they'll stand by their men, as well. From what I've heard from the other freed females, Jennifer is much harder than any of the men are giving her credit for. We already know how determined Rebecca is."

"And my camp?"

John blew out a tired grunt with the lungful of smoke. "Will fall in line, so long as you approve."

Adrian didn't respond to that. Yes, they would, but not without causing problems first by testing the strength of those underage bonds. "How about you?"

John stubbed the roach out. "I'm surviving."

"Angela wants to try."

"She's not strong enough yet."

"That's what Marc said, but she makes *those* calls."

John didn't argue. The pain was becoming intolerable without the pills. He was spending too much time stoned on them. "She's healing well."

John wanted to ask Adrian how she was recovering so quickly and stopped himself. That would reveal a faint edge of envy that the doctor didn't want known. "When?"

"In the next week or so. She'll tell me."

"Okay."

As they stood up, Adrian clapped John gently on the shoulder. "How about cutting off early and getting some rest? Bags that dark under your eyes are not a good advertisement for our doctor."

John looked at him without amusement. "When will we head for Arkansas?"

Always a quick thinker, Adrian stared back steadily. "We have been all along."

John frowned. "I mean openly. When will the Eagles start gearing up for the fight waiting there?"

"Sometime after Wichita." Adrian pushed back the heavy worry. "Right now, they still need that break too." Adrian left to do his rounds.

John returned to the medical tent.

Ray and Dale were gone.

John headed straight for the medicine cabinet.

When the flap rustled a bit later, the doctor was in his chair, waiting for the pills to work.

Anne didn't say anything as his angry gaze went over her muddy clothes and new bruises. She set her broken glasses on the table and grabbed a bottle from the medicine cabinet. *He has his demons to fight and so do I.*

3

Marc found Angela in the usual place as full dark settled over the dystopian Kansas views—perched on top of the highest, sturdiest structure inside their perimeter. This time, it was Adrian’s semi.

It’s like she can’t get close enough to the sky. Marc noted her shadows, and the newest layer of awning on the outer edges of the perimeter. It was a deflecting glint that would interfere with the sights on a scope and make it rough to pick out a single target. They only had one side of the camp covered so far, but it was something they were adding to every day that Safe Haven wasn’t on the road.

Marc nodded to Kyle, Angela’s senior shadow.

The mobster quickly vanished toward the QZ, no doubt to check on Jennifer, who he hadn’t been able to get near since returning from the dump and burn. It would be a fleeting moment. Kyle had duty over the farthest perimeter from the girl for the next five hours. Now doing schedules together, Marc and Kenn had agreed that a separation was needed. This first day of it had to feel like it wasn’t ever going to end. Tomorrow wouldn’t be any better for Kyle.

Marc only held a bit of sympathy. He had always been a little leery of Kyle, but he’d honestly thought the man was one of the good guys. *It’s like he and Adrian switched places on me*, Marc thought with a resentful frown.

“Permission to come up?”

Angela smiled. “As you would, Grunt.”

Marc cleared the top of the truck and stopped, stunned at the sight of the shield above the camp. Right over Angela, it was pure purple.

Marc was glad the camp wasn't paying attention yet. For now, only Adrian and a few of his Eagles knew of the magic building itself around Safe Haven.

“Watch this...”

The colors above them faded, and then began to change like a rainbow.

“It feeds off emotions, reacts to them.”

Marc sat down next to her, mind racing for a response. “What is it?”

“Can't you guess?”

He flashed to their clubhouse in the snow. “Protection.”

Angela flushed at the thoughts now rolling through his mind. They'd experienced something like this once before. The shield had been a lot closer then, almost hot to the touch, but so strong that nothing could have gotten through. It was right after he'd said *I love you* for the first time.

“It's so nice to be able to remember those moments.” Angela slowly leaned against his arm.

Happiness settled into Marc's heart. He had Angie and Charlie. He wanted little else.

Angela didn't bat a lash when his arm slid around her. She was making the shield fluctuate in small ripples. *Sort of like a pond...* “Brace.” Angela inhaled deeply, pulling energy from the bubble.

“Noise coming.” Marc let off the button an instant before a crackle of harsh static went through. It was loud enough to make camp dogs start yapping.

The wolf emerged from under the truck.

Curious, Marc waited.

Radios lit up again with her voice. “Just a pulse. At ease.”

Marc’s mouth dropped open as Angela let go of the mental link.

“There’s something new for ya!”

Marc didn’t say anything, working on accepting it. She was able to send her thoughts over the radio. What would she be capable of in a year? Or ten?

Angela had been lying low about her gifts over the last two weeks. She wasn’t too weak to use them anymore. She wasn’t sure she was strong enough to control them. Seeing Charlie in the line of fire today had reminded her how serious the challenge ahead was. Complete control or not, she wouldn’t be sitting back anymore. “Is that frightening to the big, bad Marine?” Angela joked to break the awkward silence.

“A little.” Marc’s expression darkened. “For you.”

“Me too Marc, but for our son. He’ll always be a target. First, to trap me, and then, to trap him.”

Not sure how to change that, they sat in silence as the camp slowly settled down from the pulse of energy she’d sent.

Neither of them was surprised when Adrian

came through the shadows a minute later. His expression said he wasn't happy about what she'd done. A sharp glance passed between them.

Adrian left soon after, delivering a hard, warning sweep of her guards as he vanished.

Marc stifled his jealousy. "What was that about?"

Angela leaned closer to Marc's heat. "He wants to be sure I'm not preparing for a suicide run that I haven't told him about."

Those words sent Marc's profile into an instant storm. "Are you?!"

"No. One gunshot wound at a time, please."

Marc wasn't amused. He was still too hurt from the near loss.

Angela didn't offer ear candy. He had to deal with it, just as she did when the nightmares woke her up gasping for air.

"Are you sleeping through yet?"

Angela winced at his accuracy. "Some nights."

"You can wake me. I'll stay up with you."

"And still work your shifts as alertly?"

"No." *That's the line, he realized. If it will hurt the camp, or even distress them, it's too far. That's her limit now.*

"Yes, it is."

Marc's mind kicked into high gear, picking out the mind reading and the things she knew, but shouldn't if she were too weak. Not only had she caught his conversation with Charlie, she knew that he approved of the downtime she was being forced

to take.

“You know that I can block them, right?”
Angela viewed him through shuttered eyes. “Your thoughts.”

Marc wasn’t sure where she was going with this.
“...yes.”

“I can stay out of your mind.”

“No, please, don’t.”

His fast response had her brow lifting. “Why not? Most people find it to be—”

“I’m not most people!” Marc’s voice dropped into flames. “And I can love you there, baby cakes.”

Angela giggled.

The bubble above them flashed into a deeper purple. It drew their attention back to the shield.

“Why can’t the camp see it, but some of the Eagles can?”

She shrugged. “Belief, mostly.”

“But it’s always there, even if they don’t believe in...magic?”

“Yes.”

Despite talking to Adrian, Marc had to ask.
“What happens when they find out?”

She stiffened, making the shield switch colors again. “Then I will have run out of time.”

“And you’ve considered...”

“Not letting them know? Of course, but it’s improbable this would remain a secret, Marc. It’s growing too fast...and I have to put it somewhere.”

Marc was unable to lock down on the jealousy this time. “*He* could find things.”

“He will now that he knows what you do, that I’ve been laying low, but it won’t be enough. I’m still evolving. So are my gifts.”

Still evolving. Marc connected the threads. *Like something else...* “What’s coming for us?”

The witch’s red eyes blended with blue, matching the color of the bubble above them. *Everything you fear and more.* The witch yawned. She’d been dozing contentedly while Angela played.

“When?”

“Not long.” Angela refused to let the witch start revealing painful truths. She planned to fight that fate.

“What can I do?”

She took a chance. “Help me with my plans?”

“You know it, honey.” Marc tugged her closer. “We’ll start in the next week.”

“Tonight would be better.”

Marc didn’t care. “Sure. At the mess?”

Angela drew in a breath. She’d missed his heat last night while he stood duty. “My tent, in an hour.”

Marc’s body flared to life. He gave a jerky nod. “Okay.”

Catching his sudden nervousness, Angela snickered. “To make plans.”

Marc tried to snap out of it. “Yeah, plans.”

Angela laughed.

The shield responded with a wave of deep violet.

She had run a few simple tests on it, and

suspected Adrian had, as well. It didn't let the bugs in or the smaller flying debris when the wind gusted. The bags and trash were caught on an updraft and disappeared into the clouds. That was something even the Eagles hadn't noticed yet.

Fascinating, it had caused Angela's nightly routine to end in a high place, studying it. She had the sense that the shield was important for more than just their protection. She was determined to figure out what it was in time to use it. She was positive Safe Haven had been gifted with the barrier for their next fight.

Marc caught the thought and felt his stomach drop. *Not again...*

4

"I'm Leslie."

"Uh-huh."

She'd come from the shadows in silence, but what she wanted shouted from her arched back and painted face.

"Nice night."

Kyle grunted. She sounded nervous; she should be. Need to accept one or not, he was in no mood to turn down yet another offer to replace the sleeping girl in his tent. None of them stirred anything in him now, not even lust.

"Do you... Can we talk?"

Kyle stared pointedly. "What do you want?"

Leslie stepped a little closer, top artfully sliding

off one shoulder. “I’d like to help.”

There was no response from his body, but Kyle forced himself to reply. “Why?”

It was more of a conversation than he’d given any of the other women who’d tried. Leslie grinned, encouraged. “You’re high up here is why most of them chase you, I guess. I like it that you look after the pregnant girl. It shows you’re a gentleman.”

Kyle heard the lies as much as sensed them. She was off the list from that moment. “I’m busy. Get back to camp.”

Leslie gaped... Then let her true opinion out. “You’re making a fool of yourself. I hope you know that.” Her painted face twisted into ugliness. “Be careful.”

“What are you referring to?” Kyle led, eager to hit back. He’d become as good as Kenn at delivering an insult.

Leslie didn’t back down, though she did back up. “I’m talking about you chasing Jennifer like a dog that’s found a bitch in heat. I’m talking about the way you’re not helping Adrian take care of this camp with all that attention on her. I’m talking about your hypocrisy—doing what others can’t, being alone with her all the time. People see the double standard. How long do you think they’ll put up with it? Everyone else has to follow the rules. Why not you?”

Kyle opened his mouth to fire back, but Leslie vanished into the shadows.

He snapped it shut. He’d expected the jealous

tirade that some of the others had delivered, not the truth, and if one of the camp cliques had the sand to say it to his face, then everyone was thinking it. The line he was walking had just narrowed. The camp women would interfere next. Was there anything he could do to ease their tension and buy more time?

“I’m pretty sure you stung her pride. She’s not sure what turned you off.”

Kyle turned to see Tracy standing behind him, long, black hair flowing on the dry wind. It was the first time she’d ever spoken to him that he could recall.

“She’ll figure out that lying was a bad idea and get over it. She just didn’t expect you to respond. It rattled her, I think.” Tracy, normally an extremely quiet woman, took a step closer.

Her generous curves pulled Kyle’s eye. With those hips, in that short dress, from the front or back she was shaped like...

Tracy gave him a slow smile, the kind that made Kyle’s mind scream duck, *this* one knew what she was doing.

“If you need a friend, I’m usually out on third shift. Catch my eye before mess and I’ll find you.”

Kyle stared at Tracy, running through what he needed, how long it would take, and if he would ever use her that way. *Can I?*

Tracy knew he was evaluating, but she didn’t say anything to convince him. Instead, the high school teacher trailed her wrist near his nose as she stepped by.

Jennifer's sweet scent slammed into Kyle's gut. He grabbed the camp whore's arm. "Wait."

Tracy delivered a sultry look over her shoulder, aware of his eyes on her lips. "Maybe a taste? To be sure?"

Kyle let go as if burned. Yes, he could pretend with Tracy if the need got bad enough. "I won't claim you." Kyle's tone lowered into misery. "I may never touch you."

Tracy shrugged. "You need a friend—one the camp thinks you're using even if you aren't. You know that. It's why you gave us both a chance tonight."

Tracy moved away slowly, loving the heat in Kyle's gaze as he stared at her. He would think about it for a while, but in the end, he would come to her. They all did because she gave them what they needed. With Kyle, it was wide hips and a maternity-like scent. For others, it might be a piece of clothing or a certain makeup style. It was the small things that a man appreciated, remembered, and rewarded.

The same was true of females, usually, but in this case, Tracy had big plans. She'd been studying leadership since she joined Safe Haven and if there was one thing she understood, it was the needs of men. It was something she had gotten good at while moonlighting as a stripper. Continuing the tradition after the war had felt normal. Apocalypse or not, everyone needed physical contact. It was what kept the human spirit fighting.

He will be ripped from your arms like grass from the earth. Do not cross that line!

Angela gasped in terror, jerking awake.

“Are you okay?”

Angela tried to remember how to breathe. Crushing desolation wanted to overwhelm her. *The dream was so vivid!*

Marc assumed it was one of her old nightmares. He shifted, wrapping his arms around her. “I’ve got ya.”

The long day and pain pills had caught up with her, knocking her out while they were working on plans. Watching her in the flickering light had been so perfect that Marc hadn’t been able to make himself leave.

Angela let him rock her. The feel of his warmth eased some of the panic. They needed to get Safe Haven ready to leave. Not this area or even this state, but this *country*. It was a lot to take in, even for the witch. They both huddled in the protection of Marc’s thick arms.

Marc tried not to notice how good she felt against him or how sweet she smelled. Even after 20 hours, he could still catch a whiff of her vanilla soap. That scent and Angie went together like butter and toast.

Angela shivered at the draft coming in through the flap.

Marc gently dislodged himself to go zip it. He clamped his lips shut to keep from asking if he should leave. All he wanted was a couple more quiet hours alone with her.

Angela watched him come toward the bed, glad she'd chosen to keep the inflatable mattress that John had insisted on once she'd abandoned the warehouse for her tent. That had been a week ago, their first moving day after the final battle. "Will you hold me?"

"Anytime you want."

Angela folded the blanket back. "Now, Marc."

Marc eased onto the mattress with a body that made it difficult to get comfortable until he reached down and made an adjustment.

Angela looked away with red cheeks, but she sank into his warm embrace as soon as he motioned, eager to be close. All the thoughts in her mind were pushing and shoving, trying to get to the front to be solved, and all she wanted was—

Angela sucked in a breath as Marc settled her against his chest, letting their bodies press close. The hardness in the center of him sent fear into her mind, but his musky scent also filled her nose with ghosts.

"Angie?" Marc waited for her to speak, worried she'd frozen.

"Workin' through it, Marine. At ease."

He grinned in the dim light. She was still growing, changing, and much of it was attractive. Especially with her hair wrapped around his fingers

and her body pressed snugly against his hip. Was she ready for the next step?

They'd been spending so much time alone together the camp thought they already had an arrangement. Marc knew that wasn't the same to Angela. If he wanted her against his back at night, he had to make a commitment. That wasn't an issue on *his* part. Marc sucked in a tight breath. "Will you move in with me?"

"Yes."

"Because the camp already thinks we're living together."

"I said yes."

"And Charlie won't mind, so we're all good there."

"Yes, Marc."

"And I don't expect sex or—"

"Damn it, Marc!"

Marc chuckled. "I just needed to be sure, baby."

Realizing he'd been teasing her, Angela shoved him off the mattress. "Damn man."

Not expecting it, Marc tried to find his balance, but landed on his side with a loud thump.

Rising to his knees, Marc's laughter mixed with hers. Heat sparked as their eyes locked. "You sure? No rush."

"Yes." Angela held the blanket back again, grinning. "Now get under here. My toes are cold."

Marc wrapped her up as closely as she would allow, thinking this would be perfect but for her injury and him wanting to—

“Would you like to kiss me goodnight?”

Marc groaned. “Oh yeah, baby.”

Angela flushed. “I could stand a little of that.”

Marc’s body woke, insisting she knew what she was ready for. He denied them both. “You still have two more weeks before you’re allowed any physical...”

Angela tilted her chin up, lashes fluttering closed.

Marc surrendered. He pressed his mouth to hers, trying not to groan again. *My Angie!*

Chapter Five
Lines In the Sand
Outside Wichita, Kansas
May 31st

1

Adrian paused outside Kyle's tent, openly eavesdropping.

“Who said it?!” Kyle was clearly upset.

“It doesn't matter.” Jennifer couldn't help the nervous tone. Kyle was furious. It was filling the tent.

“It does to me. Eagles don't act that way!”

“It was a quick remark. Please let it go.”

Adrian knew the mobster wouldn't. Someone had crossed his line.

“Do you need anything before we roll?” Kyle suddenly sounded calm and collected. “The trucks are still open.”

“Not really.”

“Jen...”

“Fine! I need some pads because I keep pissing when I walk. Happy now?”

“What else?”

“Can I write it down?”

“You can come and point.”

“I had enough fresh air at the shower line yesterday where they all stared at me and didn’t talk. No thanks.”

“That will get better.”

“It’s been more than two weeks, Kyle. If it was going to get better, there would be signs of it.”

“Give Adrian time.”

“Time for what? If he’s as good as everyone keeps saying, then won’t he banish you for wanting to claim me?”

Kyle didn’t answer.

Adrian chose to break the tense silence by tapping on the flap. “Anyone in?”

“Yeah, Boss.”

“Oh, great.” Flustered, Jennifer concentrated on folding and packing the mound of baby clothes into the trunk. During the time she’d been in Safe Haven, moments like this were all she had accomplished. She was learning how to act normal again, but she wasn’t sure she would ever feel it.

Adrian swept the mix of personal items in the tent. Kyle’s usually neat home had become a chaotic mess of Eagle gear and baby items. It spoke volumes about how his top Eagle felt. Adrian stared at him for a long minute.

Kyle had known a sit-down was coming. He and Jennifer had remained in the QZ the entire two weeks, getting to know each other while avoiding everyone they could. The camp had finally expressed enough displeasure that Adrian was being forced to step in.

“It’s time.”

Kyle sighed at Adrian’s words. “Our next break day?”

“By evening mess, *tomorrow*.”

Kyle’s expression tightened, but he didn’t argue. Once they were outside the QZ, Safe Haven would separate them more than Kenn and Marc already were. Kyle had duty over the QZ again as they broke down for travel and then only a short break before taking over point until dawn. After that, he would have to sleep, but it was better than not seeing Jennifer at all.

“It’s the right thing,” Adrian reminded his top killer.

Kyle nodded stiffly. “I know.”

“Good. You’ll take care of it?”

“Of course.” Kyle turned to Jennifer. “This is our leader.”

Jennifer reluctantly stood up.

Adrian noted the pink cheeks and the tense body language, but also the way she subtly put Kyle’s body between them. *She’s already learned to use him*. “I’m Adrian.”

“Jennifer.” She leaned forward instead of coming closer, wobbling awkwardly.

Kyle’s tanned hand was there to steady her. He immediately let go.

Jennifer grabbed his arm, staring up anxiously.

Adrian felt the pull of her magic, and the layers of selfishness that coated her.

Kyle used the will of an Eagle and pushed the

glare back to think. “I told you that’s not needed. Stop blinding me. I won’t abandon you.”

Jennifer cringed at multiple secrets being exposed.

Kyle gently slid her under his arm. “Shh... He already knew.”

She didn’t ask how. She just leaned against Kyle’s side and waited to be punished or taken advantage of.

Adrian wasn’t upset upon discovering the extent of the situation. Kyle knew what was going on and the girl obviously wanted him close. The camp was reacting to the ugly rumors of the other former slaves. The camp needed Jennifer’s side of the story, but they couldn’t have it until she had herself, her magic, under control. That’s why Kyle had kept her here.

Kyle rubbed Jennifer’s arm as she trembled, looking down in protective tenderness.

Okay, it isn’t the only reason Kyle sequestered her. But Jennifer was encouraging it. To use him? Maybe. Her plans after the babies came were shielded.

“Because I don’t know what I’m doing yet,” Jennifer confessed. If Kyle said Adrian was worthy of complete trust, she would give it, but her head stayed buried under her mobster’s thick arm. “I was going to take the kids and leave after the birth, but they’ve settled in here now and...” She drew in air. “They don’t need me anymore.”

Kyle fought to keep from saying anything.

“This camp needs you.” Adrian’s words gave Kyle permission to start bringing her in. The sooner she was under control, the better.

“You could just chain me up!” Jennifer spat, fearing Adrian, but also drawn to him against her will. He was the first person like herself that she had ever met. Her mom hadn’t been able to do any of the things she could—no one had.

“There are dozens of us here.” Adrian watched fear come into her face first. Resentment was second. Adrian understood Jennifer would be harder to blend into his herd than the others he had settled. Being tossed into the wild without her baby, or worse, before she could give birth, seemed to be her biggest concern. Adrian didn’t pick up fear about anything else.

“That’s because I don’t have any.” Jennifer stood up straight, allowing this man to meet the real her. “I stay back because I loathe your people for their weaknesses. It’s noble that you try to change them, but I only have scorn.”

Kyle’s hand fell away. He automatically took a step to the side at the tone, repelled in the same way that he was often pulled to her light. She was dangerous. He respected that.

Adrian studied the newest addition to his ever growing goodie bag of power. *Where does this one belong?*

Jennifer’s eyes went straight to Kyle.

Adrian shook his head, quickly developing an edge of respect for this young girl. “You need a

goal. You don't need a handler."

"No, I don't, but..." Jennifer sighed. Why hold back now? "I do better if I have one."

Kyle stiffened, again fighting to remain silent.

Adrian decided Neil was completely wrong. The mobster hadn't been blindsided at all. Kyle knew what he'd found, what kind of love they might share if he had the strength to fight for her. "Why him?"

Jennifer flinched, but didn't give an evasion. *He wants me.*

"Many men will want you."

Kyle stiffened.

...not the way he does. Jennifer answered slowly, thrilled and scared to be communicating this way in front of Kyle. He didn't seem to be confused or angry at all. *He wants my babies, too.*

Ah. Adrian understood that choice, approved it even, but that didn't stop his usual words to all the battered females who came to his refugee camp. "I'll keep him away from you. You'll be safe here without him."

Kyle's hands clenched, but Jennifer actually blanched. Adrian only entered those young mental halls as far as he had to. He needed to be positive she wanted this. The future depended on it.

...be alone here. No Kyle to keep me from going crazy while I wait for the birth. No Kyle to hold me while I cry or make me laugh to start the day. No Kyle to help me raise Cesar's children, to help me make them good!

Panic was beating in her head. Adrian withdrew, satisfied. “So long as you want it, Kyle will be your settling partner during the day. In the evenings, it will be one of the females.”

Jennifer smiled in relief, looking directly at Adrian for the first time. “Thank you.”

Both men tensed, instantly lured by her happiness.

Adrian had no trouble pushing it away, but he was aware of Kyle having to fight her unconscious draw. “Are you sure you can do this?!”

Adrian’s tone said if Kyle snapped, he would face the same punishment he’d dealt to so many as Safe Haven’s top Eagle.

Kyle stiffened. “She has a gun. She’s never to be without it.”

Adrian understood that was for defense against the men in camp. Jennifer hadn’t told Kyle she could control the strength of the draw. Adrian raised a brow. “Can you?”

Embarrassed, Jennifer slowly shook her head. “Not always. I try, but it...”

“Gets hungry,” Adrian filled in when she paused.

Jennifer’s eyes blazed for a moment of searing heat and desperate longing. “Starved.”

Adrian felt that protective need finally hit and gave her a comforting smile. “Dream walk. They won’t know.”

Kyle, who’d had Angela’s witch in his dreams on more than a few nights, growled. At Adrian.

Adrian's demeanor turned curt. "Should I separate you now?"

Kyle backed down, loathing the idea of her taking energy from any man but him. *Where did this side of me come from?*

Jennifer's head dropped again. She slowly slid back under Kyle's arm. *Why am I made this way?* She didn't want men to notice her. *Maybe if I never smile again...*

Picking up the thought, Adrian effectively manipulated things. "You have one of my highest men, pulling him away. His own team already views you as a threat. Find something useful to do for me, soon. Without that, the camp will get ugly."

"And if we can't find her something they'll accept?!"

Adrian responded to Kyle's challenge with the truth. "They'll hate her. I'll have to send her out of here or she'll be hurt. We won't tolerate one of *us* hurting the dream."

Meaning the other gifted people here would run her out, not the camp. Against that, she didn't stand a chance.

"I'll leave now." Jennifer was scared of hurting people.

Adrian was still looking at Kyle. "You're going too, right?"

"Yes."

"No, I'll go alone!"

"I'll track her."

"Are you claiming her, Kyle?"

“No!”

“No.”

Adrian studied them, picking up the fear and the attraction. “This could go bad. You’ve considered it?”

Kyle was tortured. “If I’m already damned…”

Adrian grunted, allowing his disgusted side to show. “Stay close to her as long as she says it’s okay, but hear me, Eagle. The second she says no, you’d *better* back right up!” Adrian left the tent.

Jennifer sank to her knees. Unlike Kyle, Safe Haven’s leader scared the hell out of her. “I’m bad. You should stay away from me.”

Kyle tensed. “Is that the official request? ‘Cause once you make it, Jen, I’m gone.”

“Why don’t you have a woman here?”

Kyle’s mouth dropped open, stunned by the quick topic change. “What?”

Jennifer flushed. “You don’t, do you?”

“How do you know?”

Jennifer peered up at him. “I read people—men—very well.”

“What?”

She quickly lowered her eyes. “If you had a woman here, you might have raped me and then let me die.”

Kyle wasn’t sure what to say. She was almost certainly right. He’d never felt anything this strong, this primitive.

“Why haven’t you picked a woman here?”

He tried evasion. “Why does it matter?”

Jennifer didn't look away. "I'm not sure. I just know that it does."

Despite being uncomfortable, Kyle refused to deny her anything, even information. "I feel nothing for them beyond lust. I never have. You've woken something else."

"What?"

My humanity, Kyle thought, but he wouldn't share something so dooming with someone he needed to keep an advantage over. She couldn't understand how dark his soul really was until she had the desire to fill it with her light. "I'm not sure," he said finally, fascination bleeding into his tone. "I only know that I've never had it, and there isn't *anything* I wouldn't sacrifice to make you willing."

Jennifer blushed, feeling very female as her breasts tingled. Being pregnant had its own side effects, but the heat in Kyle's gaze made her body stir against her will. She'd been Cesar's main puta. There was little left for Jennifer to understand about sex, and that included desire and her reactions to it. She'd never felt closer to the evil man than while she was shuddering in his arms, forced to enjoy his touch, his painful attention. It was terrifying to think of going through that with Kyle.

"I would have already said no to anyone else." She was unable to completely refuse what he was begging her for.

Feeling guilty for manipulating her, Kyle grinned harshly in the dim light, allowing her to see a bit of the animal he thought of himself as.

Reading it, Jennifer stiffened her chin. She'd been with evil long enough to recognize it and Kyle wasn't that. He would never get as ugly with her as Cesar had. As for Kyle's promise not to force her, she was old enough, had been devastated enough, to understand that fate didn't usually let people keep rash words. She'd been hurt before and survived. What was a little more pain if it meant her children would have a good life? "They can't find out what I am. The lies we'll have to tell will keep the rumors growing."

"Yes." Kyle admired her even more than he already had, but he feared her too. She now held the power to destroy him.

"You're not worried about trouble over me?"

"Counting on it." Kyle gave full honesty. "Because everything they'll say will push us together. In time, you won't be using me. You'll want me around for more than just my protection or the sense of safety that I provide."

Fear, sharp and thick, welled up in Jennifer's throat. *He knows!*

Kyle stayed still, giving her time to read that he wasn't angry, that he'd counted on her reacting this way. "I know what I signed up for with you...witch."

Jennifer didn't say anything. There was a bond between her and this killer with the lonely soul that she wasn't sure about, but there was no denying the strength. She didn't want to be away from him.

"I have to go again. I have duty."

Loneliness settled its familiar claws into her chest, but Jennifer didn't protest. "I'll be fine."

She was looking better, sunken face starting to fill out, skin taking on the healthy glow that came from the development of life. Kyle didn't think he'd ever seen anything more beautiful. "You can't hide in here."

Jennifer shrugged. "I know, but it's safer."

Kyle's heart broke. He stepped closer but stopped at her instant flinch. "Everyone's busy getting ready to roll out."

She didn't answer.

Kyle pushed. "The babies need fresh air."

"I'll go," Jennifer agreed miserably. Another shower would feel good, but the taunts would just recover her clean skin in shame.

Kyle hated forcing her to do things that she didn't want to, but the boss was out of patience and so was everyone else. Kyle reluctantly left, torn between her and his duty over the QZ. He moved through the packing camp with a scowl that discouraged eye contact and forbade conversation.

2

"Can I have a minute?"

Adrian didn't pause on his rounds. "Walk along."

Cynthia fell in, hiding her soreness. She'd been attending classes every day. The workouts were hard.

Always known for looking like a reporter, as well as acting and sounding like one, it drew attention to see Cynthia striding across the camp in calf high black boots and an Eagle jacket. She wore her gun low on her hip, hair high on her head, and she didn't hesitate to speak her mind. The camp was used to that last part, but not the words. Hearing Cynthia defending a camp rule, or Adrian, was a shock still flying though Safe Haven.

"I need to say something."

On his way to the kids' area to help carry and direct, Adrian moved them away from the passing members who were busy loading their vehicles. He knew what came now. "Go on."

"I was wrong about you."

"Yes." Adrian met her eye. "And no."

Cynthia was startled, unable to speak. She was so used to being on the outside! This feeling! *More!*

"I didn't know you were supposed to be one of us, Cyn." Adrian delivered another revealing wave of light, making sure she was firmly where he needed her. Once the options had been mapped out, he'd easily found a place for their reporter. "I'm sorry for missing it."

The last of the bitterness rolled off her shoulders. "I'm on the right side now."

Adrian grinned, reminded of their hours together. "Side, front, top..."

Cynthia smirked. "I knew I had *that* part of you pegged right." She lowered her voice, sweeping the content people around them. "Wonder how many of

Safe Haven's females have fallen for it?"

Adrian's affectionate gaze lingered here and there, some surprising, some expected. "Enough to keep me fighting for the future."

"What about the ones who conceive or become obsessed?" Cynthia asked carefully.

Adrian sent out that magnetic draw, the one that had pushed her over the edge as he whispered his gratitude. "I love them."

Cynthia let him go, trying not to hope for it, and failing. Being the mother of Adrian's child would guarantee a woman priority whenever shit hit the fan. But more than that, it was an 18-year bond to the leader that any of the females here would kill for—including herself.

Not Angela, the reporter corrected, sweeping the training area. That Eagle was slowly walking by on her way to direct traffic. Marc was on her heels. Their occasional warm look was a confirmation that Adrian's desire wasn't going to make any difference. That one had made up her mind. Cynthia applauded the choice. Adrian might be the more powerful of the two, but Marc would give a woman his all.

Cynthia nodded at Zack as he neared her on his rounds. Her mind had never been clearer. Her relationship with Jeremy had been as close as she could get to the Eagles, to Adrian. She hadn't cared for Jeremy until he'd shown an interest in Samantha. Now, she didn't want him at all.

Cynthia's attention swung to the parking area,

where Samantha was on duty with Doug. Like her or not, there was no denying that Samantha was worthy of the slot on Angela's right. The choice she'd made to stay single for the greater good was huge.

Angela and Marc, along with several camp members, stopped to view an outdoor training session. Cynthia studied them with her newer, already more observant eyes.

Neil and Jeremy were holding their own against the rest of their team as those men tried to get to the laughing hostage in the center—Charlie. It was uplifting to watch, to see the teenager happy, but it was also wonderful because the two men trying to rescue him had spent months tearing their team apart.

As the set finished, Jeremy yanked Charlie clear, while Neil used kai to disarm and then disable the last enemy standing. Neil and Jeremy were bruised and dirty, layered in side-by-side triumph as they high-fived.

Cynthia felt the respect for Samantha go up among the Eagles. Sam had sacrificed her needs to make this happen and the distress it was causing was obvious. The storm tracker's hair was always slightly wild now, gaze the same, and there was a hardness to her body that said she needed a release.

Cynthia wondered who it would be with. Neil and Jeremy were mostly even in her opinion. *Tall, lean, and arrogant.* Wide shoulders dripped sweat into waistbands around lean hips and thick arms.

The camp members clapped and went on about their loading, except for two of the former slaves. Those two stayed, hoping for a chance to talk to any of Neil's team.

Eagle groupies were following Adrian's army now, hoping for more details. Camp men congratulated them in envy that they likely wouldn't have been able to handle if the situations had been reversed. All survivors were welcome in Safe Haven, but not just anyone could be an Eagle.

The two former slaves, Sheila and Grace, were staring at Neil and Jeremy as if they were gods. Cynthia hid a grin when the two males walked over to talk to them.

The two women gushed from the first word, showering praise and admiration in amounts meant to send male egos through the clouds and prevent actual thinking.

On duty nearby, Samantha's face hardened as she noticed her men being fawned over. Instead of a fight, Samantha turned her back to them.

Cynthia nodded her approval.

Sheila and Grace, encouraged by Samantha's uncaring behavior, moved in for the kill. They invaded personal space openly, trying to stake a claim.

Neil and Jeremy both sent subtle glances in Samantha's direction.

Disappointment crept in and cut the conversation short. A minute after Samantha turned her back, Grace and Sheila were standing alone and

the two males were walking dejectedly into the training tent. They had been trying to draw Samantha's interest with jealousy, working together on it.

How sweet, Cynthia thought. *And extremely naive*. Samantha knew she didn't have anything to be jealous about. Her men would come when she wanted them, even if they were in someone else's arms when she sent the call.

3

Angela stood stiffly as the camp began to load into their vehicles. She was directing them, if needed. *Make work*. Angela rolled her eyes. This was their last travel day for the next few and she was glad. She had big plans for her team. Adrian would camp them outside Wichita—not so close as to be overrun if the city was occupied, of course—and she would hold her first meeting.

“How's the shoulder?” Zack slowed as he came by on a patrol.

“Sore.” It really was. “How's the nose?”

The trucker snorted, stopping. “Still stings when I blow too hard.”

Angela chuckled, but lightly, not about to destroy their friendship by wounding his pride. “Blame Marc. It was one of the first things he taught me.”

Zack didn't respond. Marc was picking up the slack and most of the Eagles were okay with it.

Zack's hesitation was only in that it made him continuously reexamine his loyalty to Kenn. "When are they letting you back in?"

"Unknown yet."

Zack tried to soothe her angry tone. "Plenty of ants to practice on in the meantime."

Angela chuckled as expected. Moving targets were a more effective training tool, so Adrian now had his Eagles using the ants to sharpen their knife throwing skills. So far, she could hold her own while shooting with her left, but throwing was another story. Thanks to her bad aim, a number of ants were only minus a limb instead of their lives.

Zack stubbed out his stale smoke against the truck she was using for cover and a subtle leaning post. "I'll be around." *Call if you need me.*

Zack's follow-up thought came through clearly. She nodded, accepting the newest shift in their relationship without an obvious reaction. She scanned the mess as he left. *Clear.*

Zack was still serving as Kenn's right hand, but it was obvious that he didn't want the job anymore—which was bad for Kenn, who finally appeared to be coming around. Kenn was even supporting the rookie females who were proudly wearing their own Eagle jackets.

That was another mark against him, considering the trouble other men were having with the situation. Women showing up for tryouts was an adjustment anyway, but to suddenly have them at every training session, every workout, at every duty

post, was a severe disruption. Unlike Angela, who had wanted to win the males over, these rookies didn't try. They didn't care. They only wanted one thing—to make XO on the first all-female team in Adrian's army.

Chapter Six
We're Special

1

Safe Haven began to roll out of the area a little after noon. They were a line of hope stretching for two miles behind a red, white, and blue semi with a shotgun behind the seat.

Seth slid into the passenger side of his assigned vehicle, one of the last dozen to leave. “Good morning, Rebecca.”

The girl turned to glare at him, exposing deep bags beneath bloodshot eyes. “It’s cloudy, my head hurts, and there’s a rock stuck in my shoe. Again. What’s so good about it?”

Seth blinked. For some reason he sometimes still expected cheerful little Becky. “Uh...not so much, I guess.”

They drove in silence for a few minutes, noting the ugly signs of their world gone by. It had been six months since the war. The dead were everywhere, bones showing through tattered cloth. Most horrors didn’t upset the Eagles anymore, but occasionally, a scene was above the usual nastiness and drew haunting pain. Like the stack of rotting corpses that they were passing.

The bodies stretched the length of an entire

cornfield. On the top, the decay was current, but the bottom layers of the structure were in tatters. What wasn't dragged off by predators or shifted by storms would fuse together and remain for hundreds of years. Six feet tall and two bodies wide, it was the beginning of a skeleton wall.

"Why would someone do that?" Becky was horrified.

"Marking their turf, I think." Seth squinted, looking for causes of death.

It was easy to miss the rotting frame of a house in the corn behind the human wall. Of the entire convoy, the animals and Angela were the only ones to feel the menace inside it. They shifted restlessly in response.

"I don't understand men at all." Becky slumped against the seat.

Seth tried humor. "How do you know it was done by a man?"

Becky couldn't find an answer, and it made her angrier. That was something she didn't have an outlet for, didn't know what to do with.

When she guided the truck toward the wall and stopped, Seth frowned.

Becky took her mom's secret bottle of whiskey from the glovebox and fashioned a quick Molotov cocktail with napkins.

Seth was impressed by the finished product. It was definitely usable.

When she held the small bomb out, waiting patiently, he grudgingly lit the tip for her. John

wasn't even allowing the girl a lighter right now.

Becky hit the wall, but the bodies didn't want to burn. Tears streamed down her cheeks as the struggling flames were extinguished by the wind less than a minute after she'd thrown it.

Seth let her go for a minute, and then whistled lowly.

Becky's head snapped up at the noise. "What?"

Seth motioned toward the wheel. "Let's go—forward or back, but one of the two."

Snarling, Becky hit the gas and forced them back into the line of vehicles. It shoved a Blazer over and earned a nasty gesture from the driver.

Seth sighed. *If she's already angry, a little truth might not hurt as much.* "It's time to rejoin life, Rebecca. Start talking to people again."

She didn't answer.

Seth didn't push harder yet. Right now, he was the only one she was letting stay close. The other guards and observers were often shouted at, sometimes even used for target practice with whatever she found in reach. When Becky said *leave me alone*, the area cleared.

"I'll think on it."

"Good." Seth gave the teenager an approving smile and directed them back to the oral lesson they'd begun yesterday. "Eagles rejoice in life. The best moments are to be clung to as a shield against the ugliness that comes with this job." Seth paused. "Do you understand what that means?"

Becky shrugged stiffly, following Kyle's truck

while ignoring his glare in the mirror. “It’s how I felt when I s-saw you over Rick’s shoulder.”

Seth watched a tear trail down her cheek. His heart shuddered.

Becky turned her head. John and Angela said so much crying was good, but it felt awfully heavy to be healthy. Some nights the sobs were so hard that her stomach hurt the next day.

“That’s not exactly what it means.” Seth tried not to absorb any more of her pain. It was making him worry over her too much, distracting him from his duties and drawing fire. People were starting to think he was doing what Kyle was. Very few people knew of Becky’s rape. It was easy to misunderstand the help Seth felt compelled to give. He wasn’t like Neil or Kyle.

“What did you mean?”

That’s why she responds to me. Because I let her lead. “I mean good moments that are not a result of something bad. Watching kids play, petting animals, even enjoying Kenn and Marc doing challenges at the shooting contest. Good things rarely happen outside our borders anymore. You know that. Hold onto the light and it will ease the hell in your mind.”

“You really think so?”

“Yes.” Seth didn’t back down from her cool tone. “I have my own horrors to handle. All of us do. I’ve just told you how we survive it and I think it will help—especially if you want to be an Eagle.”

“After all this, I’d never go beyond level one.”

Becky scoffed. “And that won’t be enough.”

She’s growing up. Seth hated Rick even more. “Not if you convince Adrian.”

Silence.

“Do you want to be an Eagle?”

“Yes.” Becky sighed unhappily. “And yes, I know he’ll give it to me as a reward and to ease his guilt, but I don’t want it that way.” Becky dug through her pockets to find a tissue, taking her attention and both hands away from the road.

Seth hurriedly grabbed the wheel and straightened the truck, heart pounding. John was right to still have her under suicide watch. “Did you take the pills John gave you?”

Silence.

“Be...Rebecca, you need to take the meds until you feel better.”

Becky glanced over at him in fury. “Pills won’t fix me. My life is over now.”

Instantly furious, Seth yanked the wheel and sent the truck back into the muddy cornfield next to them. The tires hit a rut; the vehicle flew up into the air, tilting dangerously.

Becky jerked the wheel from his hand, tugging lightly, and easily regained control. “What the hell, Seth?”

Seth leaned back in satisfaction. When he wanted to play with fire, he knew how to light a tightly twisted fuse. “Why stop us from rolling if your life is over?”

“Why are you with me all the time?” Becky

glared, jarred from her depression by panic. “Don’t you have other duties?”

“You are my duty!” Seth sent right back. “And I’m telling you it’s time to step up or Adrian really will overlook you.”

Silence...and then, “Angela.”

Seth frowned, eyes going to Marc’s Blazer, far ahead of them in the line. “What about her?”

“It’s Angela’s team. She’ll pick it.”

“And you want a slot?”

“Oh, yeah, just any slot.” Becky’s snort was derisive.

Seth grinned, vaguely aware of vehicles moving closer. Their driving incident had caused concern. “Well, you just proved you can handle an out-of-control vehicle. What would you like her to see next?”

Becky didn’t think she had much of a chance at getting the XO slot, but it was all she had to hope for now. The bright dreams she’d had for the future were gone, left on a charred mattress stained with her blood. She was rolling through the motions as best she could, but there was only pain in her heart. She didn’t feel anything else.

2

“That’s where we’re going.” Charlie felt eyes on the convoy as they rolled. He sent the information directly to Adrian and was shocked when his mom didn’t react. Had he slipped that by

without her noticing?

“No, boy.”

Charlie grinned, but just as fast as she sometimes did, he fell back into that hazy place between then and now.

Angela closed her journal, staring at the battered billboard.

The island paradise being advertised was one Marc had heard of, but only distantly. “Pitcairn... That’s thousands of miles south.” Driving, a quick glance told him Angela wasn’t surprised. Marc swallowed the denial that wanted to fly out. Where she went, he did.

“Are there other people there?” Angela directed Charlie like Adrian usually did for her. It felt odd and right at the same time.

“A few. One is a woman with scars all over her body. She’s the one he needs.”

Angela frowned, trying to decipher. Charlie had her glazed eyes from the trance that she was so familiar with. “Who needs her?”

“Adrian,” Charlie answered slowly.

“Is she from the dream you told me about?” Marc had his own list of questions now.

“Yes. She will come to mean a great deal to all of us.”

“But especially Adrian?” Marc reinforced.

“Yes. He needs her more than he knows.”

Angela smothered her unwanted flare of heat. “Are we supposed to go find her?”

Charlie shook his head, lying against the seat.

“No. She’ll save *us*.”

Marc and Angela exchanged worried looks. To need saving, meant danger was coming and they’d already had more than their share. “Do you know when?”

“As we recover.” Charlie’s pitch began to normalize, breathing evening out. “With her comes salvation and blood.”

There was silence as they pulled into the main parking area of their campsite and waited for the Eagles to secure it. Marc never stopped scanning the cloudy, corn littered farmland around them.

“All clear, folks.” Mitch gave the okay over the radio, after Adrian gave it to him.

“Charlie to the livestock truck.” Billy’s voice didn’t sound encouraging.

Charlie sighed, hitting the button on his new rookie belt. “Copy.”

Charlie liked how the guards were eyeing him, paying more attention to his moods, and even calling on him for things. It was what they did with his mom and the feeling was outstanding. Except for calls like these. Calls like these were hard on him.

Marc was aware of Angela’s worry as they climbed from their vehicle, stretching and watching Charlie head into the lengthening shadows with Dog at his heels. Marc wanted to offer her comfort, but he wasn’t sure what would help.

Angela placed a light hand on his arm. “Together, right?”

Marc nodded. "You know it."

"I turned in my tent."

Marc grinned, leaning forward to press a gentle kiss to her mouth. "I'll get a larger one and set it up."

Angela smiled against his lips and reluctantly moved away.

The setting sun glinted off her long braid, sending a jolt through Marc's body. He forced it down. He'd always been attracted to Angie, even when it was forbidden, but he didn't think he had ever wanted her more than now.

Marc slowly moved toward the perimeter. At some point, he would get to help her conquer *those* fears, not Adrian.

As he got to the livestock truck, Charlie saw Matt in the shadows of the moldy trees. He motioned him to come along, ignoring the nearby guard.

It took Matt a full minute to gain his feet.

Charlie grunted unhappily. When would Matt shape up? "Where'd you get the bottle?"

"Paid Zack's boy to lift it from the supply truck." Matt was drunk enough to not care who got in trouble. "Said it was for his old man."

Matt pulled the bottle out.

Charlie snatched it away.

"Knew you were ready for one!" Matt cackled.

Charlie's arm drew back. "I should hit you with this!"

Matt flinched and fell clumsily back to the dirt.

Charlie tossed the mostly empty bottle to the concerned guard. "Tell Adrian where it came from."

Billy pocketed it with an approving nod.

Charlie looked at the confused boy on the ground. "If I catch you with another drink, Matt, or even smell it on you, I'll never speak to you again."

Matt watched him go through hurt, blurry eyes. He couldn't do anything right these days. His dad was talking to him again, but it was only in short scolds and the words were always the same.

"Why don't you try out for the Eagles, like Charlie?"

"Why can't you be more like Charlie?"

"Charlie's parents don't go through this shit with him."

The tears restarted. Matt ducked away from the hard guard now hitting the button on his radio. *You can all go to hell. What do I care?*

Charlie stomped toward the shower campers, and then headed for the area behind them. He ignored the other teenagers always trying to get his attention these days. There were thick trees here and the privacy to think. He had to find some way to reach Matt...

Charlie stopped at the waves of fear and anger coming from a small group of women standing behind the campers. Six of them were surrounding one, but all of them were former slaves from Cesar's camp.

Charlie inched closer, wondering who he should call. When he recognized the girl in the center of the mob, Charlie reached out to the one who would care the most.

Kyle's response was tormented. *New group arriving. Can't get away. Do what I would.*

Can't, Charlie replied. I'm not allowed to kill.

Jennifer kept an arm around her stomach as she faced her attackers, cursing herself for not bringing Kyle's gun. These females had only been a small threat in the Mexican camp, but here, where women were allowed to come and go without restraint, they were dangerous.

"You didn't think we'd let you off the hook, did you?" Lilly smirked at Jennifer's fear.

Jennifer trembled. "None of what he did was my fault. I wasn't willing."

Lilly, who had cigar burns dotting her exposed skin, leaned closer. "I told you no magic, and you went and claimed that Italian man anyway! He's in the chain of command. Ain't that a surprise?"

Jennifer was aware of their loathing, but also their jealousy. "It's not my fault they're avoiding you. I didn't force anyone. In fact, you begged me to do it because you didn't have the guts!"

Knowing they couldn't have children had caused Safe Haven's males to exclude these women as their future mates, due to the need to repopulate. Cesar had cursed them beyond death.

"I told you no magic!"

Jennifer's weak control teetered. "You think I can't do anything because we're outside, but keep in mind that I'm being fed regularly now. I'm stronger than I've ever been."

Lilly, once a children's therapist who'd lost two sons in the war, slapped Jennifer. "Not if you're having a miscarriage!"

Jennifer was ready to fight as she was shoved down at Lilly's feet, but the two shocked shadows in the grass behind her attackers encouraged her to form a fast, more useful plan. "Don't hurt my baby!"

Lilly hadn't noticed the witness. She drew back to punch. "Knew you were too weak right now!"

"If you do that, I'll have you thrown out of Safe Haven."

The male voice made all the attackers turn, caught. The fear fled at the sight of Charlie and his crossed arms.

Lilly approached him with her hand on her hip. "I know who you are. You won't do anything, boy, or I'll slip inside your mom's tent while she's still off duty and gut—"

"Grrrrr..."

"Now you've done it!" The bushes parted next to Charlie.

Dog's expression was ugly as he padded forward. The wolf's body had filled out with the extra food and constant exercise. His flanks and haunches bulged with muscles and gave him an even stockier appearance. It was enough to keep

rookies jumping back when he came by on a patrol.

The women moved away from Jennifer.

The wolf snarled at the thoughts Charlie flashed.

“We’ll leave her alone.”

“We won’t bother her again.”

“We were only talking.”

“I think they’re lying.” Charlie pointed. “Teach them some manners.”

Dog snarled obligingly, still advancing.

The bullies fled back to camp, with Lilly in the lead.

Charlie walked up and patted the wolf. “Nice.”

Dog nudged his hand in agreement. They both turned to look at Jennifer, who was pushing herself up off the ground.

Jennifer had already heard enough stories about the animal that she hadn’t been afraid of it before now. After this, she was grateful. “Thank you. Both.”

Charlie shrugged. Kyle would be pissed about the handprint across her cheek. “They deserved worse, but our rules are strict on not hurting women.”

“He wouldn’t have attacked them?”

Charlie stared at the wolf thoughtfully. “I don’t think so, but it was my mom that Lilly threatened, so I’m not sure. She and Dog are close.”

Jennifer realized who her rescuer was. Rumors of Safe Haven having their own witch were fleeting here, but in Cesar’s camp, it had been public

knowledge.

“She’s who he wanted.” Jennifer felt Charlie should know. “That’s why he attacked you guys.”

“He paid for it.” Charlie’s gaze hardened. “Unlike some people.”

Jennifer knew that wasn’t directed at her. She carefully knelt, extending a hand toward the wolf. She was thrilled when she was allowed to stroke his soft fur.

“Star had a litter last week.” Charlie thought Jennifer would be a good master for an animal. She had a lot of compassion for kids and creatures. He could read that without going deep. “You could probably play with the pups.”

Jennifer smiled at the thought. “Maybe.”

Distracted from his troubles by hers, Charlie stayed close as they moved into view of the camp. Dog stayed on her other side.

The trio drew attention from the camp people and the Eagles, but also from the former slaves as they realized she had more protection now.

The hard glares she received in return were enough to make Charlie silently ask Dog to travel with her for a while.

Hearing the request, Jennifer declared her plan a success. She hadn’t been able to ask for protection because she had no proof of a threat, but thanks to Lilly’s ambush, she would now have it.

Charlie directed them by the area Kyle was guarding and was showered with his relief and gratitude upon seeing that Jennifer was all right.

Charlie sent a quick signal to forestall the questions about the handprint. *Tell you later.*

Kyle stared until they were out of sight.

“Busy?”

Kyle grunted at Daryl’s question. His new XO hadn’t had his say yet about Jennifer, but he was going to now while they stood watch together.

“Go on.” Kyle braced. “Get it off your chest.”

“I like her.”

Surprised, Kyle swung around with clenched fists. “She’s just a kid!”

Daryl shrugged. “That’s part of why I like her.”

Kyle tried to stay calm. “In what way do you mean that?”

“As a person, of course.” Daryl was glad he could say that and mean it. “She’s tougher than the others we rescued. She’ll make a good addition...to *Angela’s* team.” Moving off to do a patrol, Daryl left Kyle standing there, speechless, with that thought beating in his mind.

In one brief moment, his new XO had given him the answer to getting Jennifer accepted, and a vision of the future Kyle already wanted. If Adrian gave Jenny a place among his army, the rights of an adult came with it. It would be her choice from there, with the full support of the camp. It completed the plan he’d begun in the farmhouse during their first night together.

Kyle hit his radio mike. “Sit with us at mess, Daryl. I’ll treat you to a beer.”

Daryl’s satisfied tenor came right back, “You

got it, Boss.” Daryl had chosen not to confront Kyle at all, but to watch and see. He still had faith that the mobster was one of the good guys.

3

“I have to deliver trays. Want to help?”

Jennifer nodded, happy to have the distraction while Kyle was busy. The people they were passing were giving her appraising looks now instead of only hostility. She understood it was because of her escort. “What were you doing behind the female showers?”

Charlie picked up a large box of trays that Hilda had waiting.

The German woman scanned them both with open curiosity.

“I was headed for the trees to think when I found you. Call for Adrian next time. He won’t tolerate stuff like this.”

Jennifer nodded, positive she wouldn’t. Kyle was the only one she trusted that way.

“Give Adrian time.” Charlie understood her reluctance. “He comes through.”

Hearing that a second time in the same day allowed Jennifer to overlook Charlie’s mind reading. “For what? What does he do with new people?”

“He’ll find your purpose, what you’re supposed to be doing.” Charlie led the way to the tents closest to the medical camper. “After a while, you’ll settle

in here. It'll become home.”

Jennifer held the flap after Charlie's tap and call. She heard that a lot in the thoughts of the camp people. *Maybe it's true...*

“This is Rebecca.” Charlie sat the box down and lifted a tray from it. “Rebecca, this is Jennifer.”

The flashes in Becky's mind were ugly. Jennifer paled, recognizing the main player. It sent the former slave straight back to her life with Cesar. Jennifer trembled. *Rick hurt Becky too.*

Becky stared at the girl everyone was whispering about, feeling sympathy and a bit of curiosity. After the help her own Eagle was now providing, Becky understood. “What's the slop tonight?”

Charlie grinned at Becky's joke, aware that the tension seemed to be building. “Ham sandwiches, juice packs and peanut butter crackers. We're back to things that don't use as much water for cooking.”

Becky took the tray with a grimace. “Better than nothing.”

Charlie wasn't used to being around females his own age. He lingered over the stop, sensing there might be a lot to learn here.

Jennifer stayed by the flap, reading Becky's thoughts, her pain. Rick's ghost was in the back of it all, whispering awful stuff.

Becky frowned. “You got a staring problem?”

Jennifer shrugged. “Sorry. Trying to figure something out, is all.”

Becky crossed her arms over her chest. “What?”

“If we could be friends or not, because we’ve been through the same hell. You’re 14, right?”

Becky nodded, surprised out of her anger. “Until November.”

Jennifer’s eyes lightened a bit. “I’m the day before Halloween.”

“I’m the day after.” Becky hated being by herself, but it was even worse when Seth was in the training tent. She still had the urge to sneak close and watch. She just wasn’t sure she could handle seeing Neil in there laughing and living like nothing had happened.

“Maybe we could hang out.” Jennifer offered a smile.

She’s trying to make friends, Becky realized. She’s wasting her time. I don’t need one.

“Everyone needs friends.”

Charlie tried to interrupt the coming fight. “I’m on. It makes me temperamental.”

Both girls turned to look at him with incredulous expressions.

“You’re what?”

“Excuse me?”

Charlie picked up their thoughts about periods and shook his head, cheeks reddening. “Not like that. I mean my birthday is on Halloween. Girls always think the grossest stuff.”

Both females caught his mind reading. Becky traced it back to Jennifer.

Charlie realized what he’d said, and then picked up their shocked awareness. *We’re special, all of us.*

The trio stared at each other in stunned surprise.

Jennifer recovered first. Adrian had said there were many people here like her, but she hadn't considered that Charlie was one of those, despite who his mother was. Her own mother hadn't had a gift. "Shoulda known by the wolf."

Jennifer waited for Becky to get upset. She clearly didn't have the same power, though Jennifer thought maybe the redheaded girl didn't need a mental ability to be dangerous. She wasn't sure what power Becky did have, but Jennifer automatically assumed the girl had something deadly.

"So what happens now?" Becky looked around. "You guys tell Adrian?"

She is hiding something. Jennifer shook her head. "Not me."

Charlie was way ahead of them. His own gifts were known and being used. Their abilities were secret. He grinned suddenly. "Maybe Adrian will put us in classes together."

It was something the girls hadn't considered yet. The food trays sat undelivered as the teens began to discuss sneaking over to the training tent to observe.

Seth would have told them it was a bad time. The Eagles weren't adjusting to the changes as well as Adrian had hoped.

set alone every time.”

“Same way with the other one. She won’t listen, won’t do it our way, unless a team leader insists.”

“I don’t know how he thinks this will work if they refuse to cooperate with us.”

The training tent was full of Eagles who were supposed to be preparing for their upcoming mission and level test. Work had been delayed for complaining.

“They aren’t like Angie.”

“They won’t work with us at all.”

“Have you wondered why they won’t?” Stopping by the flap on his rounds, Zack waited as his question filled the long canvas with loud, crude responses.

“Would you bother with a bond if you’d never use it?” Zack snorted. “Stop thinking of them as women bent on infiltrating. Think of them as a new generation of Eagles, searching for where they belong.”

His repetition of Angela’s words right before her first test drew attention from those who hadn’t known. Since when did Zack support Angela?

“What do you mean, they won’t work with us?” Seth gave backup to Zack when it appeared no one else was going to.

“They will,” Kenn confirmed from a back corner where he was sorting through equipment and being ignored. “They just don’t know it yet. When they do, you’ll get their cooperation.”

“They think they’ll be on all female teams!” Lee

exclaimed. “That’s why they don’t care.”

Kenn was grateful his days of blind rage were over. Now, he could do his job. “Yes. Angela hasn’t gotten to settle their places yet. She’ll handle it. In the meantime, make it clear that they will work with you and things will improve. As soon as they know they need a bond with you, they’ll make one. They want to be here as much as the rest of us do.”

Kenn ducked out of the tent behind Zack, hiding a smirk at the stunned silence. *Wait until they find out about the other females who are going to join the mix. Then they’ll really have something to adjust to.*

Movement near the medical tent drew Kenn. He watched the usually invisible bubble over Safe Haven glow brighter. He’d noticed the shield not long after the senior Eagles had, a couple weeks now, but it was hard to ignore. The curiosity it caused was maddening. *What is it for? Will it work if we’re attacked?*

The bubble was shielding the camp in small ways, like keeping the cicadas out of the trees inside their perimeter. The camp hadn’t noticed the insects leaving, but the Eagles had. Even wildlife on the ground avoided the shield.

As he had the thought, Kenn noticed a small brown snake slither to the edge of the bubble and immediately flinch in another direction.

The snake ignored the migrating cicadas that littered the grass, coming straight toward the shield a second time, only to repeat the same behavior.

But we can walk through the shield. Kenn headed for Tonya's tent with wild thoughts flowing. He was hoping to steal some time alone, but Kenn knew where his mind would be even while he was enjoying Tonya's mouth. *Will the magic shield work against bigger problems, like other people? 'Cause that could be awesome.*

Chapter Seven

That Sinking Feeling

1

“**H**ow long have those been in the ground?”

“Since the week after Angie and I came.” Marc finished writing down the last of Adrian’s instructions. They’d been on rounds for hours. For once, Marc was glad that their leader always set up camp out of sight of the horror. Thanks to it, his feet were on rollers instead of concrete. The mellow hills with casual ups and downs were a pleasant change, even if nothing wanted to sit exactly level.

“Is that a pumpkin plant?” After starting the garden, Adrian had moved on to the hundred other important projects on his list. He’d known the garden was finished, and that Samantha and others were caring for it, but the vine at the door of the truck caught his attention.

“I’m not sure.” Marc was ready to check on Angie and then have a cold beer while the camp settled in for the night.

Samantha climbed out of the first garden semi. “Yes, pumpkin. That’s corn on the other side.” She unlocked the door to the second sheared-off semi and hauled herself up into the small, cool jungle. A narrow space of floor had been left in the middle.

Samantha used it to get to the rear of her flourishing garden.

“Add canning and dehydrating equipment to the supply lists.” Adrian followed Samantha.

Marc stayed in the doorway, taking notes and guarding. Adrian had begun to use him openly. Before, it had been FND work. Now he was front-and-center, and the camp liked it. Kenn was still Safe Haven’s XO, but the change in status was clear. Kenn was being punished.

Adrian was amazed by the growth in the semi. Healthy green plants bushed out everywhere, a little crowded as they twined around each other, but clearly not suffering for it. They appeared to have been thinned and evenly spaced for maximum growth. Tomato plants with small green balls covered the first patch on the right, their weak stems tied to stakes with red yarn. Wide cabbage leaves occupied the five feet on the left, roped off with stakes and blue yarn. Corn came behind both of those, the pointed stalks almost to Samantha’s shoulders. Laminated drawings were stapled to the walls, detailing the entire semi and its contents. The planting dates and watering schedule for each one was also listed. Neil’s tiny scrawl at the bottom confirmed who’d taken the time, probably to please Samantha.

Adrian joined the woman who was kneeling, pulling the occasional weed, and taking large, oval rocks from beneath the soil. The bean plants were two feet tall, with small sprouts. In a week or so,

those would be ready.

Adrian saw the base of the pumpkin plant that had caught his eye. The vines reached the top of the truck's shorn sides and circled around the staked rails that were covered by a thick green tarp. A small number of insects were flying through the truck, one of them a bee. It landed in a yellow flower on the pumpkin plant.

Adrian pointed. "That is a very good sign."

"Yeah. No bees, no crops." Samantha stood, wiping her dusty hand on her hips. "We weren't sure the insects would come in, but we hoped maybe the pumpkin plant had already been pollinated. It was one of the first things we put in here. Found it in a greenhouse. Thought for sure the shock of digging it up would kill it."

Adrian smiled. "You've done well, Samantha."

Samantha's face glowed. *What an incredible feeling.*

"I'd like to return something." She held out a familiar object. "And I'd like to make a donation."

Letting go of the past was hard for Samantha, but she was making progress. She hardly ever dreamed of Melvin and Henry anymore. The man she'd killed in NORAD, however, still visited her often. "Give these to the next woman who needs them. I don't anymore."

Adrian took his gun, her Taser and the cartridges, and stowed them away with a small amount of pride. He'd helped another battered woman. It was a tiny payment made on an

insurmountable debt.

Samantha walked lightly into the dirt to retrieve the end of the vine that was out of the truck. Bright green with thick leaves, the stem was the size of a man's thumb. She carefully fed the vine over a wooden rail on the wall where thick circles of it were already coiled, wincing at the sharp, tiny spikes. She leaned the flowered tip into the corner where it would start trying to regain the sunlight come dawn.

"Have you checked the carrots or potatoes yet?"

"No. Afraid to disturb them."

"You use chemicals to keep the bugs away?"

"Not directly on the plants," Samantha knelt to dig in the dirt. "Miracle-Gro pellets were mixed into the soil, and we use Sevin Dust on top of the truck and around it to keep the pests out while we're camped."

Adrian was more than pleased. He was relieved. The food that would come from this garden could be canned, dehydrated, and frozen. They would have vegetables and fruit this fall.

"What do you need to keep this going?"

Samantha peered up with a nervous flutter in her stomach. "If I had more water, I could have three times as much growing."

Adrian's mind groaned. Water was something they couldn't spare, but they had to have the food.

Samantha stood, eager to score points toward her goal of being chosen as Angela's XO. "I know where we can get *clean* water, but it'll be

dangerous.”

“Do you still need me?” Marc asked from the door, still thinking about Angie and a beer. *Let Neil and Jeremy worry over this one.*

“No.” Adrian waved him off. “Sitrep at morning mess.”

“You got it.” Marc left them alone.

“Okay, Sam.” Adrian settled against the only clear spot of wall in the truck. “Where’s the water, and why should I let you go along to collect it?”

2

Moving through the camp members, Marc couldn’t stop the grin that drew the attention of every woman in sight. He’d played in Angela’s thick tresses for long, erotic moments last night while tasting her, keeping them right there, doing only that, for almost an hour. He’d left her with swollen lips and the sound of her own ragged breathing ringing in her ears.

He was looking forward to doing it again, only this time, he would hold her afterwards and sleep. She was in their new tent now, resting. He was going slowly, making sure she was more than willing, and he didn’t think he’d ever stayed so horny in his life. He’d been a clumsy kid the first time he’d slid between those legs. He’d only managed to control himself long enough to please her because of his guilt over her age. Now, he was a man, sharing every bit of sexual ecstasy that he

knew, including anticipation. By the time he finally took her, the pleasure might kill them both.

“How does it help to make them wait?”

Marc jumped, and then snorted out laughter. In his fantasizing, he hadn't heard Charlie and Dog come up behind him.

Dog's auburn coat had begun to show a bit of gray near his mouth and ears. Marc wasn't surprised when the filthy animal curled up near them and laid down. Even wolves grew weary.

“Well?” Charlie's mind was still spinning from the new friendship that he'd found today. It had been a shock to discover that Jennifer's gifts were like his, but it was even more of a surprise to find out that Becky had known about him all along.

“Anticipation makes it better when you...” Marc stopped himself, changed it around. “You know how you look forward to your training sessions, but the gun classes are your favorite?”

Charlie did. Being taught by his mom while she also worked with the female rookies was great. He was learning all sorts of things about women.

“It's like that. If you got to go straight there before you did any work, it wouldn't mean as much to you. It wouldn't give as much pleasure.”

“I'm glad you came now. I've never seen mom this happy. Thank you for making her stronger, and...for loving her.” Charlie had wanted to say that for a while.

Marc's heart melted. He swung an arm around his son's shoulders. “Love you too, boy. Just as

much.”

Charlie leaned against him, hugging back. He didn't say the same, but he felt it, and that was enough. Matt was right to envy him a little. He had a great life now.

The two males moved toward the tent area in peace, both sending out good vibes that made most people want to be closer to them. It also made some people long to *be* them.

3

“When are *you* gonna sign up?”

“I d-don't know.”

“I'm tellin' you, boy. That's the only place you need. Become an Eagle and we're set here.”

Matt didn't answer, too busy worrying over the fragile sheet of paper in his father's clumsy hands.

“What the hell is this?”

“Just s-something I drew.” Matt had been sketching happily until Mitch grabbed the book.

“Haven't I told you not to waste your time on this garbage?”

“Yes.”

Mitch glared with bloodshot eyes. “Then quit doing it!” The radioman crumpled up the drawing and tossed it out the com truck window.

“That w-was mine!” Matt got out and slammed the truck door, drawing attention from the guards over the area. “Why can't you l-leave me alone? You and Adrian have tak-taken everything else!”

Mitch got out of the truck, stumbling after his son. "Don't talk to me that way!"

"You're d-drunk on duty again, after he t-told you no more!" Matt sneered. "You need to be guarded too."

"I'm a grown man." Mitch glowered, holding onto the door for support. "I've earned the right."

The pimply teenager bent down and grabbed his paper before the wind could blow it away. He shoved it into his pocket and scowled at his father. "I only came around b-b-because Charlie thought it was a good idea. Now, all I can think about is t-taking your bottle when you pass out!" The teenager stomped around Mitch. "And that means I shouldn't be here."

Too drunk for parenting, Mitch staggered back to the com truck. He'd been drowning his sorrows for most of the day, and he was beat. He climbed back into the truck, squinting at shadowy shapes in the distance. *Is that the vet, alone in the dark, carrying a body over his shoulder?*

Mitch snickered at his crazy thoughts. *Damn good Wild Turkey.* He'd have to hit the next bottle a little slower and make it last. He shouldn't be seeing things already. That usually came at the finish of the nightly bottle, not midway through.

Cynthia was having trouble sleeping. It happened so often since the rest stop that she'd developed the habit of finding something useful to do during those hours. Tonight, she'd been close enough to overhear Mitch and Matt. Cynthia trailed

after the teenager but sent a quick hand signal to Kyle as they went by his post. *Mitch is drunk.*

I got it. Kyle stomped toward the com truck.

Cynthia didn't envy Mitch the chewing out he now had on the way. Kyle hated to be apart from Jennifer, so these shifts on third were hard for him. It gave the mobster a stiff, no-nonsense attitude that Safe Haven's radioman was about to be beaten with.

"He's too far gone for thinking or regret."

Matt sounded bitter for only being 14. Cynthia studied him as they walked. Matt was a good kid but for the drinking. "Adrian will handle it."

"Tell him to handle this, while he's at it." Matt held out the crumpled paper from his pocket. "If my dad takes that away, I'm leaving. It's the only thing I care about."

Great at ferreting out details, Cynthia noticed the boy's stutter hadn't shown up in his conversation with her. *Maybe it only happens when he's upset.*

The boy split off toward the supply trucks as Cynthia stared at the picture. Hand drawn in meticulous detail, the reporter didn't think she'd ever had such a vivid view of cicadas. Feasting on slaver corpses, it was gruesome, but so well drawn that it was also a bit frightening. Those bugs were realistic enough to fly off the paper and attack. Had Mitch even looked at it?

"Too damn drunk to recognize his son's talent." Cynthia wasn't sure what to do. Matt wouldn't trust anyone right now. *How can I help him?*

“Things okay?” Samantha hadn’t wanted to ask, but that was another part of being an Eagle that would help boost her self-confidence. Interactions with other people were still rough on her.

Cynthia paused at the question from the bruised blonde woman, having one of those introspective moments that said she also needed to act more like what she was now—an Eagle in Adrian’s army.

“Not really.” Cynthia joined the blonde. “Maybe you can give me some advice?”

Also off duty and roaming, Samantha stopped in surprise. “Uh, sure. About what?”

Cynthia quickly filled her in on the situation.

Samantha fell into it as if she’d been hoping for something to do other than to search for bad weather and ignore her men each time they passed by her on their rounds.

Twenty minutes later, the two women were still talking, but not about Matt.

“I wondered if it was something like that. You don’t seem the type to play two ends against the middle.”

“I’m not, but this damn heat! It’s in the food here or something. I’ve never…” Samantha stopped, staring at the lone camp member now climbing the stairs to the shower camper.

Cynthia followed her line of sight, but neither of them acknowledged the woman, though she flashed longing their way. Lexa was one of them. Sam and Cyn knew it, but until the gun shop owner accepted

the rules and asked to be signed up, they couldn't treat her like it.

Lexa vanished into the shower camper.

The two females returned to their conversation, one that now included thoughts and comparisons on multiple areas of camp life. Both of them still wanted the XO slot, but the rivalry had been put aside for the moment. Magic took its place as the women began to communicate like team members need to.

"No, I never would have expected that either."

"It's so simple, the way he controls them all."

"And they ask him for it."

"Exactly. You can't have leadership..."

Samantha trailed off, distracted again.

Cynthia watched the storm tracker's face tighten in the light from the burnt-down can fire.

"Are you okay?"

"No..." Samantha moved toward the tent area.

Cynthia didn't hesitate to follow.

4

On point over the camp, Kyle was occupied with finding a replacement for Mitch and tracking down Zack's youngest boy, who he suspected was the one now stealing bottles for Matt. He missed the sight of the two rookie females heading for camp at a fast pace.

Kyle's mood was ugly. He'd gotten used to being with Jennifer at night, to watching her sleep

after she drifted off against her will. He loathed the time away. It made for a surly point man that only his new XO was able to approach without fear of nastiness. Daryl and his team leader had gotten closer since he'd given Kyle a possible solution.

The radio crackled. "Point man to the supply truck."

Kyle switched directions, grunting. After the fight with his dad, Kyle could guess who had just shown up wanting a bottle. The highest Eagle stormed that way with a scathing lecture ready.

Kyle heard them before he got there.

"No."

"Just l-let me have it. No one g-g-gives a shit about me anyway."

Kevin frowned. *I hate third shift duty.* "That's not true. Go sleep it off, Matt."

Matt punched the side of the truck. "I want a d-drink!"

"You're asking to be banished. Go to your tent, little boy!" Kyle stomped toward them.

Matt spun around with a raised arm.

The mobster gave him a solid clip to the jaw that sent him to the ground.

"Oww!" The boy groaned, holding his mouth.

Kyle knelt down to talk some sense into Matt, whether he was ready to listen or not.

"*Ssscchhhhhh!*"

Thick static went through every radio in Safe Haven that was turned on, jarring an entire camp of

refugees.

The leaders inside its borders waited tensely for the next sound.

“SScchhh-ssshhhccc!”

The second wave was stronger. Electrical components began to short out.

Kyle ripped his radio from his belt and hit the button. “Shut ‘em off! Electrical storm!”

“Schhrr!”

The radio sparked. Kyle dropped it, using his feet to stomp out the small flames trying to grow.

Dogs began to bark.

Birds fled from the trees above them in a flurry of panicked wings. There was a clear sense of danger, heavy and unavoidable, coming fast.

Kyle looked at Kevin in horror as the squelching sound echoed through the darkness again, further upsetting their camp. The sky above them was dark and calm except for the retreating wildlife.

Kevin’s return glance was just as terrified. This was no electrical storm.

“Tent fire!” The shout echoed across camp.

Matt slowly picked himself up as the adults ran toward the call, full of bitter, self-pitying hatred. *What do I care if there’s a storm?* He heard the chaos starting, but his gaze was on the now unguarded door of the supply truck. *Whole camp can die. I just want a bottle.*

Matt staggered inside the rig.

5

Under the ground by the edge of the protective shield, a quarter-sized hole opened up and started to fall in on itself. An old mining shaft below provided no foundation, no brace to stop the sinking... The hole began to grow on all sides, sending ripples through the dirt.

A minute after it opened, the hole was five feet wide and still expanding as the dirt continued to cave in on all sides.

Crunchh.

On guard over new arrivals in the QZ, Doug registered the newest noise with concern, but he didn't leave his post. He kept people from breaking quarantine by holding up his gun, glad the small group was being reasonable. They were all gathered at the edge of the tape, watching fearfully, but not running blindly like many in the main camp were doing.

Thud...thud...crunccchhh!

Doug rotated toward the tilting shower camper he could barely see through the trees. *Tilting?*

His feet shifted against his will as the ground rumbled. Doug grabbed the nearest tree as the dirt under his feet fell.

The new arrivals were thrown to the ground as the tremor grew stronger. Trees shook, sending down stiff, moldy leaves.

Thudddd! Riiipppp!

A full row of port-o-lets next to the tilting shower camper dropped into the ground.

Doug's mouth fell open. *Holy shit!*

Doug stumbled as the ground shifted again.

The shower camper plunged into the sinkhole, sending up a thick cloud of dirt. Behind that, a line of moldy trees followed with ear-splitting grinds and cracks.

Dust showered the area, obscuring it from the light of their can fires.

“Help at the showers!”

Doug's shout was swallowed by the static. He tossed his headset away as it sparked, catching his vest on fire. Slapping at it, he rushed toward the shower camper he could no longer see any part of through the falling grit.

Above Safe Haven, the shield glowed brilliant red.

6

Strapping on her gun, Angela hurried from her tent. She found Samantha and Cynthia rushing her way.

“Look after Adrian so the Eagles can work.” Angela scanned the camp.

Samantha motioned to the reporter to handle it.

Cynthia changed directions.

Samantha stayed on Angela's right.

Angela tossed an arm around Charlie's tense shoulders as he and Marc arrived, concentrating. Together, they swept the camp and found the biggest problems.

“Shower campers, mess for control, fire crew to the tent area.” Angela concentrated, catching the feel of more trouble coming.

Marc copied it down.

“Charlie can handle the mess. Just keep them calm.”

Charlie took off running, eager to prove he was old enough to help.

Angela sent him where he would be safe while they worked. That’s where most people would go. Adrian’s drills had them trained to take shelter there.

Angela rattled off more instructions.

Samantha copied them, also making her own notes. Without radios, the Eagles were using hand motions, but those on the outer perimeter were moving in to see what the problem was. People were stumbling, fleeing, radios were sparking, burning, being stomped out, and the ground under the entire camp gurgled ominously. Samantha hid her sudden case of nerves and swallowed the secondary grin that wanted to flash next. She was an Eagle. She was supposed to be cool and calm, even in the face of chaos.

Angela found another problem and turned to Marc. “Perimeter men are leaving posts!”

Marc went into security mode and began grabbing running Eagles, sending them out to keep those places covered.

Sscchhhrrriipp!

Around them, panicked camp members fled,

screaming as another crack tore through the ground. Animals began to run by, telling them there was also trouble in the vet area.

Seeing Adrian move through the din was a comfort. His men fell in around him, waiting to be told what to do. He headed for the area that had enough grit hanging over it to make people wonder if they were being bombed again.

Before Angela could go to him too, Samantha shook her head. “Hang on. Something’s not right.”

“Can you tell what?” Angela had to shout to be heard over the new noise of Eagles shooting the wild animals now chasing camp members. She was getting nothing except panic and chaos from her own searching. The witch was tiredly trying to decide which open doors were threats and which had only jarred loose from the emotions spewing across the camp.

“I get sensations, not images.”

“I get both, but fuzzy...” Angela grabbed Samantha’s wrist. Maybe they could merge...

Samantha jerked as if she’d been stung. The door opened. “Trap!”

Damn it! Angela followed Sam as she took off running. *Adrian! Marc!*

“Get this under control.” Adrian spun around to take up a place behind the running women. He didn’t know where the trouble was, but Angela’s call had been urgent.

Kenn didn’t bother answering, instead stepping

forward to flank Doug as the calmer camp members crowded each other for a view of the still growing sinkhole.

Doug waved a hand. “I might be able to lift that corner enough to move it.”

Kenn paused in determining where to make his descent. The shower camper was only partially in the hole. The front end was crushed against the jagged dirt edge.

“Okay.” Kenn wanted to be able to tell Adrian there hadn’t been anyone inside, but he was almost certain the opposite was true.

7

“Shit!”

Crruussshhh!

Samantha and Angela arrived in time to see a kid camper drop heavily into a new sinkhole and then keep going. The ground shifted on all sides, falling in on itself. Young screams from the swallowed camper echoed across their hearts.

Adrian and a swarm of Eagles rushed straight into the danger. They grabbed whatever they could reach—bumper, door handles, window frames—trying to stop the camper from sinking deeper.

Inside, women and kids cried for help.

“We need Doug!” Adrian shouted at Eagles coming their way. “Get Doug!”

Crunchhh!

“I’m here!” The big man had come as soon as

he'd lifted the shower camper, leaving Kenn to supervise bringing up the body.

Another large chunk of dirt broke off near the camper edge and disappeared into the black hole.

“Help us!”

“Please!”

Surrounded by helping Eagles, Doug grunted in effort, lifting with his legs. The small camper slowly came up enough for them to slide a steel plate underneath.

Almost the entire kids' area had been lost, but only this one camper was in danger of being devoured. Alert Eagles had driven the other campers away with their precious cargo inside.

“Get them out of there!” Adrian waved Eagles forward as the camper was dragged away from the danger. He put a hand on Angela's arm when she would have gone in. “No.”

Covered in axle grease, Marc nodded his approval and went to finish securing the perimeter.

Angela didn't like it, but she didn't argue as Kyle and Daryl began calling for what they needed to get the crushed door open.

Minutes later, bruised and bleeding kids were carried out to John.

Doug came forward as a small Mexican boy was brought out, taking him from Kyle's surprised arms with a gentleness everyone noticed.

“Come here, boy. We'll wait for your brother together.”

The four-year-old hid under Doug's big arm. The man patted his little shoulder as they waited for Kyle to bring out the rest of their people.

The females of the camp were gathering here too, taking the uninjured children to the mess as they were cleared, offering what comfort they could get the kids to accept. Most were stunned, too dazed to keep crying, but a few were already laughing again at adult efforts, telling their guardians they were strong.

Doug took the shaking boys toward the mess after the elder one was led out.

Adrian watched them. Doug was a gentle giant in his army and very needed.

Searching for her charges, Peggy also saw Doug and the boys, and crossed the pair off her list. She spared a quick glare for Adrian and then went to help Kyle and Daryl with the rest of the trapped children. Adrian had refused her request to make Becky talk to her. The mother was still steaming over it.

"He's good with them." Angela smiled at Doug, who was calming the two boys who may not have gotten much consideration from the others because they were Cesar's sons. "Maybe they should stay together?"

Adrian shrugged distractedly, busy scanning the camp for the next issue to be handled. "Maybe."

"Wow." Angela pointed. "Speaking of changes, check that out."

Adrian turned, ready to conquer the next

challenge.

Tonya approached the fire crew hesitantly, being careful not to get in their way as they put out fires caused by sparking radios and panicking residents.

Tonya darted closer before she could lose her nerve. “Is there something I can do?”

Sent by Adrian to help hold the hose, Cynthia was covered in soot and sweat. “No! Get lost.”

The Eagles around were surprised, but Tonya was hurt. She and the reporter had almost been friends before, bonded by their determination to have Adrian removed from power. “Oh, okay. Sorry.”

Cynthia heard the misery, but she didn’t take it back. Tonya had done enough to hurt the dream. Cynthia wasn’t letting her do more.

“I think I can find something for you.” Adrian’s words brought silence as he joined them. He smirked in its wake. “You won’t mind getting dirty, will you?”

“No.” Tonya was shocked into honesty. “For a change, I actually want to help.”

Adrian stared at her for a long minute, feeling Kenn’s silent plea from across the chaotic camp.

“Is it over?” Adrian demanded.

Tonya didn’t pretend ignorance, but it was a slight struggle to give him what he expected in front of all these witnesses. “Yes and...I’m sorry.”

“So am I.” Amid the murmurs, Adrian pointed toward the shadowy figure of the vet, who was

trying to calm the remaining animals. “Go help. He’ll think you’re being punished, so expect to work.”

Tonya didn’t care. She was glad Adrian was giving her a chance. She wanted it now. Not as much as power, but that need was starting to ease. If Adrian would make it so she wasn’t an outcast anymore, Tonya intended to forgive and forget. Kenn, along with watching Cynthia and Samantha, had converted her.

The vet had noticed Adrian pointing and waited. Tonya’s words as she joined him went a long way in soothing the vet’s growing panic.

“He said to help you, and I’m not being punished. I volunteered.”

Chris wanted to sneer at the whore, but he was too relieved to do more than nod. He’d thought Adrian knew something. He would already have to do something about Mitch. If Adrian had seen him too, the vet planned to flee.

“Sing to the animals, if you can carry a tune,” Chris instructed grudgingly. “It calms them. If you don’t sing, then hum. You can do that, right?”

“Yeah.” Tonya followed the surly veterinarian, smothering a crude remark about not wanting to get her knees dirty to deliver a hummer.

“Come on, sing.”

Tonya sighed. *Can’t I just fill a water bucket and feed them a brownie? They’ll mellow right out.*

“I can cook for you.”

Adrian and Angela turned to see one of the new arrivals standing nearby.

Angela studied the short man as flickering shadows moved through camp. “He’s okay, just old and wants to be around people.” Too busy to be gentle, Angela caught Li Sing’s hurt expression and grunted. “We do need you.”

The man lit up. He held his hands together as he bowed to them. “Let me know. Li Sing grateful to have a safe place for family.”

Adrian waved him toward the mess, where the crowd was gathering. “Help get them settled down. Ask for Hilda.”

The man went that way, motioning for his large family to go back inside their QZ tents. They quickly obeyed.

Adrian was struck by the newest part of the camp’s integration plan. Li Sing was spry, and he had his family in line. If a few of them joined the Eagles, might not more minorities do the same?

Adrian grunted, having a personal moment. With the situation, he shouldn’t be sparing time on thoughts for the future, but progress on the camp’s reform was something he tended even at the worst moments.

All around him, long shadows flickered restlessly. Most were straggling camp members going to the mess like they’d practiced during drills, but some were rushing away from that crowded

area, still searching for loved ones or friends. Not everyone was accounted for.

Adrian flipped his radio on, hoping the sparking was over.

An immediate buzz and smoking told him the radios were useless. He quickly unsnapped the box and let it drop to the ground to finish smoldering.

Kyle joined Adrian, spotting Jennifer at the mess with Dog. He knew he had Charlie to thank for that. “We’ll have the perimeter men write down who they’ve come across. What’s next?”

“Roll in camp and slide us south as you do it. We’ll go from there.”

Making their haven smaller would allow them to keep track of everyone, while helping anyone who may still need it. The sinkholes themselves appeared to be slowing, and nothing new had opened up. Even the animal noises were calming, though Tonya’s singing left something to be desired. Adrian hoped the chaos was over.

Samantha moved to Adrian’s side, conscious of the many eyes watching her. Neil and Jeremy were a few feet away, writing down the names of those they had seen on perimeter duty. She ignored them.

“We need to be on concrete for a while.” Samantha cleared her throat and spoke up louder. “That or overtop of something deep enough to hold us in place if the bottom drops out around it.”

Adrian felt Samantha’s concern for the camp, but also the lingering fear that she wouldn’t be believed. He looked at Neil. “Recon for an area

according to her specifications. We move at daylight. Sooner if the holes grow faster.”

Neil motioned to Jeremy.

The two men left the area without glancing at Samantha.

Samantha was glad to see them working together and feeling like teammates again. Her plan had worked, but it didn't stop the ache in her gut. That continued to grow.

Suddenly becoming aware of another potential threat, Adrian let his feet carry him away from the crushed camper. Thanks to the way fate had gifted him, competent people were tending the issues, but there was a smaller problem that wasn't being guarded during the chaos.

Ten minutes later, Adrian and a few of the men were out patrolling with the dogs, using the wolf to relay commands and keep the canines interested as they searched for intruders. It wasn't a coincidence that the threat had come from under the ground. Nor was it a coincidence that they had all been distracted by the first sinkhole so nature could take a cut of their kids with the second hole. Things would get uglier now.

Adrian found himself longing for Little Rock, but also dreading it. Once they reached that famed city, he might get a break from this constant stress. *I'll be dead, but that's still a break, right?*

Chapter Eight
Honor Guard

1

When Zack reached the first sinkhole, he spent a minute helping direct people away from the edges, then delivered messages to Kenn, who was keeping watch over the area.

Zack wasn't part of any of the aftermath scenarios taking place across camp. It gave him time to watch some of these people without Adrian's calmness to shelter their true selves. Like Ray. He was fawning all over Dale as he led him from the mess. That would have repercussions, but so would Tonya helping to recapture animals that had gotten free when cages toppled over and rattled locks loose.

Safe Haven's in the midst of her own global warming. Changes, big and small, were arriving. Zack neared the edge of the 20-foot sinkhole with that thought in mind.

Kenn was taking a minute to get his thoughts together. Why did it feel like they were always under attack now and doomed to lose? Kenn raised a brow at his right-hand man. "Truce?"

Zack wanted to deny him, but at that moment, the sense of being needed for this camp's survival was impossible to ignore. "Yes."

Kenn grinned, but it didn't reach his eyes. Despite all their security and the magic they had here, he had to tell Adrian they'd lost someone. Behind Kenn, Alex and Anderson were bringing up a towel-clad body. So far, it was the only one, but the blow from this would be harsh for their leader.

"Do you want me to tell him?" A week ago, Zack wouldn't even have considered it.

"No." Kenn noted that Lexa appeared to have broken her neck, meaning it was quick. At least one mercy to tell the boss. "This is part of my job." Kenn didn't want anyone else to see Adrian's grief.

Zack's rage lowered to normal anger. Ass or not, Kenn was loyal to Adrian and he was good at what he did. After he delivered the news and handled the blowback, Kenn would spend the rest of the wee hours setting this camp to rights. Come dawn, it would be back together.

John joined them. "Anyone need the doctor here?"

"No."

"Not here."

Kenn and Zack both answered, stepping back to let John through.

John knelt down to confirm what a first glance had already shown. Lexa, the gun store owner from the City of Angels wasn't going to join Adrian's army or any other. John looked up at Kenn. "Does he know yet?"

Zack swept and found the blond leader now comforting camp members by the mess. "In about

five minutes he'll start rounds, but he'll head here first. Maybe less."

"Yep." Kenn grunted. Why couldn't it have been someone else? Adrian wouldn't take this well. "He'll pick it up from us even if we take her away." Kenn sighed. "Get a sheet. Leave her face uncovered and put an honor guard here. That'll let him know before he sees her."

Zack took care of it, giving Kenn a nod of respect as he left.

John stood up too quickly. Pain ripped through his stomach and stole his breath, knocking him to his knees.

Kenn offered him an arm. "Anne saw, not Adrian. Get up, old man, quick."

John let the Marine help him.

Kenn stayed with his body shielding the sick doctor from view of most of the camp. "Tell me what you need."

"He needs a pill and rest." Anne appeared and took John's other arm, turning them toward the trees. "He doesn't want Adrian to take him off duty yet. Help me get him out of sight and you can scold him from there."

Kenn grunted, doing as the woman ordered. He wasn't worried about Adrian. The boss already knew John was getting worse, but he didn't want the camp any more upset than they already were. It was what Adrian would have done.

Anne didn't scold her husband. Her touch was gentle, loving. She understood a man's pride all too

well, but did John understand a woman's ego was just as big, just as fragile? Did he realize this would drive her harder and make her more determined to be able to protect him? The shootout at the QZ wouldn't be the last. Even a dying MD was better than none at all and John was now an easy target.

They got him inside the medical tent to find people already waiting for them.

Anne took charge. "Unless you're bleeding, give me a few minutes to get him settled."

"She's bleeding."

Jennifer and Charlie were in the flap behind them, Dog at her side. The girl was pale, pulse in her neck pounding rapidly. She sank to her knees as another contraction hit, groaning.

Anne let go of John, causing him to grab a cot and roughly slide down on his own.

"Go get your mom and then Adrian," Anne ordered. "I can't handle all of this."

Behind Charlie, lurking to see the results, Lilly's face glowed with satisfaction in the light of the flickering fires. An accidental punch during the stampede had been enough.

Really makes a difference when you catch the witches off their guard. Lilly headed for the mess to get a mug of chocolate. *I'll remember that.*

2

Jennifer and John both grunted in relief as Angela's healing orbs began swarming over them.

Hidden by a small sheet, those in the tent watched the glowing lights behind the partition in uneasy wonder. The Eagle inside the medical tent wasn't here for the camp's protection. He and Adrian had exchanged one brief moment that made it clear what Zack's job was.

"If she uses magic, no one comes out of this tent until you handle them."

Standing in a corner near the flap, Zack was now keeping a hand on his gun and eavesdropping on the quiet conversations to know who might be a problem.

The highest ranked Eagle in the tent was able to see what Angela was doing, but Kyle couldn't have told anyone afterward even if he wanted to. He wasn't watching. He only cared about Jennifer.

"If I don't make—"

"Sshhh." Kyle refused to let her talk that way. He wiped the sweat from her brow. "Save your strength."

Jennifer felt the cramp easing and let out a tired breath. "Didn't know it would hurt so much."

John thought of giving the girl a painkiller.

Angela shook her head, red eyes glowing. "Do not interfere."

John hastily retreated and stopped in stunned shock at the pain free movement. He felt...*good!*

John sank into a nearby chair and began to weep. "Thank you! Oh, thank you!"

Angela ignored him, straining to keep the orbs working, though they'd already repaired what

damage they were capable of. She was trying to give Jennifer some of her reserve.

In the far corner of her mind, the witch watched silently.

Angela knew the witch was waiting to be called, but she didn't want to admit that there was little more she could do without crossing a line that couldn't be returned from.

What will you do? the witch questioned as Jennifer's breathing became a low moan on every exhale. *You have one life to save, one more time you can fully heal. Will you use it now?*

Angela hated the rules, the limits, on her magic. She received only one life credit for each birth, and she had used the first for Marc. If Charlie ever needed help, she wouldn't be able to give it.

Is there another deal I can make?

The witch came closer slowly, glowing crimson in front of an enormous mental construction project. They'd worked on it all of Angela's life, but recently it had begun to take shape. It was as if being around Adrian and his light had increased their mental workers and supplies. Hammering and grunting was a common sound in her thoughts these days.

You can borrow from the mother's double luck, but the price is moral responsibility for them, the witch finally answered, coming close enough to fight for control if she wanted.

Angela wasn't concerned. They were a team now. She confirmed what mattered most to the

future. *One good, one bad. And we won't know which?*

The witch raised a hand with long, jagged claws. *Yes. Let them both die and spare Safe Haven. That's the choice he would make.*

Angela understood that to be the truth, but she wasn't Adrian. She hadn't hardened that much yet. *I'll tend to them in whatever way is required. Do it.*

A vivid bolt of crimson light shot from the witch's hand and slammed into Jennifer's contracting stomach.

Kyle jerked back, stung by the heat.

Angela held up a hand in warning. "Stay back. She still wants you."

Kyle scowled, watching Jennifer's face heat up to match the burning of her skin. "What are you...she doing?"

"Closing, cauterizing—"

"Ahhh!"

Kyle shoved through the heat to take Jennifer's hand at the scream.

In his mind, the witch groaned, *Yes. Let them feel your love!*

Kyle didn't resist the drawing.

Angela allowed the witch to meddle. With the knowledge of 50/50, it couldn't hurt. Angela was already planning to have the evil twin removed at the first clear sign and it was heartbreaking. If the witch could stop that future, it was worth whatever mark the witch was stitching into their DNA. When it came to the evil Cesar and his minions had

carried, his kids needed any help they could get.

3

At 4 am, Marc and Kevin were still busy.

All but one cherished camp member was accounted for, the smaller perimeter had been secured, and then the two men had been sent to gather supplies for the kids who were now set up in large tents with the camp women.

In the darkness, the sinkholes were visible because of torches and guards using flashlights. Between all that, these two tired men had helped round up the surviving larger animals, moved vehicles away from the still crumbling edges of the sinkholes, and taken Lexa's body to Hilda and Peggy for funeral preparations. Everyone wanted leadership, but at moments like this, no one envied the men who'd actually been chosen for it.

Thanks to Adrian's efficient setup between teams of Eagles, the outer edges of camp life had been quickly reestablished. Once Marc and Kevin delivered the last load of supplies to the waiting women and kids, both men would go to their higher-ups for a new check in and a fresh list of duties to be performed. Marc's hopes of a beer and Angie's kisses were long gone.

"I guess it's Neil or Jeremy you're usually working with on things like this."

"Yeah." Kevin clapped him on the shoulder. "Nice to have your brain here, but I do miss their

arrogant attitudes.”

“So do I.” Marc opened the door. “Not being nagged by Neil while Jeremy makes faces behind his back just doesn’t feel right.”

Laughter died at the sight of Matt in the supply truck. The teenager was curled up in the corner, a mostly empty bottle of whiskey clutched in his grip.

Kevin frowned. “Adrian’s night just got longer.”

“Maybe not.” Cynthia joined them and handed Marc the drawing, then she climbed into the truck. “Make sure Adrian gets that. Tell him I’ll take the boy on as an apprentice for my newspaper.”

Kevin stared in surprise, captured by the reporter’s ass suddenly being level with his face. It was almost too much to take. Kevin found himself leaning forward for a subtle smell.

Marc turned away with a grin of recognition. It was something guys did, like tasting what they’d just had a finger inside. Women might be disgusted, but they didn’t understand. It was instinct for a man to imprint the female that way, ages old and undeniable.

“I’ll punish him when he steps out of line.” Cynthia moved forward and delivered a solid slap to Matt’s leg that made the teenager recoil groggily.

Marc and Kevin exchanged glances.

“Would Adrian trust her with something like that?”

Marc shrugged. “Let her handle it for now, I guess. If he disagrees, he’ll let her know.”

Kevin climbed into the truck to help, and to get another whiff of her scent. “I say we wait until morning and fill him in then. If we can get Matt sobered up, maybe Adrian will go for it.”

“Okay.” Marc paused. “You got this covered?”

Kevin’s face reddened in the lantern light. “I don’t have a clue man, but I’ll wing it.”

Marc chuckled as the sooty reporter continued to try rousing Matt, missing the remark. He slid the detailed drawing into his pocket. Why did people with talent have to have such glaring flaws? Why couldn’t human nature just be good?

Marc sighed. As he went toward the medical area, he mentally scanned, making sure the guards were covering the camp. Marc saw the crowd outside the medical tent and the lone man trying to secure the area. With so many of the higher Eagles he depended on not around, or flat out not responding to his need, it wasn’t going smoothly for Kenn.

Marc reluctantly took the place on Kenn’s right. For the most part, he liked working with Adrian. Kenn would always be a piece of shit. “What’s next?”

Kenn pointed toward the medical tent and then the camp that was slowly being set back up, unable to stop the elation of telling Marc what to do. “No organization, too many rookies.”

“I’m on it.”

Kenn gave Marc a minute to scatter the crowd and then began directing things again. It went better

this time, truck and men moving together.

Kenn's heart eased. *This is the way it should have been all along.*

4

On the other side of Safe Haven, Adrian winced each time he passed the freshly dug grave. They would hold Lexa's funeral right before they left.

Scchrrriipp!

The sound of the sinkhole still growing, getting closer, was keeping him and the Eagles alert. Adrian didn't want to move the camp in the dark. They were too jumpy to be sure of a calm bugout, but he was ready to make the call if he needed to.

Adrian swept the sheet clad body again. No matter how careful he was, people died.

Neil and Jeremy had chosen a thick grove of trees for the camp, and Samantha had approved it. Neil, along with half his team, was packing a few essentials and heading back to secure the new site—much to Neil's pleasure.

Adrian knew Neil was having a tough time staying away from Samantha, who was now holed up in the vet area to listen for more trouble. The trooper had been by there a number of times in the last half hour, but he hadn't gotten the nerve to speak to her yet.

Adrian moved that way in case he was needed. Neil was leaving camp. Jeremy wasn't. *Let the games begin. Again.*

Greg put away his list. “We’re all set.”

“Good.” Neil stored his kit. “We leave in 10 minutes.”

“We’ll be ready.” Greg hated not being on any of the mission teams going out, but Neil’s constant need to leave camp was helping with the restlessness of his team.

Chosen to be the man left in camp this time, Jeremy waited at the truck door, full of thoughts and plans. He wanted to talk to Samantha, but he couldn’t do it without telling Neil first.

Neil was expecting it. He shrugged in dawn’s grudging light. “If you think you can get through that hard-ass shell around her heart, go on. I won’t stand in the way.”

Jeremy was caught off guard. “You mean that?”

“Yes, I do.” Neil grunted unhappily. If he was wrong, there were a lot of miserable nights waiting. “It’s not enough to have what I want. For me to live with myself, I have to know *she* has what she needs. If that’s you, so be it. My wants no longer matter above hers.”

Jeremy flushed. “You don’t think I can put her first?”

“I know you can.” Neil wasn’t going to leave with any misunderstandings between them. “Now you know I can too.” Neil let his XO in for the first time in months. “I want her in ways that I never expected, and her happiness is one of those. It ranks above my loneliness.”

“Are you going to see her before you leave?”

“Yes. Is that a problem?”

“No.”

There was a tense pause and then Neil broke it. “Are you ready to jump back into his war?”

Jeremy thought of Frank dying beside him, of the blood on his hands. “No. Neither is our team.”

Lingering at the semi door, Adrian listened to them work it out. Neil could make the offer because he knew what Samantha was hiding. She loved it that he was dangerous and while Jeremy was too, he didn’t throw it around the way Neil did. Samantha liked the excitement, the attention. Neil was confident enough of it to give his blessing for Jeremy to try. It was almost wise. This way, all of them would know for sure.

If Samantha agrees to play their game. Adrian tiredly continued to the parking area. She has her own script written this time.

5

“I’d like to ask you something.”

“Damn it!” Samantha swallowed a startled shriek as Neil stepped from the foggy shadows behind the vet area. Hadn’t he just been in the parking zone?

“Please?”

Samantha’s pulse increased at the tone. “Uh...okay. What?”

Neil didn't get upset at the defensive response, understanding she was scared of what he might say. It was in her wild eyes and twitching fingers.

"I know you want Angie's XO slot, and to help Adrian build the dream. I think you fit right in, but what about personally? If your past didn't stand in the way, what would make you happy?"

Unprepared for the telltale query, Samantha flushed. "What if I said I have it already?"

It was obvious that she didn't. Neil waited.

Samantha sighed, staring at his cleanshaven jaw. "The things that haunt me would get in the way of anything I try to build."

"*You* need time now?"

Samantha shrugged. "Surviving was all I thought about for so long that I'm not sure what I need, only that my place here has to come first."

Neil thought of his words to Marc. "*I'm an Eagle first. My woman would have to know that.*" "I'm leaving now."

Samantha stiffened. "It's only for a few hours, right?"

He moved a step closer, wanting to grab her and needing to run at the same time. "I'll still feel it." Neil pushed his hat back, letting her see how much he meant it. "I miss you."

Sam sucked in a sharp breath at the emotional blow. "Damn it!"

Neil smiled bitterly. "Had to know you feel it too."

Samantha couldn't resist the panic. She

advanced with a low growl. “I hate you for this, Neil. I really do.”

Neil met her kiss with a blast of his own anxiety. They were about to be apart. He’d given Jeremy permission to try. Was he crazy?

Sam’s grip tightened. She didn’t want to need him this way. She just did.

Neil deepened the kiss, taking the taste to memorize in case he didn’t get to do it again.

Samantha’s arms tightened around him, need thrumming through her skin.

Neil pulled back, heart suddenly ripping open without him knowing why. “After this is done, I’m going to ask you out.”

Samantha clutched at his shirt, trying to control her breathing. “No promises.”

Despair returned. Neil took a double hit as he remembered saying almost the same thing to Becky. And then he’d developed this attraction for someone else. Neil went cold inside with dread. “Okay.”

Samantha slid back into his surprised arms with a low groan. “Kiss me once more. Hard and quick.”

Neil did, then headed for the waiting team without glancing back.

Samantha didn’t look away until the taillights faded into the landscape. When she finally turned, it was to find Jeremy’s wounded face staring at her from the foggy dawn shadows. Waves of guilt tried to crush her.

Samantha joined him with a blank expression.

“How about a kai lesson?”

“You know that means I’d have to be around you, right?” Jeremy couldn’t stop the jealousy that spewed. “And touch you.”

Not in the mood for it, Sam’s tone cooled. “Yes, I do.”

Jeremy’s hands shoved into his pockets. “Why me? You’ve got enough admirers to fill that slot.”

Instead of another barb or even the shove of frustration she wanted to give, Samantha walked away.

Jeremy quickly caught up. “Wait. When?”

Sam’s feet were already leading them there.

Jeremy groaned silently but didn’t protest. After an hour of beating on him, she might agree to have a cup of coffee and spend some time together.

Samantha eyed Jeremy warily. “So, you two aren’t fighting anymore?”

“No. The Eagles come first. Even before you.”

To his shock, she grinned.

“Good. Maybe we could all start having mess together?”

Jeremy instantly fell back into competition mode.

Samantha sighed. “Guess not.”

“Why don’t you just pick one of us?” Jeremy prompted. “We’ll work it out.”

Samantha shook her head, leading them to the crowded training tent. She wasn’t the only one who didn’t want to try sleeping right now. “That might ease the two of you, but it wouldn’t make me

happy.”

“What would?”

Sam sighed, nerves about shot. She couldn't wait to start swinging. “Being able to spend time with who I want, doing what I want, without people acting like children over it.”

Jeremy felt the sting, but it was still attention. “Thanks.”

Samantha opened the flap, held it for him. “Any time.”

Jeremy wanted to be pissed, but he found himself grinning instead. *I just can't figure her out.*

6

Becky snapped awake with a startled gasp, not sure where she was or what had happened. Her hand groped out to find Seth's tense body at her side. They were in the parking area, in the back seat of his big truck.

“What is it?”

Becky sat up, sweating and shivering. “Dream.”

“Nightmare, you mean.” Seth placed a gentle arm around her trembling shoulders. “He's dead, Becca. You saw it.”

The girl nodded and let Seth guide her down to his lap where he could wrap her up tight against him.

Becky felt the tears coming and let them.

Gonna have that mouth next, Becky, baby!

She shuddered, lost in her mental prison.

“Rebecca?”

The different name helped pull her from the past. She bit down on her lip in an effort to stop crying. Rick was in her head so often! Seeing him die hadn't been enough. Ashamed, Becky buried her head against Seth's chest to hide the tears she was unable to stop. She didn't want to die anymore but living looked hard too.

Seth held her close, forgetting about the sinkhole, the possible witnesses and everything else but her anguish. “You were betrayed. That's not your fault. You didn't cause this.”

Becky shuddered again. “I should have turned him in.”

Seth didn't lie. “Yes.”

Becky sucked in a ragged breath. “I wish I had!”

She sounded completely different from the playful flirt they'd all been accustomed to.

“He's like Angela and Adrian. That's why he won't...wouldn't die. Except he's all darkness, where she's light.”

Seth had wondered what information Becky might have gleaned from Rick while with him, but he hadn't expected her to be so observant.

“I think he was supposed to be one of us. That's why he's so full of hate. If we'd found him first... Cesar stole that hope.” Becky trembled, forced herself to go on. “He wanted me broken and bleeding. He said...he said stealing my soul would destroy Neil and Samantha, and through them—Adrian.” Becky sobbed, shattering. “Please!”

Seth gave in, tilting her head back to slant his mouth over hers.

She responded as if she were drowning, grateful for any distraction that he would provide. His hands would put her back to sleep, and she'd be able to try living again when she woke up.

Lingering in the fog, Adrian watched Becky guide Seth's hands, small moans echoing. Now he understood what hadn't been revealed by his Eagles. Seth was helping the teenager fight Rick's ghost in a powerful way—one the camp would not condone.

Can I?

Awash in guilt at the answer, Adrian headed for the funeral. *Yes, I can. I'm not finished playing with her life either.*

Chapter Nine

Honor and Confusion

1

“Are you sure you should be doing this yet? John didn’t clear a full course.”

Angela increased her pace instead of wasting breath on words. *Running helps me think.* Having her body in motion often sent innovative ideas and connections through her brain. Angela knew it was the same for many of their Eagles.

Marc tried not to stare. Even with bags under her eyes and worried, Angela and those perky breasts were a sight to make a man glad to be alive.

Angela jumped over the hole in the ground, landing smoothly despite the arm sling.

Marc hung back, but he was ready to grab her. She wasn’t happy about it, but that was the only way John had agreed to clear her for even a partial workout, and that was telling, considering how grateful the doctor was for Angela’s healing. Both of her secret patients were doing well. Jennifer was in Kyle’s tent, once again hiding.

Angela jogged sharply down the flower dotted hill. Face tight, she picked up the stride and forced air into her burning lungs.

Hanging back a bit more, Marc watched her

muscles flex as she jumped another wide hole and rolled down a grassy incline. It had to be hurting her, and he knew for a fact that she hadn't taken a pill. *Where was this fire when Kenn was beating on her?*

He didn't understand that surviving it without snapping had taken incredible strength, but Angela didn't correct him. It wasn't worth the argument. Let him think Kenn had been able to control her because she was weak. It didn't matter, did it?

It shows another way he doesn't understand you, the witch said.

Angela stored it, but without worry. They didn't have to be alike in everything or see all situations the same way.

Angela's foot slipped as she hit the next embankment. She allowed herself to fall into a roll that took her to the bottom with only a grunt of discomfort. It was much better than hitting her shoulder directly.

Marc tried not to be offended when she refused his hand, pushing herself up with one arm and a frown. He stared at her for a second of complete bewilderment before jogging to catch up. *Will I ever understand what makes her so determined that pain means nothing?*

Angela's heart thumped. He wanted to know her in those ways that she was still holding back, but she wasn't sure he was ready to hear the truth, let alone to accept it. *In mere months, Adrian has changed me. I'll never go back to what I was before.*

They both called greetings as Charlie moved toward them.

“Hey, boy.”

“Good morning.”

Charlie didn’t glance at the men filling in graves or the crowded mess, taking Marc’s side. He also didn’t say anything.

That told Angela he wanted to talk to his father.

“I,” she stated, with dramatic eagerness, “have a class and a run. Excuse me.”

Angela went back the way they’d come.

Both males tried not to frown or remark on it. Neither of them wanted her out of camp at all, but she was stir-crazy. If she could prove she was in shape, Adrian would let her go to Wichita.

The males waited until she was out of earshot, then Marc looked at his son. “Girls, again?”

Instead of laughing, Charlie leaned closer. “I can’t stop thinking about them! When does this shit stop?”

Marc sighed, gaze going to Angela’s lightly swinging hips. “When we die, maybe. Not a second before.”

2

Cynthia nodded to Angela as she went by and got the same in return. She and Matt were working on speech lessons right now. The reporter insisting on doing it in public for many reasons. The biggest was her refusal to be accused of having a thing for

someone younger. Too many of this camp's men had shown that side and the females were getting tired of it.

“Do it again.”

The din of the mess had Matt flustered, cheeks red. He repeated the rhyme, easier this time, and stared at her in adoration. “That was better, huh?”

“Yes.” Cynthia's attention was drawn away as Li Sing came out to personally reload the buffet dishes. Maria had always sent one of her helpers, preferring to remain in the truck where she could take bites of everything unseen. Li Sing liked to circle the tables and make sure people were happy. It wasn't hard to guess that he had owned a restaurant before the war.

The eager-to-please man had been put in charge of the mess and providing Safe Haven with a new menu, a quick choice by Adrian after a snack he was served. The rice patties and bamboo shoots had been covered in canned beef and gravy. Adrian had been sold. It was good, considering that all their food was now nonperishable or being raised. Hilda had run out of meal ideas for the items they had in abundance, but Li Sing had added a new item to his menu every week before the war. He'd promised their stocks of beans and rice would yield more than plates of the same. All of them hoped it was true. After six months, supplies had dwindled into small stashes that would hold them for days at a time instead of weeks. Many of their old staple items were now only occasional treats.

Cynthia saw Angela's shadow a few seconds later—Zack—and approved. Anyone who wanted to cause Angela trouble here would now have a challenge finding an accomplice. The camp knew she was protecting them, even if they didn't know exactly how. Even nature wasn't getting the chance to attack them from the bottom again. They were only camping on solid foundations. More than a few of the camp were limping due to sore feet. Concrete sucked.

Cynthia swept the crowded mess around them, spotting Doug lurching with Maria's boys. She quickly dropped her eyes at the surprising number of males who tried to catch her attention. *It feels so odd to be wanted!* She wouldn't trade it for anything.

3

Angela slid into the pharmacy tent with a grimace at the strong alcohol odor. “Hey, Tonya, got a minute? I'd like to—”

Angela stopped at the sight of Kenn, shirt off and lying on a bedroll behind the makeshift wooden counter.

Stiffening, she cleared her throat. “Tonya around?”

Kenn was just as surprised to see her. “She has babysitting duty.”

“Oh. Right.” Angela stared. Even without the layers of fat and cruelty, Kenn's hard body was

enough to make the past come flying back in thick waves.

“There’s only one thing she wants from you, if you came for more than wipes or Chapstick.” Kenn was trying to break the awkward silence.

Angela turned around, needing to go. The tent even smelled like the past. “What’s that?”

“A chance.”

Angela understood Kenn wanted to speak on behalf of the redhead and locked down on her emotions, making herself wait.

“Please.” Kenn hoped his faith in Tonya wasn’t misplaced. “She deserves it.”

Hearing him care for someone was a good moment. It broke some of the hold the ghosts were gaining. Angela really did need all the hard-assed women she could gather, and Tonya fit that role without a doubt. “I don’t know how it would work, but if I didn’t tell Anne no, I won’t tell Tonya that either.” Angela yawned, fear leaving weariness in its place.

Kenn grunted in satisfaction.

Angela got pissed. “You’d better be sure, Marine! He will banish you for tanking *this* part of the dream.”

“I think you’ll be surprised.”

Kenn’s answer was oddly confident and held none of the resentment she’d expected. Angela sighed, glancing around. Unlike the mess she’d come to expect from the redhead, Tonya’s tent was orderly, jars and bottles all neatly shelved. “I’m

going to hold an official tryout. Have her show up five minutes late. Even if she blows it, the surprise might rattle the two women tied for top and help me pick.”

“Thought you would have already.” Kenn was surprised. “Not smart.”

Angela swiveled, bracing for the sight of his naked chest, only to find he’d pulled a shirt on.

Wow. Angela was stunned. She’d never gotten that kind of respect from him. “If it were your choice to make?”

Kenn both loved it and hated it that she’d asked. He loved the sense of power but hated the urge to help that usually only Adrian drew from him. “It depends on what you need from a right hand.” Kenn looked away. “Adrian chose me because he knows there isn’t anything he can ask that I won’t give him. If he needed a stronger moral line, he would have picked Neil.”

“What if I need both of those, at separate times, with organization and communication?” Angela was surprised to be taking his opinions seriously. “Who fits that?”

Kenn snorted. “You won’t like my answer.”

“I hardly ever did, but tell me anyway.” Angela’s tenor was only slightly bitter.

“As I’m sure you know, I have a lot of time to observe things now, since most of the Eagles aren’t talking to me.”

Angela nodded. That would eventually ease.

“Well, I’ve never seen a more manipulative

chick in my life.” Kenn pursed his lips. “And that includes you.”

Angela was instantly intrigued. “Which one?”

The lowly spoken name was a shock. Angela immediately left the tent. *Is he kidding? Is he...right?*

Maybe. Damn.

Will Adrian be as surprised as I am or did he see this one coming too?

4

“Will you give your approval?”

Adrian had been expecting it. “You’ve thought it through? You’re sure?”

“Yes.” Kyle was. “She needs someone.”

“To help or to have?” Adrian had to know. That would make all the difference to the camp. “Our old world would vote to lock you up.”

“In the old world, I would have never considered it.”

“And yet, here you are, claiming an underage, pregnant stranger.” Adrian’s tone sharpened. “Can you explain that?”

“She pulls at me like no one I’ve ever met.” Kyle tried not to get defensive. “She’s brave and strong, and she doesn’t deserve the treatment she’s getting. I promised her she’d be safe here.”

“And?”

“And... I *need* her.”

Kyle’s soft mutter made Adrian nod. “The truth,

at last.”

Adrian sank into the chair he'd first picked out in Vegas. The edges were tattered and torn. *Like my heart*. They'd just come from the funeral for Lexa. They were still in Eagle gear. The service had been the same for the camp as it had been for the Eagles, only the crowd wasn't as big. Many people in the camp were still sleeping off the sinkhole interruption.

Lexa would have been an Eagle. He'd told her that once as she'd writhed beneath him in orgasm. Her quiet strength had drawn Adrian repeatedly to her comfort. Of all his afterwar women, she was the one he'd thought might make him a father again. He hadn't loved her exactly, not like he could Angela if things were different, but he'd honestly liked being with her. That was more than Adrian could say about many of those relief moments. Lexa might even have been carrying his child. John wouldn't have put it in the report. The doctor had known about their relationship. John had sacrificed the medical tent to him once so the crippling need could be eased. Lexa had been a safety net that Adrian had taken for granted. *Did nature single her out because of me?* The odds were high.

“It's a good match.” Adrian let Kyle off the hook, too consumed by grief to continue being a hard ass. “She'll have your name and the protection that comes with it. And there won't be *any* contact until she's 16.”

Kyle remembered to breathe, glad he'd

controlled himself and remained silent while the boss considered things. Pushing would have been a mistake. Adrian wasn't in a comfort giving mood. In fact, he appeared to need some. The mobster understood why. Losing two females you were sleeping with was a hard blow for any man to take, let alone one who cared about life the way Adrian did. That was part of why Kyle had chosen to talk to him now—to provide a distraction.

Connie's body had been found farther down in the sinkhole. Her red top had been visible once the sun rose. She'd been a distant member of the camp, one who hadn't really wanted to be a part of it at all with her antisocial views. Kyle had only seen them together once, right after Angela joined. He wondered now if it had been because of Connie's long black hair and pale skin.

Kyle forced his mind back to the issue at hand. "What do I say, when they ask me why?"

"The truth. You want to be the father of her children—these and future." Adrian held out his hand. "Congratulations."

Kyle shook it and also his head. "She hasn't said yes."

"When do you plan to talk to her?"

Kyle thought of her in his tent, secure with Dog at the flap. He had a quick rookie session to do and then he would spend the rest of his day with her. "Tonight, or tomorrow."

"And you'll explain? Expectations should be clear up front."

“I expect to marry her.”

“And do you plan to sleep with her? ‘Cause if so, you need to make that clear during your talk. If not, she’ll assume you’ve made this offer to protect her from all men, including yourself.”

Kyle frowned, starting to understand.

“She’s been horribly abused,” Adrian continued. “Right now, she probably thinks she’ll never want another man to touch her. Best tell her up front, give her time to get used to the idea. Otherwise, you’ll be able to say it’s your right as a husband, but she’ll hate you for being tricked again.”

Kyle got it clearly this time. Adrian was right. He would be honest and tell Jennifer what he expected of their future. There would be a lot of time before, but unless she said no, it would happen and the real start of it would come tonight. He was following Charlie’s unknowing advice. The same age, Charlie had given Kyle a glimpse into Jennifer’s thoughts that he hadn’t considered, and a way to be sure she never forgot him. Charlie had said she and Dog got along so well it was almost as if he was her pup. Then he’d mentioned the new puppies.

That’s my way in. I’m taking it.

Adrian saw the glaze of obsession and knew he’d have to make sure the mobster wasn’t a threat. The feeling was ugly. It was a side of Kyle he had never suspected. The other small disturbances in his camp would slowly sort themselves out, but this one

was just as dangerous as the Seth and Becky bomb waiting to hit. In fact, they were identical slugs from the same double barrel. Hopefully not to be fired yet, though. His herd was too twitchy.

Kyle left but Adrian barely noticed. He would have to do something about the jumpiness, something to soothe his people. He had the Eagles now including ground sweeping patterns during their rounds, but Adrian knew that wasn't enough. He also needed to squash a few of the rumors of magic in camp. These weren't coming from Angela healing both Jennifer and John. The few who had been in that tent weren't a problem. Adrian had no idea which of his wild cards was stepping out of line, only that it wasn't the elder ones.

Tap-Tap-Tap.

Adrian forced his mind to the coming kai lesson. He would worry about all of that after he spent a few minutes feeling male, feeling human. Causing so much death was slowly eroding his soul "Come in."

Angela ducked into the tent.

Adrian felt his mental confusion clear into one single thought. *She's the key. She's Safe Haven's future.*

5

"These things that I've gone through, they've changed me in ways that are scary."

Adrian studied her thoughtfully. The main lesson was over, but not finished. "You mean for the

worse.”

“Yes. I can be so cold now.” Angela sighed. “Is it supposed to be that way?”

“It has to be that way.” Adrian watched her twist her necklace restlessly. “How else would you be able to make those hard calls that sometimes hurt everyone to help them?”

Angela was quiet, considering. She’d come up with that much on her own, but there was more to it.

Adrian knew. “No, it’s not morally correct. Nothing about being a leader is. You’ll lie to one to satisfy the other and buy time to make ends meet.”

She was horrified. “How the hell does that work?”

Adrian shrugged, sweeping the quiet camp through the open flap. “It helps to have fate on your side.”

“Do we?”

Adrian met her gaze. “*You* answer that.”

Angela laughed. “Not me, Bubba. Better ask the witch.”

He chuckled, not telling her that he already had. The answer was terrifying.

They sat at his folding table, sharing a joint as the cool breeze rushed over hot skin. Angela understood her session wasn’t over when he nodded toward the bubble.

“Seal us up.”

She did it awkwardly, bringing the shield over Safe Haven into a solid form. She quickly let go of

it, hoping the ever-growing camp hadn't noticed.

Angela felt Adrian's mood improve. His stress level lowered. "Why is that?"

"Sometimes I wake up right before dawn and it's the week after the war. Except there's never any light. Day doesn't come and I'm alone, trying to keep them all alive. The things you do drives those ghosts back."

"Because it proves you're not crazy, that all of this is really happening?"

Adrian flinched from her astute observation.

Angela smiled coldly. "Don't ever let them know you have those kinds of doubts. You'll lose them."

Adrian knew her warning to be a valid one, but instead of answering, he leaned back and closed his lids. "What am I thinking?"

"The ocean is dangerous." That was too easy. "Again."

He looked at her curiously.

Angela shrugged, almost blushing. "I pick things up."

"You had to be searching me to know that."

"Listening."

"To me?"

"Like everyone else here," she admitted. "I just have an advantage."

"Okay."

Angela stared in surprise. "You're not mad? It's an invasion of privacy."

"You're not Tonya." Adrian smiled. "Trusting

you is easy.” *Unlike myself.* His mind these days was either on her or Arkansas. Both produced excited longing...and dread.

Angela was picking up many of his thoughts, aware that he would only allow her to be his comfort, his guidance, in matters that were personal. None of the others played this coveted role for him anymore.

“We could leave sooner instead of staying for a break.” Angela didn’t like his unhappiness. “We could get there faster.”

Adrian was sorry she was getting the negative from his thoughts. “I need a reason for the camp.”

Angela closed her eyes, concentrating on her lessons. *What did Doug say about getting a large group of people to agree on something?* Oh, yeah. Tell the truth, and if that doesn’t work—lie. “Tell them you saw carcasses with sores.”

He recognized her tone. “Where?”

She pointed to a small thicket of brambles they could barely see through the flap. “Rabbit.”

Adrian stood up. “Come on. You can help with the rearranging on your way to handle Matt. We’ll head out after the level tests are finished, instead of staying the two other days.”

Angela sensed he wanted her close and got her notebook out as she fell in on his right. “What’s first?”

“You tell me.”

She concentrated. “We have to get them to *want* to go.”

“Yes. Write it down word for word, Eagle. These people are tired of being on the road. Extra travel has to be their idea. Unless it’s a crisis, don’t order them to do anything.” Adrian kept talking, walking her through how to accomplish it.

Angela copied it tirelessly, obeying the instinct that said want it or not, she would have need of this information later.

6

“My mom wants to see you.”

Matt paled. Charlie had told him it would happen. The adults wanted details now that they’d cooled off enough to hear them.

“When?”

“Now.”

Matt froze. This was where he found out his future in Safe Haven, if he even had one.

Charlie hated the tension. “Try not to worry so much. She understands you have a drinking problem.”

“I don’t have a...”

When Matt stopped, Charlie didn’t push.

“What’s gonna happen?” Matt asked instead of continuing to deny what he’d known for a while.

“I hope you’ll be punished and cleared, but I don’t know. Your dad’s in trouble, too.”

“Yeah. I’m sleeping in the l-l-livestock truck again.”

“Let’s not talk about it, okay?” Charlie didn’t

want to go through this anymore. “Just tell her everything, and this will be over before you know it.”

Matt planned to do exactly that. There wasn’t anything else he could do “What’s it like, to have a mom and d-dad again?”

Charlie swiped at hovering insects. “Different. I’ve never had both.”

“But, Kenn—”

“Was never my dad.”

Matt shrugged. He would take either of the men in Charlie’s life in place of his own. “What’s it like to have both?”

Charlie realized that was another thing Matt envied about him and tried not to get upset. He didn’t want to fight now that they were talking again, but he had also been on the other end enough to understand it was hard not to feel that way when you had so little hope for your own future. Adrian and the Eagles would change that for Matt, but he had to prove himself worthy first, otherwise they would never give him the chance to atone. “It’s cool. My dad trains me on the things she can’t do, and she covers my...gun classes.”

“Sucks about her getting hurt.”

“Yeah...”

Matt frowned. “I thought you were pissed.”

“I was. I still am a little, but a lot of things are better now.”

Matt wished he could say the same. “What type of training are you getting?”

“Self-defense from my dad. Common sense stuff from my mom.”

“Like what?”

“Where’s the hidden object, figure out the right path. Stuff where I have to add up the clues for an answer.”

“Is she easy on you?”

Charlie snorted, holding the flap open. “My dad’s nicer than she is when it comes to lessons. She’s a lot like Doug.”

Just coming out of the tent that they were headed into, Doug smirked at the teenagers. “Got a rep, do I? Good. You’ll know what to expect when it’s your turn.” He went out.

The two boys stared after him with uneasy glances that made guards hide smiles.

Matt was a ball of nerves as he followed Charlie inside. He would know his fate in a few minutes. He didn’t have much hope.

7

Samantha slammed Cynthia to the mat, grunting at the effort. The reporter was scrappy. “Stay down!”

Cynthia growled as she got right back up, triggering Samantha’s rage. The storm tracker swung a nasty hit that knocked the woman on her ass again.

“Match!”

Sam pulled in the anger and wiped a wrist across

her bloody nose as Cynthia struggled to her feet.

Angry at losing, Cynthia used the sleeve of her shirt to clear her vision, then flung the blood toward Sam's boots. "Again!"

Sam advanced, eager.

The observing males braced, expecting it to be ugly. The two women had already passed their evaluations in this area and others. It helped to have female vs. female, but the battle for Angela's right was growing nasty. It wouldn't be long before that slot was officially filled. So far, no one knew who was in the lead, only that Adrian had given Angela the choice, as he had with his other team leaders and their crew.

"No. That's enough." Adrian's pleased words stopped the women. He liked it that they were showing their willingness to bleed and fight for the slot they wanted. It was enlightening for the males to watch these determined women go through the same emotions and discoveries that they had.

Adrian sensed that bond might become incredibly strong once Angela was back full time. Right now, there was a lot of fighting between the new and the old as the sexes merged, but once her XO was assigned, things would settle down.

Cynthia and Samantha could both do the job, but the two Eagles standing near the flap knew which one it should be. After less than a month, Samantha was brutal. She was only two levels behind Angela in kai. Cynthia, on the other hand, was just starting her workout sessions. Samantha

spent hours a day in the ring with Doug and Billy, and sometimes Adrian. Cynthia had only recently passed the first defense lesson. Neil and Jeremy didn't like the idea of Samantha in danger any more than Marc had Angela, but there was no denying the truth. She deserved the position.

For Jeremy, it was another attraction, another sign that she was the woman of his dreams.

For Neil, it was pride and pain. Pride that his chosen mate, even if she hadn't chosen him, was doing so well, but also pain to be around her and not try to convince her that he deserved another chance. Her reply to him asking her out "*No promises.*" had stopped him from doing it.

"Can I play?"

Angela's forlorn tenor at the flap drew grins and instant welcome from all of the men. It also caused straightened shoulders and fresh glares between Samantha and Cynthia as the sense of competition rose.

Using the moment, Adrian motioned toward the ring. "Were you watching?"

"Nope." Angela's cool gaze went over both bloody females waiting for her approval. "Have 'em do it again."

Adrian smiled amid the eager male chuckles and female dismay. "Welcome home."

With that, she was cleared for workouts.

"Thank you." Angela came inside with a long-suffering sigh. "Can't tell you how much I've missed this ugly green tent."

More laughter came, but those who had spent time off duty understood. It was as if nothing else was satisfying. The air was just air, and food was just food, but when you were an Eagle, the wind was crisp and inviting, and mess was a sweet trip into happiness. To be away, was to be incomplete.

Angela moved toward the two women who were straightening clothes and tending minor injuries. Rookie nerves before a level test were always rough, but with everything Safe Haven had been through in the last few months, these men and women were now quick to fight first and talk later. As a result, the number of people working off offenses with the vet had increased. Sour faced and surly, Chris now had more hands than he knew what to do with. Often there with Jennifer, Kyle helped keep them all busy.

Angela swept the women with a hard gaze.

An expectant silence fell in the tent.

“I’ve had short conversations with you, where I refused to talk about what role you might have on my team. You both said you were content so long as you held a place, *any* place. Is that still true?”

“Sure,” Samantha grunted, clearly not meaning it.

Neil smirked. They were so much alike, it was scary.

Jeremy worried she was about to blow it.

Cynthia already expected to lose the slot and didn’t respond at all. After this session, she understood she had a lot more work to do.

Angela motioned toward the flap, where a new female had quietly appeared. “She says the same thing.”

All eyes went to Anne, running over the glasses and other signs of age. There were surprised mutters and even snorts.

“No less than five of you are now competing for my right hand, with others quickly rising through my list of requirements.”

That stopped the laughter. The Eagles instantly began trying to name the others and all came up short by two. Even Adrian was minus one.

“If someone shows me something the others can’t, that’ll seal the deal for me.” Angela turned toward Adrian. “What’s the deadline?”

“By Little Rock.”

“I’ll make my choice before then. In the meantime, all of them need XO training.”

Adrian motioned to Doug. “Take over.”

As the big man took the two sweaty females into the corner and began explaining the next part of the test, Anne joined them. The camp would know within hours.

Are you sure?

It’s only for a little while, Adrian answered Angela’s mental question.

Long enough to give her the skills we all need and the strength to carry on after he dies, Angela clarified.

Yes, but also to finish bringing in those who are watching you form this team.

Because it boosts their confidence enough to try, Angela repeated the reason she'd given to Anne. A lot of this wasn't set in stone in her mind yet. She was using Adrian's techniques, but confirmation helped relieve some of the worry over her choices.

Yes. As they ducked out of the tent, Adrian holding the flap, he couldn't stop himself from asking. *Who's the fifth?*

8

"You're late," Chris quipped.

Kyle gently dislodged Jennifer's hand from his tingling arm and glowered at the vet. "You'll get over it."

Jennifer kept her eyes on the ground as she waited, curious and a little uneasy. It was only the vet and the guards here, but that was still enough males to make her wish for the privacy of her tent. *Kyle's* tent. The sight of the dome light in his camper had brought her to tears every time she saw it. Kyle had insisted on switching after getting her a thick air mattress from the supply truck. Most nights she fell asleep while he was still with her and woke to a flower or a piece of candy on her pillow. He was sweet, considerate, and so closed off that it was hard for her to imagine him as a father.

Jennifer ran a loving hand over her twins as they jostled for position. "In a bit, babies. In a bit."

As if hearing and responding, her stomach settled into the occasional twist, and she went back

to her observations. Life here was so good that Jennifer sometimes found herself studying Safe Haven for hours without moving or talking. The setup was vastly different from the old world, but the leadership made it a beacon of hope. Even the name said she and her children could be happy here.

“Damn dog!” Kyle growled from inside the semi.

The vet backed up as Kyle came from the truck with a box. Inside, something sniffed and scratched curiously.

“Why don’t you keep her chained up?!”

Chris scowled. “You didn’t hurt her, did you?”

Kyle snorted contemptuously. “No.”

Chris shrugged, eying the newest tear in Kyle’s pants. “It’s her pups. You hurt?”

“No. I’ve learned to jump when she lunges. Only got cloth this time.”

Chris snickered in satisfaction, but still headed into the truck to assure himself of Star’s safety. “Give her time. She’ll figure that one out too.”

Kyle was still scowling as he set the box at Jennifer’s feet. “I know you’re okay with wolves. What about mutt puppies?”

Jennifer frowned darkly. “Guess that’s what I’m having.”

She eased to her knees beside the box before he could say anything.

Kyle stopped breathing when she giggled.

“They’re so cute!” She sighed happily. “Hope mine are.”

“Oh doll, your kids’ll be beautiful,” Kyle answered before he could think, steering the conversation into a direction he’d intended to avoid. “Fathers don’t matter when they come from your gene pool.”

Jennifer stared at the puppies. “Cesar was ugly. Won’t it make mine that way?”

Kyle knew a thin line when he heard it. The problem was, he couldn’t *see* it. “If they are, you’ll love them anyway.”

Jennifer was too young to hide her concerns. “What about you?”

“Kids are kids to me, Jen. I’ve always liked them.”

“The people here won’t feel the same.” She revealed her true concern now. “They’ll be outcasts, even here, because of who their father might be.”

Kyle had already considered that. When it came to getting what he now wanted more than even air, there was little he hadn’t contemplated. “We’ll stay until it’s causing trouble. By then, Safe Haven will be settled somewhere.” He fought the urge to stroke her head in comfort. “We don’t have to live in Safe Haven, Jenny, to be a part of the light.”

Jennifer hadn’t considered that, still working up to what else was on her mind.

Kyle understood that asking for her wants so soon after being a slave was hard. “There isn’t anything you can’t tell me or ask for.”

“If I said yes, I would need two things, and they’re hard,” Jennifer quickly answered before the

terror could shut her down. Her fear was thick, making her breathing rough.

Kyle felt his protective nature grow, but also the dangerous need. Her chest heaved a bit at his silence, capturing his eye. Kyle braced for a fresh wave of lust and was surprised to find sympathy leading this time. “Yes, to both. Now tell me, knowing I’ve already agreed, and I won’t take it back.”

Jennifer swallowed. “If you’re wrong and you can’t love them, you have to let me take them and leave.”

Kyle knew it wouldn’t ever matter to him. He’d always wanted to be a dad. He just hadn’t wanted to be a husband. That had changed. “Next?”

Jennifer drew in a breath.

Kyle prepared to take a blow.

“You can’t...have me, until they’re six months old and we *know* if you can love them.”

Kyle leaned down to brush a curl back. *So soft!* “Let’s make it until you’re legal, so the den mothers don’t castrate me. I’m rather fond of that part, Jen. I doubt I’d be the same without it.”

Jennifer giggled, sending good vibes across the camp. “Okay.”

Above her, the shield rippled into view for a bare instant that was noticed by three people. Two of them were in different parts of the camp and assumed the other had done it.

The third stiffened with a hundred connections filling in the blanks of Jennifer’s profile. Kyle

backed up. She wasn't just special. She was meant to lead. Only those with that duty could influence the shield. It was the first thing he and Neil had noticed about the mysterious bubble.

Jennifer felt Kyle's withdrawal and knew he'd discovered one of her secrets. "Are you sure you really want me, Kyle?" She quickly distracted him, vowing to control her emotions better. "It'll be hard."

Kyle was jolted from his deep thoughts. "So much that I'll make any deal you want, even if it costs me everything I've built."

Jennifer's heart leapt. *He's mine now if I want him.* The manipulative girl gave him a smoldering glance that was hidden from the others by her hair. *I do.*

Kyle's openly returned leer said he'd known all along, but his reaction spoke louder. He backed up another step. He meant to stand by his word and not touch her until she was legal.

Jennifer didn't celebrate her victory, thinking a life at Kyle's side now looked better than any of her other options. She had come to care for him, without meaning to.

Kyle absorbed the warmth in her eyes as if it were the icy drinks that she'd confessed that he smelled like to her. And then he stepped even farther away. A man could only take so much.

Totally distracted from what he'd noticed with the shield, Kyle leaned against the truck, staring at her without the usual protective cloak over his

expressions. Making her happy was something he planned to do repeatedly.

Kyle's team were the Eagles on the area. They were about to be relieved so they could take their places overseeing the level tests. All those men wanted to continue being upset with Kyle, but they couldn't. Hearing his promises, being sure he would stick to them due to his reputation in Safe Haven, went a long way. If Kyle said she'd be of age, then she would be. Daryl's support and carefully chosen words had helped to convince them.

The vet ignored everyone as he came out of the semi, only caring for the wildlife in his charge.

Mitch stared at him through the com truck window. Maybe later he would swing by and find out what the disgruntled man had seen...and maybe Safe Haven would be short another useless member. Rick hadn't been the only evil Adrian let into Safe Haven. He and his Eagles had to play by the rules, but Chris hadn't before the war and the vet didn't plan to now. Some things had to be done. Some people had to die. It was that simple.

Kyle got the vet's attention. "What do you want in exchange for the pup? I'm her collateral."

Chris had been expecting it. Anyone could see the mobster was smitten, and what better way into a young girl's heart than a puppy? "She joins the training lessons and shows up. One sign of abuse, and I come for it."

"I'm not trying to buy her." Kyle made sure his words carried. "I thought she'd like it. No strings

attached.”

That had been her first thought. Jennifer was glad she'd been wrong. “I'll show up for every lesson, my word. And I'll come help if you have something I can do.” She thought Chris had probably once been a very handsome man, but nice hair and straight teeth couldn't make up for a nasty attitude. None of the females here ever looked his way.

Kyle opened his mouth, but Chris beat him to it. “Paperwork and play with the small animals. They get restless, being caged so much.”

Jennifer's happiness radiated again, making her glow. She could tell she was glowing by the way the males stared. The closer she got to delivery, the harder it was to control the things that made her different from the other survivors.

“Cool beans!” Jennifer used a simple smoke-and-mirror technique to defuse the tension. She sounded her age.

Both men blinked in response, shaking off the haze.

“You can't start working until John clears it but come and play with them whenever we're camped.”

The vet's tone had become the one Kyle had only heard him use on the animals. “Which one do you want?” Unable to control his jealousy, Kyle directed her attention back to his gift. “The solid black one is the runt.”

Instead of picking, Jennifer stood up and moved into Kyle's personal space, pushing herself and him

to show how much she appreciated the gift. She knew pets weren't allowed here.

Big stomach resting against his hip, Jennifer cautiously curled her arms around his thick neck. "Thank you for bringing me here."

Kyle clenched his fists to keep from reacting, nose on fire as her sweet scent flooded him. "*Anything* to make you happy."

She leaned closer to hug.

Kyle groaned, hands coming up to hold her shoulders. He eased away before his fingers could cross a line. "Go pick your puppy and we'll hit the mess for a snack before you crash."

Happier than she'd been since the war, Jennifer did. She still held a fear of the dangerous man who had chosen to be her protector, but it wasn't something she had to worry over right now. She'd also heard enough of the adult females talking to hope there was another side to sex, one where humiliation and submission weren't involved. Jennifer thought that was probably BS, another line fed to female children to keep them following blindly...but if anyone could show her that side, it would be Kyle.

Jennifer's breast hardened into the deep ache that said delivery wasn't so far away now. She shifted around so the men might not notice her adjust her bra. She couldn't wait to hold her babies but carrying them sucked. Not that she would complain. Angela had saved her children, given her another chance. Jennifer wouldn't be caught alone

again, nor would she hold back the witch from how often she wanted to draw energy from Kyle. She would do whatever she needed to.

Kyle strolled into the shadows to take up a place by his XO. They didn't speak right away, watching Jennifer sort through the five pups. The load these two lethal Eagles were carrying was toted without objection. The moments like this—sweet and simple—were hard to come by. When one happened, senior men knew to soak it up as a buffer against the next horror.

Or the last, Kyle thought, flashing to holding Angela down so Adrian could burn her skin closed. He could still feel the blood pulsing from her body to soak his clothes.

Jennifer picked the runt, then helped the vet take the remaining pups to the semi, chatting cheerfully with the surly man the entire way. To Chris, Jennifer was another expectant animal to be cared for. The fact that she was human didn't matter to him. All he saw was her need and the abuse she'd suffered. Despite his bad attitude, it was winning the vet a special place in Safe Haven among those who understood what made him tick. The man abhorred violence of any kind, but most especially to animals and mothers.

“That was nice of you.” Daryl was eager for this shift to be over. His skills were wasted on this area.

Kyle nodded. “She needs it.”

“Someone to be nice to her?”

“To feel special.” Kyle swept the shadows for

trouble, not meeting the hard eyes of his team.

Daryl raised a brow. “And to know someone cares for her?”

Kyle watched Jennifer’s awkwardly perfect waddle. “She already knows that.”

“Then why?”

“Tell the camp I don’t want her to be lonely while I’m on runs.”

“And the real reason?”

Kyle’s heart spread over his face. “Every time she loves it, she’ll be reminded of the man who gave it to her...and maybe love him a little too.”

Daryl sighed, being swayed to the idea against his will every time he saw them interact. “The others are coming around. Just be careful. Stop letting those sparks show. It’s too clear.”

Kyle settled into the blank expression that was so dangerous. He wasn’t sure if he might lose it all, but he had no illusions that getting the camp to accept it would be easy. In this life, achieving happiness wasn’t meant to be. In fact, happiness for most people after an apocalypse was impossible. Kyle was glad to know that he and Jennifer might be an exception to that rule. Once she understood he would never hurt her, that he would always love her above himself, they would be perfect mates who never had to hide anything from each other.

It only took the end of the world for me to find it.

Part Two

Challenge:

A task or situation that tests someone's abilities.

Chapter Ten

Tiger By the Tail

1

As the gritty sky settled into full black, Kenn was finishing a shift on guard duty over Tonya's pharmacy and Candy's hairdressing canvas. Both females were getting customers, and as Kenn had predicted, most of the pharmacy orders were for Tonya's stashes of Advil and Chapstick. In exchange, people were donating time to teach her the things she'd been avoiding. It was earning her small gestures of friendship and giving Kenn an awareness of emotions for her that he hadn't known existed until his snap. Leaving her behind had been hard. Recognizing that had made Kenn keep their relationship within legal bounds for the last two weeks. They were both walking the line.

Life for Kenn was now a confusing mix of new emotions, of being accepted by the camp again, but still being loathed by the Eagles. For those brave men, it was justice. For the camp, life was better, and it was mostly because now that Marc and Kenn were no longer fighting, they were working together and making their own magic.

Kenn still didn't know if Marc and Angela had been together while she was with him, or how they

had split up, but there was another suspicion that had become more pressing. Whatever Charlie had said had triggered the shootout with the traders. Had he been hiding his gifts? Was he like Angela?

Kenn wasn't sure it mattered. He also wasn't sure that it didn't. He was making progress, finally growing as a person, but to be fooled for 10 years by a child? How was he supposed to react to a crippling blow like that?

Bang! Bang! Bang!

Kenn spun, hand dropping to his 9mm before he realized it was the construction crew adding another layer to the shield around camp. They were out of wooden planks and down to using the moldy trees for stakes to attach the ledges. Once they chopped the trees down and cleared the mold there was still usable wood, but in another year, that probably wouldn't be the case.

Thud! Thud!

Zack's boys were cleaning the mold off the trees. It was their punishment for stealing supplies from the trucks while his team was on duty. The trucker hadn't known about it. He'd let Adrian handle the boys with a week of hard labor. That had been the lightest punishment given. Mitch had been assigned a buddy in the com truck so he was never alone on duty again. The first time his buddy reported him drinking and working, he would be finished as Safe Haven's radioman.

All around Kenn's post, people were working, digging latrine holes and garbage pits, washing

clothes, playing cards and handheld video games, chatting lightly while waiting in lines. It was calm, but Kenn wondered how many of those conversations were about Angela and the things she could do. Those who had been in the medical tent were refusing to talk, but John's renewed health said something huge had happened. He was moving without discomfort again and he appeared to be sober, implying she had helped him enough that he didn't need the painkillers.

With his vigor returned, John was implementing new procedures for the camp, like monthly disinfecting of tents and equipment, and restarting vaccinations for those who wanted them. He had also upped the iodine consumption for the entire camp after his weekly absolute lymphocyte count came back more elevated than usual. The doctor tested random batches of blood from people who came in during the week, then compared those numbers to previous amounts to tell Adrian how much needed to be added to the drinking water. Today, John had run a full shift of appointments, and then examined Billy's broken leg, sending him out of the medical tent on crutches instead of in a wheelchair. That Eagle was ecstatic. And clumsy.

Kenn watched Billy fall twice, wincing each time. If he kept up like that, John would be setting the other leg next, with no sinkhole to blame it on.

"Instructors and testing Eagles to the training tent!" The radios crackled roughly. Some still weren't functioning at all despite Kenn and Marc

both working on them.

Angela walked by with a gun on each hip, fast clip implying her recovery was speeding along. John had also cleared her for private lessons with the senior men. Marc wouldn't like Adrian's plans, but to Kenn, there was an intense feeling of time running out. Whatever Adrian had been preparing Angela for was closer now.

Kenn stepped over to where Doug was standing. The big man was in charge of making sure the cans were lit, the dogs were put out, the supply trucks were locked up, and the keys were delivered to the next person on point. "Is everything set?"

Doug didn't answer.

Bracing against the lingering ache from his healing ribs, Kenn raised his voice. "Are we 5-by?"

Doug swung around in surprise. "Huh?"

Kenn ignored the twinge in his side to view what had distracted the big man so thoroughly. Doug wasn't normally one to miss much. If not for his limp, Kenn would have considered him a serious rival when he'd first joined.

"We're all set," Doug answered stiffly.

Kenn narrowed in on the mess. Hilda and Peggy were unpacking the truck and it wasn't hard to guess which female the giant man was eyeing. The stories were flying through camp. "You should go talk to her."

"What?" Doug stared as if Kenn had three heads.

"You're allowed a personal life."

You don't understand. You don't look like me.
Doug was addicted to the dream of rebuilding as much as the rest of Adrian's refugees, but the idea of finding a woman among Safe Haven's hens was terrifying. *No one wants a hulk like me.*

"Doug?"

"I don't need a woman."

Kenn flashed to one of his last moments with Tonya, to the way she'd had him shuddering and groaning. "If you say so."

Doug pushed Kenn's words out in favor of the silent worship from afar that he'd been doing for months. She wouldn't have anything to do with someone like him, not a strong woman like Peggy, but he liked to look at her. The stern bun she always wore was loose from a day of labor and the sight of all that strawberry silk gone wild had drawn his eye from across the camp. It glistened in the light of their fires like diamonds.

Doug's daydreaming was interrupted by a familiar, hated ache. The big man limped toward the bathrooms. Eventually he would talk to John. After hiding his own illness, surely the doctor would understand and keep quiet. The debt Doug felt he owed Adrian for pulling him free of that collapsed bridge along the Nevada state line hadn't been paid yet.

There was a lot of that going around in Safe Haven.

“How about I teach you to hear differently?”

“Sure. How?”

Becky heard Seth come up behind her. When his big hands settled onto her shoulders, she didn't flinch. They were just outside her tent, with a small campfire going. With so many of the camp and Eagles at the level tests, it was almost isolated. “The world is full of sounds. Even this dead one.”

He rustled her hair against her jaw. “The wind, the animals, us. Even if it were all gone, there would still be sound. After light, it was the next thing created.” *Or so I understand from my dreams.*

Becky heard his thought clearly and tried not to flinch at the newest evidence of her gifts.

“Light and sound,” Seth highlighted. “Without your eyes, there is no light, but without ears that can hear danger, sound no longer matters. For true survival, the ears must work as well as the other senses.”

Seth rubbed his fingers together, making a light scratching noise. “We hear ranges of sound, from high pitches to low, deep to shallow. Our ears process it for us automatically. So much so that most people don't realize they can consciously sort those sounds. With the right mindset, a person can make a sound louder or softer to hear what's around them.”

He made a few low noises, demonstrating so Becky understood what he meant. “Controlling it is like anything else—practice and willpower. In time,

sounds from multiple sources can be not only identified, but also tracked to a close location and evaluated for the threat.”

The sound of him sliding his knife from his sheath made her tense.

Seth put it away. “Very good. You’ll use your ears and react accordingly.” Seth grabbed her arm, forgetting to warn her.

“Don’t!”

Her panicked shout stopped him in his tracks and drew the attention of those on duty—his team. None of them envied the undercover cop this chore, but each of them respected him for living up to it.

“I won’t touch you.”

“I’m okay.” Becky was shaking. “You just moved too fast and I...” She dropped her head, starting to cry.

Seth slowly put his arm around her shoulders. She rested against him tensely.

“It’ll get better with time.”

Coming to herself for a brief, rare moment, Becky raised her eyes and a hand that went to Seth’s cheek. “It’s good that you’re not like *him*.”

Seth placed a gentle kiss in her palm. “Thank you for not giving up. There’s always hope.”

Becky’s demeanor snapped into cold desolation, hand dropping. “Don’t be confused, Seth. I’m destroyed. There’s only a gaping hole surrounded with endless rage. Killing him may have let me survive, but I’ll never trust another man as long as I live.”

Her face hardened more as she revealed another level of the adulthood she'd been forced into. "And that includes you, even after all that you've done. He robbed me of something that I can't ever get back. Even I know that." Becky stumbled toward the tent. "I need a few. Go take a test or something."

Seth headed for the level tents, waving his team closer to her. She did trust him though, even if she didn't recognize it. He had to show her that she was wrong. He'd hoped the new friendship with Charlie and Jennifer might help, but he hadn't seen any signs of it yet.

Studying them from across the camp, Neil couldn't miss the connection, their spark. Seth was extremely protective. *Maybe that's what Becky needs now.*

Neil grimaced, tilting his hat forward to block the glare of the roaring center fire as he headed to the tests. *I certainly didn't put her safety first.*

Seth wasn't among the largest of Adrian's army, but those thin hips held up a man that was wiry and determined to succeed. Everyone had expected Seth to be a hot head when Adrian had brought him into the Eagles. That bright red hair and those glinting green eyes said he was just as wild as a first contact implied, but he'd settled in and found a place with his team. All of those men adored Seth now. If they had to accept Becky as his woman, Neil was sure they would agree.

Unlike my team. Neil tried not to be bitter. He

understood they didn't have as close a bond because he wasn't an enterprising person like Seth or Kyle, or even Kenn. Neil liked his place where it was and didn't see the need to fix what wasn't broken.

After weeks of watching Seth guide Becky into her tent and hold her until she cried herself to sleep, Neil still hadn't made a final choice. The shadows had confirmed that Seth was mostly only offering comfort, but it implied they'd had at least one intimate moment to bond them. And no matter what date he came up with, Neil was pissed. He would keep watching until he was sure Seth's motives weren't like Rick's...or Kyle's.

3

“Welcome to the Cage. Let's get started.”

The Eagles and camp members who were crowded around the testing area cheered in response to Adrian's words.

Those about to fight grinned as if they couldn't wait. For the first time, the camp was being allowed to view a level test. Over 100 people watched, waiting for them to get everything set up. Of all those fighting tonight, Marc's was the team everyone wanted to see—especially the Eagles. Marc had been working privately with his men for almost two months now, not letting them show what he was teaching. Even Angela was curious.

“Draw a name from the hat.” Adrian pitched his dog tags into the rear of the cage. “Trainer with the

number three goes first.”

Seth held up his number three for them to see.

Some of Marc and Kevin’s team groaned. After Neil and Jeff, Seth was the most ruthless at kai.

Kevin was nearest to the hat. He swallowed a complaint when he pulled Seth’s name from it. He would go first.

“Come on, rookie.”

Kevin snorted, unbuckling his gun belt. “Suck my rookie.”

Loud laughter rang through the crowd as the men faced off.

Marc reached for the hat.

Everyone craned to see who he would face.

Marc flashed Greg’s name.

When the groaning and betting began, Marc gave Neil’s third in command a grin. “Ready?”

Greg sent a worried look around. “Oh shit. Who has my back?”

More laughs came as Adrian started the match. “Go!”

Marc watched the first minute or so and then found his interest lagging. His team was set to give Adrian what he wanted, but more than that, it was what all his men wanted. They loathed being so far down the Eagle chain.

Marc noticed there were more females in the front rows than there had been for any of the events he’d attended. It included Samantha, Tracy, Cynthia, and half a dozen camp women.

Those last six were a clique that called

themselves the Sisters. More than a few Eagles eyed these females as they watched the now bloody match that they themselves would be facing in a few weeks. Most of them were pale, but a few seemed like they might be more interesting to watch than the current match. Kevin was good, but Seth was toying with him. Being levels ahead meant all the difference, and it was another sign of Adrian's genius. As long as the men continued to pass each level, the teams would be easy to manage because those on top would keep seniority over the years.

"That's a pass."

"4:41." Shawn recorded it.

"Number two, pick someone who drew your name." Adrian continued to sweep the camp, hoping they really were ready for the show he was about to give them.

Jeremy waved his paper. "Let me have Ray. If he gets by me in a fair fight, I'll support him and Dale."

A shocked silence fell over the area...then shouting echoed until Adrian began glaring at people.

Ray eagerly stepped forward. "Let's go."

Jeremy took up a defensive position in front of Adrian's dog tags. "If you lose, I'll be with the moral board when they make it illegal here. Men have to be able to defend this camp."

Ray's face tightened. "I can't wait to see you bleed. Then the rookies will know that *straight* blood looks just like ours."

Jeremy waved a hand. "Come on, then."

Adrian hit the timer. "Go!"

Everyone crowded closer to watch the surprise matchup.

Marc was the only one who didn't. Ray had come to him not long after Angie broke Zack's nose and asked for private lessons. Jeremy was set to take a dive for the dream, but it wouldn't be needed. Ray had caught on fast.

Thud!

Marc grinned as those watching went crazy.

"He's out!"

"Get the doctor!"

"Did you see that?"

Marc met Adrian's eye over the mob, brow raised. *Happy with that?*

Adrian nodded back. *Yes.*

Ray handed Adrian his tags and then turned to face the surprised people watching the match. He narrowed in on the rookie Eagles. "I'll hurt the next man who touches Dale against his will. I mean that."

Ignoring the shouts and mutters, Ray went to Jeremy. "You okay, man?"

Jeremy was slowly sitting, blood dripping down his shirt. "No, you asshole. Help me up."

Ray grinned, getting Jeremy to his feet.

The talking, laughing, muttering crowd quieted as Adrian approached the two men. He held out a small black patch with a gold number three on it. "That's a pass."

Ray slid it into his pocket, grinning wider.

“Should I take him to the medical tent?”

Jeremy wanted to say no, but his nose was bleeding freely, stomach churning. “Damn it, Marc. I know you taught him that and didn’t warn me.”

“Yes.” Adrian turned toward the cage after motioning Dale to help them. “Who has number one?”

4

All of Kevin’s team went first, by Adrian’s design Marc assumed, and except for Logan, they all passed. Logan went down with a fast hit from Greg and didn’t get back up until John arrived with smelling salts. He had passed all the other parts of the test, however. Kevin’s team stood in happy triumph.

Marc’s team was now gathered around him, waiting for their matches to start. “All set?”

The nervous males nodded uneasily at Marc’s question. Going through the tests in front of a few teams was hard. This? This was a circus, and *they* were the main act.

“Good.” Marc chose to wind them tighter. “Look at the front row.”

They did, and quickly saw what Marc had. The number of single females watching this test had been unusual before, but that had now doubled. A few of those groomed, perfumed, set-to-cause-doom females were here to see what they would face, but most of them were looking for a man.

Jax was the first to react the way Marc had hoped.

“Dibs on Leslie!”

Paul didn’t like that. “I already talked with her. Too late.”

“So have I,” Quinn informed them with a grin.

Marc waited, hoping she’d gotten her interview’s worth from his team. She should have since he’d arranged it.

“Uh, guys.”

They all turned to look at Shane.

“Not you too?”

Shane chuckled. Unlike the others, he was a brawler from birth and wasn’t the least bit scared. With nine brothers, he’d had to be able to fight. “Yeah. I think she’s more of a relief source than a mate.”

Jax frowned, but the other two gave low laughs.

“Is this a problem?” Marc knew Jax had a thing for Leslie. He’d set it up this way to draw out the rage he needed everyone to know his XO was hiding.

Jax shook his head, glaring. “No.”

“Maybe she’ll narrow it down to the one who does the best here.” Marc stepped by, leaving them with that thought.

Marc gave Leslie a small nod as he neared the cage and watched her deliver a generous smile to Shane. And then a second leer to Paul.

Jax nearly growled.

Marc was satisfied. He could now concentrate

on his own match. He was set to face Greg, but Charlie had warned him Adrian had a surprise planned. Then the boy had refused to say more or think about anything except dog training classes

“Okay, let’s get the next sets started. Greg and unlucky victim number one, come on down!”

Adrian loved to make his herd laugh, and he was in rare form today. Few heard the forced cheer.

On his right, Angela ignored it.

Paul had the first match. He followed orders, making eye contact with Leslie as he entered the cage. “Busy later?”

Leslie blushed furiously at the open attention, shaking her head.

Paul chuckled, getting set as Greg glowered at him. “You could be.”

Jax and the others shouted insults, while the crowd continued to enjoy the show.

Marc had taught each of his team a special move, one that would disarm an off-guard opponent in less than a minute. They’d learned fast.

Paul used his leaping chest kick to daze Greg and then a vicious roundhouse to land the Eagle on his back. He grabbed the tags and gave them to Adrian while Greg tried to recover. Being a test overseer had some disadvantages.

“Pass. Next!”

Quinn jumped down from the stands and sauntered into the cage, not bothering to play his part in Marc’s game. Jax was already hot enough to injure whoever he faced, and Quinn had his eye on

Cynthia. The reporter was incredibly sexy with a gun on her hip. If only she wasn't so aloof. *Doesn't she understand she's been forgiven?*

Crone, the top fighter on Kyle's team, growled. "Ready, boy?"

Quinn didn't answer, busy getting set.

"Go!"

Marc watched Quinn run and heft Crone into the air for a quick slam against the bars and head butt that sent the bigger man to his knees. A fast knee to the chest, and Crone sagged, still trying to swing back.

The crowd roared for Quinn to finish him off, but when Marc shook his head, Quinn finished the test without delivering the expected final blow. He dropped the tags into Adrian's satisfied hand.

"Pass. Who's next?"

Marc's men stepped forward eagerly.

The overseeing Eagles began to eye them as if they had the plague.

Marc laughed, enjoying himself.

"I'll go." Daryl took up his position with a hard face.

Everyone thought Kyle's team was unbeatable. Rumor had it they had taken a dive in every cage match that anyone had passed. Marc was determined to prove that popular belief wrong. Kyle's team were the best overall—they'd had more experience than Marc's men—but when it came to teaching men to fight, Marc was worlds better than Adrian or Kenn.

Shane got to the steps before Jax could and stripped his guns with a taunt. “Watch this, kid.”

Shane had 10 years on the rest of Marc’s team, years that he liked to rub in when they were facing a challenge he knew how to handle. It made for an awkward group some days.

Marc gave Adrian a subtle confirmation, telling him this one needed a lesson.

Adrian caught Daryl’s eye. *Put him in his place.*

Despite liking Shane, Daryl shrugged. What the boss wanted, he got.

“Go!”

Shane lunged forward.

Daryl kicked, catching the cocky man just inside the knee. It was a brutal first blow.

The crowd gasped as Shane fell to the mat, clutching his leg and groaning.

Daryl delivered a fast heel kick to the other knee and leaned down to grab Shane’s hair as he tried to roll away.

Daryl loved to set up the hits before he gave them, but it backfired, giving Shane time to recover. He slammed one fist into Daryl’s ribs and the other into his cheek.

Daryl landed on the mat, blood running from his jaw.

When he pushed himself up, Shane had the dog tags and was set to dart by.

Daryl spun into an extended punch and knocked Shane back into the far corner of the cage. The dog tags flew from his hand, sliding under the bars.

As Daryl moved determinedly toward the dazed man, all of those watching began to understand this wasn't about the pass or fail of a test. It was personal.

“Do you know everything?”

Shane shook his head, trying to stand. “No, I—”

“But you act like it.” Daryl delayed the physical blows for emotional ones. “Safe Haven has enough leaders. You're one of the crew. You got that?”

Understanding, and then embarrassment, fell into Shane's face. “Go to hell!”

Daryl rushed in and punched him in the mouth.

Shane clutched the wire to stay on his feet. As he gained his balance and looked up, Daryl swung again.

Shane fell, hands missing the bars. He dropped heavily to his ass.

“You get it now?”

“No!” Shane didn't try to stand up. “You can't break me!”

Greg moved forward.

Thud!

The crowd didn't like it, not the camp or the Eagles, but no one interfered. Shane really was an insufferable know-it-all.

“Please! Stop now.”

Daryl stepped back as Shane's hand came up in defense, glad to be able to. If he had to go much farther, it might hurt his own place. “Do you know everything, rookie?”

“I didn't know this was coming.” Shane

glowered through the bruises and blood. He glared in Marc's direction and got a look in return that said he should have.

"You have a team. Act like it or lose it." Daryl stepped out of the cage and moved to Adrian.

"Fail. Who's next?"

Adrian was clearly supporting Marc's choice to have Shane handled this way.

Now Marc's team moved forward slower, not sure if they were in for what Shane had just gotten. All of them had flaws—they were men.

It would have surprised these nervous Eagles to know that the females in the front row were thinking the same thing. It wasn't only the men who knew and feared their shortcomings.

"I'm up," Marc called in satisfaction.

Silence fell as Greg moved into the cage.

Adrian waited until the two men were set. "I have an adjustment to this test."

Marc waited calmly. The only one in camp who might be able to give him a hard fight was Adrian himself.

"Some people in my army have backgrounds that give them the advantage here. That ends now." Adrian motioned Kenn toward the cage.

The crowd chattered eagerly. Eagles began to place bets.

When Adrian also motioned Neil that way, the crowd slowly quieted. He was kidding, right?

Standing nearby, Angela turned to glare at Adrian.

He didn't look at her. "Ready?"

Marc had gone into kill mode the second Kenn moved toward the cage. Seeing the best kai man in camp join Kenn made the lovesick wolfman vanish and the Marine appear for the camp's view for the first time. He could lose this one, but it wouldn't be a quick beating. He wouldn't stand for that. Challenged, Marc grinned. "That all you got?"

Adrian obligingly motioned a third man forward.

Marc cursed his mouth as Seth came through the surprised, uneasy crowd. *Shit!*

"What the hell are you doing?" Angela reacted angrily, like Marc had been doing over her. "Someone will get hurt."

"I'm putting his back against the wall so he'll give me what I need." Adrian gestured curtly. "Exactly what he just had me do to Shane."

Angela already knew Marc's pride wouldn't let him back down. She clamped her lips shut to keep from protesting again. *Adrian had better be careful. Once that tiger is out of the cage, it might be awfully hard to get him back inside it.*

Adrian tossed his tags into the corner as the defenders took up shoulder-to-shoulder places. Marc would have to disable all four men to pass.

Marc turned to look at Adrian, starting to understand what the blond wanted. He didn't have time to figure out why as Adrian hit the stopwatch.

"Seven-minute limit. Go!"

Marc ran straight at them.

The four men drew back to swing, but Marc jumped at the last second, throwing himself to the right in a leaping lunge that gained him the side of the cage.

He quickly scrambled along the bars and leapt into the back corner over Seth's reacting shoulder.

Seth's swipe missed, sending the redhead sprawling.

Marc had the tags in hand in the first eight seconds, without a single blow taken. He slid them over his neck without a grin, though. He'd lost the advantage. The four men trapping him were no longer on defense.

Marc took out the most dangerous first. He lunged forward to hit Kenn in the jaw so hard that his arm clenched in a spasm from the recoil.

Kenn dropped like a ton of bricks, and then the other three were moving in and Marc had no choice but to react as the situation deserved.

A sidekick to the ribs took Greg to his knees.

A fast kidney punch sent Neil stumbling back to trip over Kenn's big body.

Seth knocked Marc against the side of the cage.

Marc ducked the next swing and caught the redhead in a bear hug, forcing him back. He dropped the man and did a half spin, sending his balled-up knee into Seth's stomach.

The man gasped for air, sliding down.

Marc felt a blow coming and threw up a hand to deflect Greg's temple shot.

It glanced off, unbalancing them both.

Marc sprawled against the cage, an open target for Neil's hit. Blood flew again.

Fists rained down, the grunts and groans echoing across an unhappy crowd. No one liked seeing Marc treated this way either.

They didn't understand, but Adrian was confident in his plan. Marc wouldn't take much more before he got mean. Once that happened, another part of the dream would be safe. Marc was a strong hand for any leader to have, one who would be followed if his strength were known. After this, it would be.

Marc felt that dangerous side of him fighting to come out and tried to prevent it. He didn't want to hurt—

Thud!

Greg's blow rocked Marc's head against the cage. Blood splattered.

Kick!

Neil's spin sent pain flaring into Marc's arm as he blocked it. If they didn't back off, he wouldn't be able to—

Wham!

Seth delivered the line-crossing hit with a brutal chest shot.

Marc struggled to find air, fists clenching... But he'd been pushed too hard. Ice flooded his veins. His heart thumped in that familiar, nauseating rhythm of death.

The inner Marine stepped forward. *May I?*

Marc grunted at the next blow, no longer

bothering to block. *Yes. Give him what he wants and then some.*

One of Marc's long hidden demons snapped a mental salute and took full control.

"You have to stop it now!" Angela was frantic. "He'll kill them!"

Adrian wasn't about to interfere. "He still has three minutes."

Marc didn't need them.

Adrian watched him lunge forward and deliver a nasty hit to Seth's windpipe. As the cop fell, face reddening, going dark from lack of air, Marc swung again.

Thud!

Neil slid to his knees at the forehead blow, not knocked out, but on the edge of it. His vision warbled sickeningly as he fought to stay alert.

Greg tripped over Kenn's body as Marc turned toward him, hoping to avoid it, but Marc was there to help him with an uppercut swung from the hip.

Greg joined the others—groaning, trying to recover, and clearly out of the match.

Three hits, three men down.

Marc stalked toward the cage door.

Except for breathing, silence echoed eerily across the crowd.

Behind Marc, Seth's gasps came in choked whispers, but at least he was getting air. He didn't care that his eyes were streaming tears or that his throat felt like it had been caught in a pepper grinder. It was just good to breathe at all.

John waited until Marc was clear of the cage before hurrying inside with Anne on his heels.

The crowd wasn't sure how to react as Marc moved toward Adrian with bloody fists and furious eyes. The Eagles were, though. Those closest rushed toward the two men.

Marc stopped with plenty of distance between them. "Are you satisfied now?"

"Yes." Adrian's tone was neutral. "Are you?"

"Not even close."

"Good." Adrian had expected it. "You'll handle the rest of the cage matches. Who's next?"

Angela didn't think it would work. That was her Marc, and his need to see Adrian bleeding was strong.

"Fine." Marc turned back toward the cage. "But you'll have to send in tomorrow's men, too. The few left on my team won't be enough to cool me down."

"Agreed. Pass. Who's next?"

Tension broken, the crowd began to cheer, and the Eagles joined them—those who weren't busy helping their fallen men or comforting suddenly terrified rookies.

Now, Marc's team absolutely dragged their feet, shooting each other worried glances. There were four of them left and no one was surprised when they all went together. Marc's reputation had just grown.

Angela waited until the tests were finished and the camp had gone. Only a few of the Eagles were left. The training tent was now back up around them. Marc was filling out paperwork, collecting old patches, setting up the next duty shifts, but all the while, his eyes flamed.

He'd won the remaining matches. It made for slightly upset teammates who could now miss the next level with even one mistake during tomorrow night's shooting test, but it also made for a calm camp that was secure in their defenders. Jax had been the only one to even get a hit on Marc.

Angela frowned at the injuries. She wasn't allowed to heal him, but she wanted to.

Angela saw the last Eagle duck out of the tent and moved toward Marc, feeling his tension, his anger and triumph. Both were on his mind, but the need to kill hadn't been satisfied.

"I'm fine."

His coldness stopped her from touching him, the fear she still held of men rearing up. It would be nothing for Marc to hurt her, she knew that now. All the shots she'd ever gotten in on him were nothing compared to a single blow from his fist.

"I would never do that."

Angela relaxed her stiff body language in guilty surprise. He was so much more observant this way. Not that he'd slacked off before, but now, without even looking at her, he knew she was scared.

"It takes a little time to cool down," Marc tried

to explain, still fighting the occasional shudder of rage.

Angela wanted to offer comfort but seeing him tonight had sent her into places she'd hoped not to visit again.

“Angie?”

It was odd, to be so full of courage one minute and lacking a spine the next. She found her tongue. “I’ll be in the...our tent.”

Angela forgot the golden rule, spinning for the flap.

Instinct triggered by the movement, Marc lunged.

Angela found herself in his big arms before she could suck in the air to shout with.

Marc held her tightly against him, scenting her. He’d never wanted anything more.

The fear in her face and those beautiful eyes brought him back. Marc slowly lowered her feet to the ground. He gently adjusted her sweater over her rigid shoulder. “Give me a few.”

Angela was having a battle of her own. She could fight, shoot, think, run, but when it came to men... “I’ll wait with you.”

Marc wasn’t back in control yet and shook his head. “We’ll end up doing a repeat of Nebraska, baby cakes.” Those flaming eyes dropped to her chest. “Or more.”

Angela swallowed. *Am I ready for it?*

“No. Not like this.”

Marc’s tone forbade a moment like that out of

sympathy or duty, and she understood. That wouldn't be enough for her, either, if the situation were reversed.

Marc's hot eyes never left her face. What he wouldn't give to be allowed to take her!

Catching the thought, Angela trembled, but not all from fear. If she knew their moment in Nebraska was all they would repeat, she wasn't against it. The revelation was enough to make her smile.

Marc stared at the mouth he craved, dreamed about. Some night he would kiss those lips as he slid into her warm, willing body. Marc shuddered. "You. Go. Now."

Angela chuckled at the wording, but Marc wasn't kidding. "Angie."

She looked up, face a mix of courage and terror. "Some fears should be conquered head-on."

Marc hadn't expected that but realized he should have. Hadn't she handled every challenge that way? Marc's eyes went over her lips again, wanting to kiss her, to go on and give her what she was asking for. "It's too soon."

He watched his hand go out to touch her. She kept that long hair up now, usually in a thick ponytail, and she had no idea how sexy she looked with it that way. It exposed a nape he longed to stroke, to taste.

Desire, thick and welcome, flooded Angela as he traced her cheek and slid his warm hand along her jaw.

Angela tried to relax. "Why not tell me what

you had in mind and I'll make the choice?"

Lust—to feel her in the throes of a pleasure he'd delivered—swept through Marc. “Better to show you.”

“Clothes?” she asked nervously.

Marc tightened his control at the images that sent flipping through his mind. “On.”

Scared, Angela started to shake her head, and Marc's heart protested. He leaned in and kissed her.

Angela was caught in flashes of the past, of their stolen moments together. Things hadn't begun crossing the line until she was older, but this heat, this magic between them, had always been there.

Heavy with need, Marc deepened the kiss, and felt her arms go around his neck. His body responded instantly, thrusting against her.

Angela was helpless to keep from arching back.

Marc paused for an instant. He hadn't thought she was ready for more, but that one little reaction said differently. The Marine inside wouldn't let him stop after that realization.

Marc kissed her again, softer, but more intently this time as he searched for her pleasure triggers. Some men rushed through these moments for that quick, fleeting satisfaction, but not Marc. He enjoyed a woman—all of her—and learning what she liked always increased his own satisfaction. Women's libbers might have called it pride, or an ego fix, but Marc was determined that what his woman got out of it would always be good enough to keep her coming back.

“Okay.” Marc’s timbre lowered into that deep rumble that stunned the camp’s women when he used it on them. “I want to do what we did the first night we snuck out to the clubhouse.”

Angela was a bit dazed by how much desire he was pulling with only a few words and a kiss. *Is it intentional?*

“Yes.” Marc stared at her in blatant want. “Lean against the wall, close your eyes.”

Liquid heat and nervous tension flooded Angela as Marc eased her back without waiting for a response.

“Let me make you feel good, baby.”

Angela couldn’t fight that desire laden request. It said these chills running along her skin would become shudders of pleasure if she let him do what he wanted.

She leaned against the tent wall, trapped between it and him. She slammed her lids shut. *He won’t hurt me.*

Marc slipped out of his coat, understanding she was on the edge of calling it off.

Angela didn’t want to be tense, but it wasn’t something she could help. At moments like this, she’d always been scared.

Marc was in his own mind and missed the reluctant surrender for the feel of rubbing against her. He knew she wasn’t relaxed, but he wasn’t sure if he could stop without at least touching her.

Marc slid a finger between her legs.

Angela stiffened as lust, fiery and strong, shot

through her stomach. “Mmm!”

Marc throbbed. “Yeah, me too.” He pushed gently.

Angela forgot to be tense as desire reminded her it had been months since she’d done this for herself—long before the final slaver battle.

Starting to sweat, Marc carefully repeated the exact movement, making her hips arch.

Angela shivered as he stroked her through the jeans, breasts tingling, scalding heat flowing.

Marc rubbed against her, sliding into that hazy place where satisfaction was what mattered. He felt her breathing roughen, hips shifting restlessly. He slid his lips along her jaw, moving closer to rock gently against her thigh. As he did, he thrust inward again with his finger, harder than before.

“Oooo...”

Need, thick and demanding, shoved into Marc’s mind. *Take her!*

Marc locked down on his lust, free hand coming up to slide along her hip. He gently lifted the edge of her shirt and stroked his thumb across that satin skin as he slowly withdrew his finger.

Angela arched, lost.

Marc let his hand settle over her breast as he thrust forward. They both groaned.

He leaned back to look at her. “I want to touch.”

Angela knew what that meant, but with him thrusting his finger against her like that, it was hard to stand, let alone think.

When she didn’t answer, Marc drew in a breath

and rubbed her nipple as he tugged her zipper down.

Beautiful bare skin flashed in the lantern light, and Marc felt a bit of his control snap off. He wanted to be naked, rutting and spewing inside that body.

“Wait. We’re in the training tent. What if someone—”

Marc dropped his mouth back to hers and sent his hand to her other breast, rubbing that rocky tip in hard circles.

“Mmmm...”

Her moan against his lips was enough to make Marc have to count to 10 in his mind. His hands didn’t pause, though. He would have a little of what he’d been denying himself.

Angela shivered at the cool air as the buttons on her shirt began to pop open.

Marc sensed the withdraw coming. To counter it, he sent both hands to her nipples and pinched lightly as he moved between her legs. Hard enough to hammer nails, he thrust forward as she arched, giving them both an incredible spark of lust.

In the clubhouse that night, he’d done much the same, though the inside of his jeans had been coated more than once by the time they were finished. This time, Marc put his hand inside her pants and touched that slick pussy.

Angela cried out, grip on him tightening.

Marc throbbed at the feel of her hands in his hair, lips moving against his neck in hot lust. He dipped his head and brought his finger up, tasting

her.

Sweet! Marc shuddered. His hand went back to her body, swirling his finger over that sticky nub.

Angela stiffened, muscles clamping down. “That’s so good!” She groaned against his cheek, hands tangled in the silken hair she’d dreamed of for so long. When he used his knee to nudge her legs open farther, she trembled, no longer caring about who might see them.

Marc’s rough breathing sent chills over her as he thrust, pinched, and continued to use that amazing timbre on her. “Next time, I want to kiss you...*here.*”

He squeezed as he tugged and Angela exploded, nails ripping into his shoulder. “Oh, Marc!”

Marc ripped his jeans open and positioned them, eager to steal a few seconds for himself. He thrust against her slick heat, drawing another arch and moan when he hit that pulsing nub. She was so wet!

One tilt and thrust, buddy boy, the Marine inside reminded him ruthlessly. *A shift into heaven.*

But only once, his heart protested. *She’ll never let us get this close again.*

She wasn’t a camp whore. He couldn’t make the mistake of treating her like one. And that wasn’t nearly enough for Marc, anyway. He reluctantly stepped back. *Need time alone—now!*

Angela’s hands slowly left his shoulders, surprising him when they kept going down to his tense forearms.

“Do it while I’m here to watch.”

Marc forgot how to breathe. If he didn't get a release right now, she was in danger or his vow of fidelity was. A man could only take so much.

The thought of Marc using a camp whore to keep from scaring her or being a little rough had Angela's womanly instincts protesting. She would rather he threw her down and had his way than to send him into someone else's arms, for any length of time. "Come on."

Damn. He'd been counting on her leaving now. Didn't she understand that he was—

Angela took his wrist and moved it to where it was needed, meaning to let go.

Marc watched his big paw wrap around himself as if he was alone, trapping her hand. Flames shot into his groin.

Angela watched in fascination as Marc began to stroke, seeing how his glowing blue eyes traveled over her lips, her hair, the skin he could see. Still pulsing, she slowly opened her shirt with her free hand.

It was what she'd done to end their first night together at the clubhouse, and Marc shattered. He yanked her against him, one big hand going to the small of her back to keep her in place, the other jerking furiously between them until he was grunting in thick satisfaction with every stroke.

Angela felt his pleasure. His lust was fierce, shooting through her in dizzying waves. She helped things along. She shifted the fingers under his.

The iron bar in their grip swelled, jumping

eagerly at her attention.

“Again!” Marc begged against her mouth, breathing coming in short bursts.

Angela squeezed as he jerked.

Marc groaned hoarsely. “Yeah, baby!”

Angela repeated the movement, delighting in the power she held over his body. She wanted to play a bit, but the witch sent a quick warning. *If you stop, he won't.*

Angela pressed a slow kiss to Marc's sweaty jaw and shifted her fingers again. “Love you, Marc.”

“Uh! I...grrrrr!”

His grip tightened and he shoved forward, sliding between her damp thighs. When his hand moved, going to her hip, Angela spread her legs. If this was what he needed... She braced.

Marc grabbed her thighs, forcing them closed as he exploded.

Angela held him as he shuddered, absorbing the energy. Even at the most out-of-control moment for a man, Marc had kept her safe, but more than that, she'd been braced to take whatever he needed. She hadn't frozen or even flinched. *Though there wasn't a lot of time*, she thought with a small smile. It broke another barrier around her heart. She was healing—sexually—and she had Marc to thank for it.

Breathing mostly back to normal, Angela leaned her head against the canvas. “When can we do this again?”

Winded and amazed that she wasn't filled with

his seed, Marc let go of her legs and slid to his knees. “Two...minutes. Need fluids.”

Angela giggled. Being his woman was wonderful.

Outside, most of those who saw the shadows went on about their business or sought comfort where they could find it, but not all of them.

Adrian moved through the darkness toward the firing range instead of the shadows where eager relief sources waited. *Jack Daniels and jealousy are my companions tonight.*

Chapter Eleven
Twice the Men

June 2nd

1

“Remember to pivot on three and look. If you don’t look, you can’t pass. Go!”

Aware that the routine would be a part of their first level test, Cynthia got into the rhythm, ducking and remembering to look as she held her body under rigid control.

The rookies rolled together across the training area that had been cleared for this, nine souls working together to cover the targets coming at them from a dozen angles.

Cynthia spun awkwardly and caught herself in time to recover. She was there to put a steadying hand on Samantha’s arm as she also spun wrong. They dropped into their places, attention going overhead. They drew as they rolled, dry firing at targets to their right.

Sweating, Cynthia grunted heavily as she spun again, starting the routine over, and heard Samantha echo the sound. This was the hardest thing the males had tried to teach them so far, this teamwork. She wasn’t the only one struggling with it.

“Take five.”

The group of Eagles dropped to the floor in relief at Doug's call. It was the tenth time they'd run it in two hours, and though it was getting better, it still needed a lot of work.

Now that they'd all been evaluated by the senior men, Cynthia had been put with Kevin, who'd already been training her on most of her Eagle duties. Samantha was still with Daryl. Leslie was XO training with Jeremy, a fact that Jax and Samantha were upset over without being able to express why.

Cynthia moved toward their head trainer for the day. "Can I ask you something?"

Kyle shrugged, clearly not in the mood to be here. "At your own risk."

"Why didn't you ever bust me?" Cynthia leaned against the tent wall. "I know you saw me tracking Adrian plenty of times."

Kyle didn't bother with the expected sneer. He didn't hate her anymore. "We needed you busy. You chose the activity, but we made sure you saw what we wanted you to."

Not a bit hurt, Cynthia fired her next question. "Are you going to claim Jennifer publicly?"

Kyle's expression tightened, mind going straight to the pregnant girl he'd left in the chair with a heating pad for her back. "None of your business."

"That's interesting."

Kyle smothered a growl, waiting for the next dig. Hate her still or not, there was little love

between him and the reporter.

“If you wait much longer, you might lose your place.” Cynthia felt he needed to know. “Action is about to be taken.”

Kyle turned to snarl and found himself alone along the tent wall. Was it time for the next step? He’d been waiting, but inside, it was a done deal.

Coughing, Daryl slid into Cynthia’s spot. He hated the smell of the perfume Cynthia wore. *Damn flowers*. “Word says you can expect a visit from the den mothers.”

Kyle stiffened. “And a call to the moral board after that?”

Daryl shrugged. “If you don’t obey what they decide, yes. They plan to check on her tonight.”

“They what?!”

Daryl took a step back. “They always check on the new females, Kyle. You know that.”

Kyle cursed, storming from the tent in a show of Italian temper the camp rarely saw.

He climbed the steps to the new female shower camper a minute later, with no thought to the rules. He caught Hilda and Peggy mid undress.

“I need to see you!”

Peggy, not flustered by most men like the younger females were, had an idea what had brought him here and nodded. “Okay. We’ll wash, you talk.”

Hilda’s mouth dropped open as Peggy removed her shirt, exposing her bra and a waist that was still slender.

Kyle blinked. “Put your clothes on.”

“Wait until we’re done.”

Kyle crossed his arms over his chest. “No.” He didn’t keep his eyes on the molding stall doors or the foggy windows that were screwed shut to keep out the draft and curious teenage boys. He leaned against the door that was now being knocked on by Doug, the guard on the campers.

“Is everything okay?”

“Go away! We’re all full here!” Kyle slapped the door as Peggy stepped into the stall and closed the half door.

“What the hell, Kyle?” Doug’s bewildered voice faded.

“I want you to support me and Jennifer.”

Neither woman responded with anything more than frowns.

Kyle’s tenor rose. “And, stay away from her!”

“You’re not exempt from the rules.” Peggy was carrying a grudge against any male who wanted an underage girl. “And doing this isn’t helping your cause.”

“Depends on what we can work out.”

Hilda’s gaze flew to his in denial.

Kyle scoffed. “Tell me there isn’t anything you two want, and I’ll call you both liars.”

Again, neither woman spoke.

“What is this?” Kyle groaned. “A guessing game? Tell me what you need!”

Now that he’d said the right word, Peggy grinned, a harsh smile befitting a sly female

determined to have her way. “When the time comes, support Angela, not Marc or Kenn. Do that, and you can have *any* willing female in this camp.”

“So long as there’s no physical contact until legal age,” Hilda added.

It took Kyle a minute. *What...who...* A bit stunned, he uncrossed his arms. “And they say men are ruthless!”

“Yes, but we’re also survivors, Mr. Reece.” Peggy sneered bitterly. “Angela will make sure we stay that way.”

Kyle opened the door. “I’ll get back to you. Until then, leave us both alone.” He slammed the door, ignoring Doug and the other scowling guards the big man had called over.

Kyle paused on the landing, caught in a haze of longing as Jennifer tilted her chin up to catch the sun’s warm rays. She and Dog were walking by, ignoring everyone around them to enjoy the beautiful day. Kyle forgot how to breathe.

Jennifer felt the heat, the strong, protective presence that was Kyle, and started searching. She found him nearby and gave a small wave, detouring.

Kyle held up a hand, telling her to wait.

He slid back inside the shower camper and gave Peggy’s now naked chest an appreciative leer. “Nice, Ms. Kelly!”

He enjoyed their startled expressions for a moment, letting the tension build. As they both started to speak, Kyle delivered scorn and surrender. “You’re conspiring against Adrian.

You've offered a deal for a teenage camp member, to get what you want." Kyle dropped his eyes in respect. "And it worked. Give us your approval and so will I, *if* the time comes."

Hilda gestured. "It's the right choice—unlike the one you've made with that little girl."

"Don't think you can push me any farther than this, ladies." Kyle's demeanor became dark and dangerous. "You have no idea how big of a mistake that would be."

Peggy studied him, this big killer with a bleeding heart showing for everyone to judge. She relented reluctantly. "Walk the line we've set, and you'll have what you want."

Kyle understood the word choice, and now flung it back at her. "*Need*, Ms. Kelly. If I only wanted her, I would have made a different deal, and it wouldn't be with you!"

Peggy and Hilda exchanged satisfied nods as Kyle left. He would love Jennifer, and their plans would have the support of the top Eagle in camp.

The two females looked up in surprise when the camper door opened again.

Doug limped inside, hand up to cover his view. "Everyone okay in here?"

Hilda opened her mouth to answer.

Peggy stopped her with a quick motion.

Understanding what would happen, Hilda quietly grabbed her towel. She'd thought Peggy had a spark for the big Irishman but hadn't been positive.

Doug cleared his throat, not hearing anything except running water. *What did Kyle do?* “Hello? Hilda? Ms. Peggy?”

Steadily running showers and silence.

After the way Kyle had stormed in and blocked the door, then stomped away without answering him, Doug knew he had to look. He slowly lowered his hand, braced to see anything.

Anything, but beautiful breasts being lovingly washed without a thought for his shock.

“Son of a...”

Peggy snickered, making sure he was getting her best angles. Age hadn’t been unkind to her, but it hadn’t been exactly generous either. “We’re fine, Doug. Thank you for coming to make sure.”

Hilda didn’t approve of the way Peggy was letting him know she was interested, but it was still amusing to see Doug’s jaw drop and his eyes grow dark. Hilda hid a grin.

The big man nodded, gaze glued to Peggy’s chest. In the halls below, shifting began. “Yeah, um, it’s my...” Doug trailed off, aware that he was staring, but that tone! It said if they were alone, more than looking might be allowed!

Peggy slid into the water, studying him from under lowered lashes as his eyes glowed like the bonfire. She was enjoying the rush. “Was there anything else you wanted...*needed*, maybe?”

“Aye!” It was almost a growl. Doug tried to snap out of it. “I mean, no! I’ll go now.”

He didn’t budge.

Peggy thought of her late husband, of the way he'd been so big and quiet. Was it okay that she liked the same things in Doug, was drawn to him because of it? She hated his dreads, though. They would be the first thing to go.

Peggy swept his faded red vest and army jacket, seeing how raggedy both were becoming after so many hand washings. *Bet there's a story attached to them. Other than just a symbol of his time in another war zone.*

Hilda stayed quiet, waiting for the kind giant to be gone so she could dress. She had enough to do with all of the things Adrian had her working on. She didn't need to add man troubles to the list. *I'm perfectly happy being Safe Haven's top den mother, thank you very much.*

Peggy arched a sexy shoulder at Doug as she rinsed. "It would probably be best if you left now."

Doug forced his feet to leave. *What did I come in here for?*

Behind him, the hens cackled.

2

Adrian slowed down as he neared the small, neat tent Tonya had put up herself. Right in the center of the female canvas area, she wasn't able to get away with anything. Her convertible had been traded in for a sturdy truck, the fake accent was gone, and that shorn hair had drawn attention. The camp knew what Kenn was trying to do, and to the

surprise of the Eagles, people were helping her. When Tonya went against an unspoken rule, camp women took the time to correct her. It wasn't always gentle, but it was effective—mostly because she was listening. Tonya's reform was a learning experience.

“Do I have to?”

“No.”

“What happens if I don't?”

“You'll lose progress and have more work to do later. Up to you.”

Kenn didn't sound like he was being hard assed. Adrian changed directions when he figured out they were discussing how she was running the pharmacy. Kenn's transgressions were ones to rival Tonya's. It was uplifting to have them both trying so hard.

Kenn was handling his outcast status well, not even voicing a protest at being forced out of the level tests as an instructor. The Eagles had done it intentionally, causing double pain. Kenn wasn't really one of them and they were making sure he knew it.

Adrian headed for the parking area, confident that Kenn would join him soon. This was the first time he had sent so many teams out of camp all at once, and he wouldn't be able to relax until they returned. Kenn would keep him busy, like he was doing for the grief over Lexa and Connie.

Adrian winced, distracted himself with the sight of Cynthia and Matt awkwardly setting up a large tent to work in. The hand cranked machine to print

her paper was already waiting in a crate for her use. The reporter didn't know it, but she would help push these people into another level of cooperation and manipulation. *If it's in the paper, it must be true. Everyone knows that.*

Marc was aware of Angie watching with open longing as he and the others prepared to leave. Over half the bruised Eagles were going, but not her. She hadn't been cleared for full duty yet.

"You should take her along as your XO." Adrian came up next to him. "We both know that's all she wants."

Marc stared at Adrian for a long moment before speaking his mind. After last night, he was in control with Angie, but with other males? Not so much. "I don't need your help to make her happy."

Adrian wasn't about to argue that point. "Shall I surprise her with it, then, and be slapped by the heat of her smile while you watch?"

Trapped into accepting the gift, Marc felt that inner male wanting to lunge out and draw more blood. "Be careful. I won't stand for much interference."

"Understood." Adrian grunted, pushing away the need to respond in kind. "Now go tell her, so she'll have time to get the new vest setup."

Distracted, Marc spun that way, frowning. *Why wasn't she already given one?*

Adrian motioned to the other team leaders and got nods in return. They were set. He pushed the

button on his barely working radio. Since the sinkhole, well over half of their communication devices were useless. “Hurry home.”

Headlights flashed in comforting response.

3

Wichita appeared completely abandoned as the four teams approached. That dark city skyline was haunting; a somber mood settled over the Eagles. No one envied the men sent to gather supplies from that menacing mausoleum. It looked like a place where death still lurked, eagerly waiting for those who would trespass.

As they reach the city, the four teams split up. They all had a destination, a much-needed goal, and a long day ahead of them. Due to the other half of the level tests being tonight, some of the returning teams would have to relieve those who were standing watch while they were gone. Even with the three new rookie teams being formed, they still only had 87 Eagles.

Three missions would take place inside those dark halls and rotting buildings. The fourth, Neil’s team, was on a search and rescue for the trader hostages just outside the city limits. Zack’s team would secure a load of fuel—jet and normal—if they were lucky. From the low squat of the tires on some of the heavy planes and trucks that the recon scouts had seen lined up around undamaged terminals, the odds were good. Unless they built vehicles that ran

on something else, survivors were either stuck using what was left from the war, or just plain stuck wherever their luck ran out. Adrian was determined to get his camp to the mountains. If they found enough fuel today, he could stop worrying about it.

The second mission was headed to the Reddi Industries Plant to find water. Samantha's idea was a sound one. The chance that there had been water cleaning taking place when the war came was good. It stood to reason that if it hadn't been looted already, the water would still be there, waiting to be drained into Safe Haven's trucks. If there wasn't any water in the clean tank, they had instructions to try hooking up a power source and following the codes and specs they could find. Water was desperately needed. Seth and his men had charge of that mission, with Jeremy along as Samantha's personal guard.

The third team—Angela and Marc, surrounded by his crew and a team of rookies—was going to the Westlink Branch of the Wichita Public Library to bring back medical and gardening books. Among their more pressing needs, Adrian had them gathering information on projects that would take a while to put in place, like solar panels to absorb the energy from their truck tops. Driving or parked, they would be collecting power and eventually become self-sufficient.

When finished, all teams were supposed to report to the treatment plant and either help with gathering and cleaning water or supply protection

for the trip back to camp. All four teams would travel together to provide less opportunity for anyone hoping to take whatever they gathered. It was a lot of risks, a lot of time for something to go horribly wrong. All of them were aware of it.

“This is creepy.”

Zack agreed with Allan’s observation. They were slowly rolling through the suburb outside the airport. The sense of emptiness was everywhere.

“Do you think the whole city is this way?”

Allan meant the weather-abused, but otherwise undamaged neighborhood around them. Some of the homes still had cars parked neatly in weedy driveways and sprinklers set up. If not for the mildewing Christmas decorations and grass growing through the pavement, it could have been before the war. The effect was enough to make stomachs tighten with longing, while hearts clenched in grief. Their generation would probably never know this lifestyle again.

Lee frowned. “What were the numbers for?”

Zack peered through the window, studying the painted and carved numbers that were on most of the front doors. “Number of dead, I guess.”

“What about the letters after them?”

The trucker stared, noticing that A and S were the only letters. Some of the numbers were low, four and five the most common, but a good deal of them were over 15.

The Eagles’ dismay changed to horror as they

rounded the next block. On these doors and windows, below the numbers and that one letter, were silent screams.

21 S

No food

Please help us!

18A

Starving!

39 S

Murders! Need law!

11S

Will trade bullets for food.

“Alive...” Allan moaned, horrified. “They were survivors!”

“This isn’t good.” Lee lowered the camera. They needed the fuel from the airport, but not the depression that would come after this trip’s pictures were shown to Adrian.

5S

Need medicine!

8S

Missing! Ashley Simmons

Black hair, 5’3

Needs medication!

Zack increased their speed so that reading the notes was harder. In the UPV behind them, those pushing the buttons captured another of the tragic effects of the war. This city had clearly tried to keep itself together and succeeded in avoiding the looting and arson that most places had dealt with, but it hadn't mattered. They'd gotten no help. The smell was identifiable now. It was the dead, their rotting slowed by the dampness of both nearby rivers and barricaded basements. Adrian wouldn't sleep for days after he viewed these pictures.

Behind the airport, the city of Wichita groaned and creaked in neglected decline, lower areas now marshy swamps only fit for reptiles. In them, pythons had already begun to spawn unchecked. Moving up from the south in search of food, these snakes took over each waterway as they progressed, leaving eggs.

"This is a Safe Haven mission team. We are a convoy of Red Cross survivors picking up refugees. Is anyone out there?" Allan had to try.

"No way, man. It's been six months."

"Hello? This is Safe Haven. Can anyone hear me?"

Zack didn't protest again. If it comforted Allan to try, what would it hurt? They were packing enough heat to take over a country, and this place was a ghost town—

"Help us!"

The shout was faint but clear over all the radios

on their channel.

“We’re out, but they’re coming!”

They waited only a few seconds before Neil’s ecstatic voice came over the radio.

“Help is on the way! Keep transmitting if you can.”

Finding the hostages at the boarding school would make up for what they were seeing. Allan was glad the kids the traders had tried to sell to Safe Haven were here and alive. There was no mistaking the youth in those shouts, but the thought of going into a ghost town still wasn’t sitting well with him. Allan didn’t consider himself superstitious, but then, he hadn’t considered himself a hired killer, and yet, that’s exactly what he’d become. Adrian had bought his loyalty with confidence and power. Allan was grateful he’d had the good sense to agree.

Zack spotted the grungy planes and trucks lined up across from them and steered that way. The abandoned feeling was prevalent, but the Eagle didn’t let his guard down as he scanned the windows and doors of the terminal. There was no damage other than nature, no signs that anyone had been here since the war. Even to hardened men, it was eerie.

Zack felt his training kick into gear as he pulled the ugly green Bronco to a stop in front of the first fuel truck. “Let’s get it done and get home.”

Eagles spilled out.

Zack joined them with the mantle of leadership firmly in hand. He’d gone from a driver to a leader.

The feeling was everything he had hoped it would be while laboring under Kenn. *I'll never go back.*

4

In the library parking lot, the third mission team quickly secured the area, noticing signs of life, both good and bad.

Angela's hand slid to the Python that now had a place on her left side. She wasn't picking anything up. Instead of the past fear and urge to hide, she advanced eagerly when Marc motioned everyone out.

Eyeing the boot shaped bruise on Marc's forearm, Angela followed the team. He'd fared better than most of the others in the cage when it came to marks, but it bothered her to see him wince as he stepped from their vehicle. He'd accepted the Advil and refused the stronger painkiller, though she knew he was extremely sore. That was the condition of half the mission teams, but it wasn't a hindrance. The bruises and wounds were their badges of honor. She understood now because she had her own.

The library stank.

It was bad enough to make Eagles gag as they moved through the dusty bookshelves, clearing each room and level. As they headed downstairs, the stench grew worse.

Marc held them just above the bottom floor,

using his hands to keep from talking and having to use his nose to breathe. *We go on three and brace. Smells like dead.*

Except, Angela thought it was more like mildew and feces. Either way, it was improbable there were survivors.

One... Two... Go!

The first team moved down the stairs at a run, with Angela and the rookies behind them. She ran down the stairs, lights glaring from all directions as she hit the carpeted bottom and found herself listening to the faint sound of something that they were all familiar with. Barking dogs might mean they'd been wrong to assume there were no survivors here.

Marc waved Angela's team back as he went to the only door into the single room.

Following his training, they put her in the middle of their tight circle.

Marc flashed a signal, stomach rolling as breathing through his mouth no longer kept out that sickening odor. *Ready?*

Enough positive motions between gags made him yank the door open. Marc lifted his gun as shadows darted for their legs.

"Hold your fire!" Marc choked out as the rot hit him square in the nose and twisted him into a gagging, puking machine that only let up when he made it back outside and covered his head with his jacket. *Bodies would have been easier on me. I was ready for that.*

Chapter Twelve
My Baby!

1

Angela handed out the medical salve from her bag, motioning for Jax, who was grimacing under that split lip, to follow Marc.

The basement was alive with growling, wiggling, barking shadows the Eagles carefully waded through as they hung lanterns from the rafters. The sound of vomiting was almost as loud as the dogs. Angela was grateful for her cast-iron stomach.

The library team had found a large basement full of dogs. Thanks to bags of food and an intentionally dug watering ditch they traced to a nearby creek, a surprising number of the animals were still alive. Angela hadn't picked it up because they weren't a threat.

Angela watched the Eagles play with a few of the calmer dogs they'd culled from the stench-ridden room. The animals were shivering and shaking with joy, pissing all over the place, and drawing loud chuckles from these hard men. Angela found herself absorbing the good moment. She'd been braced for another awful city. It was wonderful to have this instead. Even the deaths of the weaker

dogs couldn't dull it for her. She often forgot what it had been like to live in a calm world that delivered good things. Since the war, she always expected the worst. Wichita would last in her heart for a while as a balm. "They tried to save their pets."

Quinn nodded, ears hurting and stomach twisting violently. He gently nudged his team leader's woman toward the stairs, sure that viewing the small corpses wouldn't help her sleep much more than human ones would have. "Let's get the rest of what we came for, gentlemen. Marc says we'll take the mutts with us."

The others got to their feet.

Angela went upstairs to supervise there when Quinn motioned her to. It had been a good trip for them. She hoped the others were doing as well.

2

Bang! bang!

"I'm pinned!" Shawn ducked behind a wide tree with a trim of dead roses.

Neil fired at the truck trying to leave, hitting a windshield.

The glass fractured.

He fired again.

The window shattered this time.

The driver jerked at the impact.

The prison transport truck swerved to the left and ran into a burnt security car by the gate. The impact sent the truck flipping into the brick wall,

throwing debris in all directions.

Smoke and steam rolled upward as Neil ran toward the traders who fled from the transport wagon. He didn't demand surrender. That world was gone.

No longer pinned down, Shawn joined Neil in the chase.

"There's another one!" Greg tried to get closer through the sporadic return fire from the traders. They'd already disabled two jeeps of armed riders.

Neil and Shawn spun around to see a third jeep flying toward them, guns on the front glinting in the dim sun.

"Take cover!" Neil and Shawn dove behind the brick divider next to the gate.

Wack! Wack! Wack! Wack!

A fourth jeep flew up the grassy hill behind them.

Trapped! The traders had been prepared. Neil hit his emergency radio as he dumped his spent rounds. "We need backup! Automatic weapons, five mobile targets!"

Only the mission teams inside the city were close enough to hear through the limited radios.

"Half hour," Zack responded first, grimacing at the fuel odor on his hands.

Marc's team was deep into loading the dogs and books. "Fifteen."

"On the way!" Seth's voice was eager. "Where?"

Wack! Wack! Wack!

Greg fired from nearby, hoping to hit any of the four vehicles now bunched together as they came in for a sweep.

Kablammm!

Two trucks exploded with the grenade. The other vehicles split up, realizing their mistake.

Out of grenades, Neil keyed the radio and ducked lower as debris flew over the battlefield. “Just follow the noise.”

3

Jeremy grabbed Samantha’s arm and shoved her toward the tanker. “Ride back to camp with the water.”

Sam jerked away, drawn to the sound of the explosions. They weren’t far from Neil and that was where she wanted to be. “I’m going.”

Jeremy didn’t have time to argue. He shoved her toward his ride instead. “You follow orders, or I’ll tell Adrian!”

Samantha smirked, sliding into the passenger seat of his sporty white Jeepster. If he really thought that would keep her in line, he was crazy.

Jeremy felt the sense of dread he’d experienced at the rest stop and made a quick choice she would hate. He didn’t want to deny Samantha the opportunity to feel like an Eagle, but this was a gunfight and she wasn’t ready.

Samantha didn't speak until the battle scene came into view, heart thumping at the sight of the armed jeeps and trucks circling the pinned down team at the entrance to the boarding school.

She watched as Seth arrived and drove behind a tall brick wall that lined this gated community. "What should I do?"

Jeremy stopped well behind Seth's team, killing the engine. "Stay here."

Sam scowled, shaking her head. "I'm good with a gun. I can—"

"No time to argue, baby." Jeremy grabbed her wrist with one hand and his cuffs with the other.

"Hey! No, don't!"

Jeremy snapped the metal into place and shoved it over the steering wheel before she recovered from the surprise.

Click!

"You son of a..."

Jeremy quickly got out of range of her fury, barely missing being kicked in the balls.

"I'll make you pay for this!" Samantha was so pissed, she was crying. *How dare he do this to me after Rick did it!*

Jeremy slammed the door in her face and went to join Seth's team. They would hit hard and quick, and he wouldn't have to worry about Samantha.

Samantha began digging in her pocket with her free hand the second the door closed. After being held this way by Rick while he hurt Becky, she'd sworn she would never be in this position again.

Sam clutched the hairpin in a tight grip and started working it around in the hole.

Gunfire echoed as she struggled—hard, flat pops of death.

4

Seth waved everyone forward, gun in hand. This was the best part of his new life. Not the action or the rush, but the legal killing. “Fire!”

“Fire!” Jeff repeated Seth’s order, careful aim already locked onto the circling jeep with the machine gun. The grenade launcher in his hands lurched, belching out a perfect shot.

The jeep exploded in a splintering ball of flame and smoke.

Jeff switched his aim to the closest truck.

Kablamm!

The other jeep of traders rolled their way.

Neil’s men were able to fire at it now that they were no longer pinned down by the rapid shots of a machine gun.

Seth’s men fell into that dangerous V as Neil’s team did the same. Watching their line of fire, two full teams of Eagles emptied their guns into the remaining vehicles from both sides.

It was over soon after the call for assistance came. One Eagle team was dangerous. Two was lethal.

“Where are the hostages?” Seth reloaded as Jeff

and Shawn moved through the bodies. He normally would have had a lot more to say, but it hurt to talk. The quarter shaped blood bruise on his windpipe was a constant reminder to everyone who saw it. Marc wasn't to be challenged without a death wish. He'd taken that slot from Doug.

“Back of the transport truck. Greg's working on the door.” Neil pointed.

Seth went to help.

Neil did a quick sweep, hating the openness of this area, but also grateful for it. With a little more cover, the traders might have been successful with their ambush. When their other men hadn't come back, these few had assumed them to be dead and packed up. If Neil's team had come an hour later, they would have been gone.

Neil saw Jeremy gathering guns and ammo. “What's the count?”

Jeremy shrugged, shoving guns into a burlap sack. “About 15 usable. No ammo other than what we might pull from the machine guns.”

Neil nodded. “Water run go okay?”

Jeremy stood up, leaving the bag for when they loaded it all up. “We'll be off rations by morning.”

Neil grinned. “Guess Samantha didn't like not being allowed to come along. She's with the water, right?”

Jeremy didn't answer.

The silence made Neil frown. “Right?”

Jeremy shook his head, voice casual. “No, she's uh, handcuffed to the steering wheel of my jeep.”

Jeremy pointed to the barely visible Hurst edition. It was too far away to see her shadow, but waves of anger hit them clearly.

Neil stared. "You are in deep shit, my friend."

"Nah." Jeremy smiled uneasily, looking at the fist shaped bruise in the center of Neil's forehead. "She'll yell for a minute and then realize I didn't have a choice."

Neil's brow went up. "Do you think so?"

"Well, maybe." Jeremy became defensive. "She refused to stay in the jeep!"

"Did you think she would?" Neil scoffed, motioning for Greg to load up and get rolling as soon as possible.

"No, that's why I cuffed her."

"So, it was premeditated. Another mark against you." Neil led the way. He wasn't sure there would still be a steering wheel when they got there, but he didn't tell Jeremy that. "It's rare, right?"

"Oh, yeah." Jeremy nodded, grinning. "I've wanted one since I was 10. They only made about 100 of them. Even found a way to modify it for my cd player."

"Uh-huh." Neil was still staring at the jeep, almost convinced he'd seen a glint of movement—*shiny* movement. "And she knows that, right?"

Jeremy nodded again. "Yeah, she said I might be in love with it instead of..." Jeremy got the point all at once. "She wouldn't!"

Neil clapped his XO on the shoulder. "Did you tell her it even has the original T-handle shifter?"

Jeremy's third nod was the slow motion of impending doom. He'd told everyone who would listen and even a few who wouldn't. "Yes."

Neil got them moving, trying to be sympathetic. "Vehicles aren't as important to women. Maybe she won't remember."

5

Crash!

That sound made the two men run.

Crash!

Neil rounded the edge of the wall first and came to a screeching halt as he took in the situation.

The jeep looked as if it had been in the center of their battle. All but two of the windows were sporting large, jagged holes. Glass shards littered the ground all around the jeep and the hood glittered as if it was covered in diamonds. On the ground in front of the Jeepster, was a broken T-handle shifter.

"Uh, I think she remembered." Neil tried not to snicker.

Crash!

A thick boot heel shot through the passenger wing window, leaving only the back glass intact as a fresh rainbow of shards scattered.

"Shit." Jeremy sounded as if he'd been punched. "Maybe she can't twist enough to—"

Thud! Thud! Crash!

Jeremy grunted in shock. "My jeep!"

Neil clapped him on the shoulder again. "She's

out of windows. I wouldn't leave her cuffed much longer or you might lose that radio—”

Grind. Rippp!

The radio came flying through the boot hole in the windshield, catching more glass and sending debris to the ground.

“Oh. Too late.” Neil turned back toward the boarding school, where the teams were set to roll. “Let me know how it goes.”

Jeremy stared at the furious blue eyes glowering through the damage, warning him that she wasn't satisfied yet. “Coward.”

“Yep.” Neil chuckled. “Gotta tell ya, I'd rather face that machine gun again. Good luck.”

Riippppp!

Jeremy watched a brand-new sun visor join the radio. Why had he thought Samantha needed protecting? *We could have turned her loose on the traders and saved the grenades.*

Jeremy moved closer, carefully. “Hey, Samantha.” He grimaced before he said it. “Are you still mad?”

Thud! Craaccckkk!

The steering wheel, wires flapping, landed at his feet.

“Uh. Yeah, okay. I understand that.” Jeremy held up the keys to the cuffs. “If I let you out, will you be nice?”

He winced at the next sounds that came from his cherished jeep. He had spent weeks modifying it. If he had to guess, he'd say that was the glovebox and

the cup holders.

Plastic shards flew at him, unidentifiable. Jeremy took a step back. “How about if I throw you the keys and run?”

Silence.

“Sam? I’m gonna let you out now, okay?”

The dented driver’s door slowly crunched open, grinding from glass and plastic caught in the frame.

Jeremy watched Samantha slowly stand up and then get out on her own. *She isn’t cuffed! Shit!*

Sam snarled as she stepped around the door, a wild mess still aiming for a deserving target. She drew back, baring her teeth.

Jeremy turned in time to avoid the heavy metal cigarette lighter. It was the rearview mirror that smacked him in the back of the head.

Samantha grunted in satisfaction as he hit his knees, not caring that Neil and Seth’s team were stopped nearby, laughing uncontrollably. She threw the flashlight without remorse, striking his shoulder hard enough to shatter it.

Jeremy scrambled toward the safety of Neil’s truck as batteries started flying.

Samantha missed with all of them. He was zigzagging to avoid her aim.

As he ducked into the safety of Neil’s backseat, Sam held up the keys to the wounded Jeepster.

Instead of the throw they all expected, Sam dropped the keys just behind her and took up a familiar cage stance. It said come get them, coward.

Jeremy thought about it. Those keys opened any

number of toolboxes and devices, and he would definitely enjoy rolling around on the ground with Samantha. But... Jeremy wiped the blood off his ear and held it up for her to see through the window. "You play too rough."

Samantha laughed, calming down now that she'd had a release. She scooped up the keys and gave them a shake. Then she slid them into the front of her shirt where they poked her. "When you want 'em, you know where they are."

She walked by the truck to take a backseat in Seth's truck.

The Eagles burst into another round of crude laughs and taunts.

Jeremy stared at the Jeepster as the others got in. *My baby!*

"I guess you know not to do that again."

"Yeah." Jeremy took the napkins Neil held out and began wiping away the blood. "There were some signs."

Neil chuckled, motioning for Greg to get them moving. "Head for the rendezvous point. We're done here."

The four teams met up under a green sunset that didn't dampen their mood. They'd gotten all the list items and a few others. The kids they'd rescued were between the ages of five and 12. Jeremy thought Adrian would put them with the slaver children, sensing the bonds that might grow between the two abused groups. The adult females they'd also hoped to help, were dead. They'd found

the graves and corpses upon exploring the school grounds. The boss wouldn't be told that part. Adrian would be pleased by their successes, and that meant a good time at the second half of the tests that would take place just after mess.

It took half an hour to get back to camp, where they unloaded, sorted, and cleaned up. It had been a long day. They were ready for the quiet drama of camp life.

6

On her way to watch the tests, Samantha paused at the sight of Jeremy coming from the workout tent that Marc and Charlie were entering. Jeremy looked as if he'd just— "*Grrrr...*"

Samantha flushed as her stomach growled. He looked as if he'd just come from the bed of a woman who was sore and smiling. Desire pushed into her thoughts, the kind she usually suffered at night or found a distraction for. Samantha recognized the moment. She'd felt lust before the war and sent out for a stranger like the other females in her class bracket had, but now...

Samantha tuned out everything but the man who'd just spotted her. Now, she had two sweat-layered, muscle-bulging, gun-packing Eagles at her fingertips—hard killers who would delight in easing her torment. It was going to be harder to resist taking one of them up on what their eyes were

always offering.

Jeremy was caught in the heat blast, drawn to her side against his will. He'd concluded that she was likely done with him now, but the open want in that gaze said differently.

Jeremy took a quick minute to ask himself if he wanted to try again, to keep playing the role. It only took a few seconds of her looking at him as if he was hanging on a butcher's rack to find the answer. Jeremy gave her an easy grin but stayed back. "You still pissed about what I did?"

Sam blinked, but the haze didn't clear. She watched a drop of sweat roll down his neck and trace a fiery path over his shoulder. "No. You?"

"No." Noticing where she was staring, Jeremy stiffened the muscles in his chest.

Sam's hands clenched. *Think! Keep talking.* "Are you sorry for it?"

Swallowing the grin, Jeremy couldn't lie. "No." He was sorry to lose the Jeepster, though. He didn't tell her that.

Samantha shrugged. At least they had honesty. "Then, I can't be either. You didn't understand the lesson, so it wasn't harsh enough."

Jeremy didn't know what to do with a female who used logic and emotion. How was he supposed to...*logic*. Jeremy began running through the signs in his head, listing those little things that were either putting him off or making him uneasy.

Samantha sensed he was about to open a painful subject and quickly spoke up. "If you do it again, I

won't be able to get over it.”

Jeremy already knew that. He'd gotten the lecture from a number of Eagles, but Cynthia had clued him in first by threatening to cut off his balls if he interfered with the dream again. “I don't have another Jeep.”

Sam sighed in mock reluctance. Leave it to a man to say the wrong thing. “Guess I'd have to let Cynthia handle you the way she wanted to when she found out.”

Jeremy took a step back. “If you want to kill yourself Sam, you'll have to do it when I'm not around.”

“Okay.”

Jeremy stared in exasperation. “You get that you're not ready, right? That we would've been busy watching out for you instead of helping Neil?”

“Bet if it had been Angie, you would have handled it differently.”

Jeremy spotted the ambush too late. “Yes, but she's...”

Jeremy snapped his mouth shut as Samantha's eyes glowed brighter. *Mistake!*

Instead of blasting him, Sam spoke softly. “I have Adrian's approval, too. You know that. Treat me like everyone else or stay away from me.”

Jeremy shook his head, heart thumping. “I'll never be able to do that.”

Sam caught the tremor. “Stay away or treat me the same?”

Jeremy went for the kill now that he'd evaded

the trap. He took a step closer, leaned in. “Both.”

Sam stiffened.

He pushed, hand going out to brush a wild curl behind her ear.

Samantha shivered as his finger slid along her jaw before dropping. *That’s cheating!*

“You’re not the same. Stop being ashamed of it.”

Samantha wanted to scoff, but he seemed to know what effect he was having on her as he let the sweat drip instead of wiping it away with the thin towel around those big, hard shoulders.

Samantha felt heat scorch her insides and began fighting back. If he still wanted to play, she had his part picked out this time.

Jeremy braced for it, reading the intent as she reached out.

Sam grabbed the ends of the towel, gently pulling until his mouth was within inches of hers. Tension crackled. She let her lips brush his. “Will you be one of my relief sources?”

One of my relief sources. One of. One...

Jeremy was ice in her space an instant later. “No.”

Sam let go, shrugging. “Okay.”

When she turned around as if she’d just finished an unsuccessful interview, Jeremy’s inner asshole broke out. “Whore.”

Samantha stopped.

Jeremy got ready to run. Her aim was too good to bother with ducking.

Sam scrolled through a dozen responses before she answered, bitterness supplying the lines faster than she could reject them. She finally chose the one that would keep him awake tonight, worrying if it was true. "I'll have a stable lined up in a week. You'll fight alongside them, eat with them, save their lives, maybe, and Neil will be first."

You bitch! Jeremy gave her his second thought instead. "Neil won't go for this. You're asking too much."

"Really?" Samantha's hand went to her hip, oblivious of their gaping witnesses. "How many guys is Leslie providing comfort for?"

Jeremy shook his head, glaring. "That's not the same."

"Okay, then. How many of the older women in camp is Daryl seeing to?"

"They have an arrangement!"

"I know." Sam grunted in exasperation. "So would we, if you could just accept that I have the same rights as everyone else."

"It's not that you don't have the same rights," Jeremy protested. "It's that I don't..."

When he stopped, she filled it in. "Want to share?"

Jeremy nodded, expression pinched. "If I didn't care, it wouldn't matter."

"It doesn't matter that you care. That's your issue to control, not mine." Samantha twisted it around, as females are so adept at.

"And I don't think I can," he confessed angrily.

“So go ahead and line up your stable. I won’t be in it.”

Samantha watched him go, understanding he was hurt, but unable to change her nature. Since the war, she needed more to stimulate her, and that was true in so many ways that she wasn’t able to count them all without a scoresheet. If she had to do her old job now, she would never be able to tolerate it. Without the thrills and the close calls, what was the point of being alive?

“I haven’t forgotten, you know.”

Sam stopped, but didn’t turn to face Neil, not wanting the observant trooper to notice her crimson cheeks. How much had he seen and heard? “Forgotten what?”

“I’d like to spend some time with you, Sam.”

Her shoulders stiffened. Great. Another awkward conversation. “In what respect?”

“A date. I’ll swing by your—”

“No.”

“What?” Neil’s mouth snapped closed.

Samantha sighed, moving toward the crowd. “You guys will figure it out eventually. I believe that.”

Neil sighed. The attraction wasn’t going anywhere. He’d hoped for it to fade, but the more she said no, the harder he was pulled to her. “Who set it up this way? God has to be female. No man would ever be this cruel!”

Charlie studied Marc as the bare-chested man pushed the bar up in quick, hard repetitions. The members and Eagles were gathered on the other side of camp for the second half of the level tests. The workout tent was empty around them.

Charlie drew on his courage as the silence continued. “Do you and mom...get close when you’re alone?”

Marc’s grip on the slick weight shifted. He caught it awkwardly. *Damn tent shadows.* He grunted as he shoved the weight off his chest and set it in the groove. “Interesting question.”

Charlie shrugged, tossing him a towel. “Just heard something and it made me curious.”

Marc sat up on the bench, wiping at his light beard. “Guess it depends on your definition of close.”

“Sex.”

Charlie’s cheeks reddened, telling Marc he had an itch that needed scratching. “What’s up, boy?”

Charlie was relieved at the willingness. “I have this idea about men and women, and I’m kinda watching you guys to verify it.”

Marc took that in, trying not to grin. Being a teenager was confusing. The last thing he needed was his father’s laughter filling his mind. “Why don’t you tell me, and I’ll give you my opinion?”

Charlie agreed eagerly, sitting on his bench. “It’s about how to recognize a good mate.”

Marc wondered who had caught his eye. “Go

on.”

“Well, it’s a myth until you and mom are in a tent together. People notice it, so I started studying the other couples here. They don’t have the same connection that you guys do.”

Marc studied his son in the softly swaying light. Charlie was growing into a man already, and he hadn’t seen him as a boy. The thought made Marc blurt out a question of his own. “Does that bother you? That we’re getting close.”

“No. Matt teases me, but I think it’s great you guys like each other so much.”

“And…”

“I’m watching, that’s all.”

“No pressure.”

Charlie grinned, looking away from his dad’s new injuries. It made his own desire to be an Eagle more complicated, but it hadn’t dimmed. “Not like that. I mean for myself. I won’t go through the crap everyone else is. I’ll be sure of my choice the first time and stick with it. Like Kyle.”

Now Marc frowned. “What Kyle’s doing may not be right.”

“He can’t help who he loves. Jenny won’t believe it yet, but—”

“How is that possible? He’s a grown man and she’s just a kid…” Marc let his words trail off, realizing he and Angie had started awfully close to the same way. Was Kyle’s attraction so different from his own? Hadn’t he acted on his desires and found a love beyond compare? Marc looked over to

find Charlie changing his shirt and smiling. “You did that on purpose.”

“It’s a psychology thing I have to practice,” Charlie admitted. “And I know you liked being friends with Kyle.”

When Marc didn’t blow up, the teenager moved for the flap, giving his father the rest of the truth as he saw it. “Kyle deserves the same chance that Adrian made sure you were given when everyone thought you and mom were having an affair.”

Marc stared after his son, stunned. No wonder Adrian had already brought him into the Eagles. A mind like that needed to be occupied or it could bring down the dream without even trying.

Dazed by the intelligence he and Angie had created, Marc headed for the tests, eager to start shooting. Unlike last night’s surprise, this evening would be fun. He would pass, enjoy being with Angela while they watched the others for a while, and then maybe head back to their tent for an hour of pleasure before sleep. He couldn’t wait to hold her again. It had always been that way, and that would never change.

Chapter Thirteen
Fighting For It

1

“**W**e have a couple minutes before the test is ready. Does anyone not scheduled want to try to pass a new—”

“Lefthanded, level three.” The area went quiet as Angela came eagerly through the thick crowd. She couldn’t wait to stand on her own again.

Crone got a pleased nod from Adrian. He waved her to the line. “You’re up.”

Angela’s skill with a gun was something most of the females here had only heard about. All those thinking about the team she was putting together crowded closer.

Angela thought she was the only one who knew she had only cleared level three a single time and by a hair, but when they got to the line, Billy smirked in a good-natured challenge.

“No wind. You *might* be all good.”

Angela realized the guard had seen her attempt. “Sweet. Now clear me a line of fire. Momma needs to hear that thwap!”

The males chuckled as she checked her weapon, then drew and fired in a smooth blur.

Thwap! Thwap! The last two slugs went into the

farthest target within an instant of each other.

Angela reloaded as they waited for the call. Unable to take her level tests, Angela had been working on the left hand so she could have this moment.

“Five of Six!” Crone had to shout over the cheers. “That’s a pass!”

Adrian came to her and held out a small patch.

“What’s this?”

“A welcome back.”

She recognized it as the new way he’d been setting the teams apart. It would go on her jacket, declaring her a level Three.

“But I didn’t pass my—”

“Yes, you did. *Every* Eagle who went on the slaver run earned the next rank.”

Angela waited until the congratulations were over and kept her voice low. “Why the double jump?”

Adrian knew she’d accept either answer. He gave her the one that mattered most. “I need you to be level Four by Arkansas.”

Adrian turned away before she could plunder his thoughts to discover why.

Shoving that newest challenge onto a shelf labeled with that number, Angela held up a hand to the females in the front row. “Let’s have a small contest, ladies, while they’re waiting on the men to get here. Anyone who passed the gun class can try.”

As the two main women lined up and began casting fresh glowers at each other, Angela swept

the murmuring crowd. “Anyone else?”

Shadows broke out to line up with them, causing mutters and betting.

Angela needed a few minutes with these hopeful women, and it wasn't just a shooting evaluation. She was still trying to narrow down who her right hand would be. So far, she honestly wasn't impressed with any of them for that slot. Adrian had told her he'd known where Kenn belonged on first sight. He hadn't said the same was true of her upon their first earthshaking glance, but she'd heard the thought. Where was her decisive moment in that regard?

First in line, Samantha looked to her team leader. “Set.”

Angela changed to a better viewing place and got comfortable. “A full mag at 15 feet. Go.”

2

“Can you stay for a while?”

Anne nodded, getting ready for bed. “I'm off until noon.”

John's eyes went over her in desire, something he hadn't felt much of in the last year. They hadn't made love in a long time, and the doctor found his hand reaching out to caress her hip. She felt good under the fingers that tingled with new life.

John grinned up at her when she looked down in surprise. Her long hair was loose—she'd been about to brush it. The elderly man tangled his

fingers in it softly. “Miss you, baby.”

Anne had only been thinking about sleep, but the feel of her husband’s hands on her after so long was amazing. “Mmm...”

John felt life flow into other areas of his body. Tears rose. He shoved them back, gently wrapping his arms around Anne’s waist. “I’d like to try to love you.”

Anne knelt down, bringing herself within reach. He looked younger, but it was how he felt that meant the most. Anne was grateful, so much that she’d sworn to find a way to give Angela what she wanted most—to be accepted for who she really was. “We’ll sleep in the camper tonight.”

“Where the beds are higher.”

They said it at the same time and spent a great moment laughing and holding each other as they had for most of their marriage.

3

“Shooters to the line,” Adrian called.

Angela was now standing along the tent wall with thoughts that were no clearer. Samantha and Cynthia were neck-and-neck in most of the areas she’d compared so far. Samantha was better in the cage. Cynthia was better with a gun. They were neat, organized, tough. The others who’d shot tonight weren’t anywhere near as good, though Leslie’s two surprising bulls-eyes had given her third among the 12 who had tried. Having Peggy

and Hilda line up had been something of a shock. Angela almost hoped they chickened out when the harder tests came. Getting those two to follow orders would be a nightmare for *any* team leader.

Angela thought about the current camp rumor and snickered. *Okay, maybe not for Doug.*

“Some of the Eagles in my army have backgrounds that give them an advantage.”

Lingering with his team, Marc’s head snapped up at the familiar words.

The crowd fell silent.

“Challenges can now be issued during a level test. Would anyone like to?”

Kenn’s big shoulders moved through the crowd that began to cheer and bet.

“I’ll offer a challenge to Marc for top gun in camp.” Kenn took his place with the other shooters.

Adrian looked at Marc. “Do you accept?”

Marc grinned. “You know it.”

“What happens when I win?” Kenn ignored his stinging jaw. The other three men looked worse than he did. “Does he fail?”

Adrian nodded. “Yes. From now on, you have to be able to defend your title. If you can’t, it’s gone.”

Meaning those who were getting by on lucky shots and other people’s misses, were SOL. Eagles groaned as the camp cheered.

“I also have a personal challenge.” For the moment, Kenn was accepted again as one of Adrian’s men and it felt better than he’d

remembered. “Plates.”

The betting went up as Adrian agreed. “Another challenge has been issued. Do you accept?”

Marc’s inner Marine had already been given permission to come out. “Yep. Got one to offer myself. How about you join us?”

Adrian hadn’t expected that. It was clear by the look on his face.

His answer, however, came from the heart. “I’d *love* to.”

The crowd was starting to get slightly unruly now. Neil waved his bruised team into the mob, giving them instructions to keep things calm while Adrian was occupied. In the rear of the throng, Kyle’s team was already doing the same thing, under Daryl’s command.

Many of the other shooters wanted in on the action, but all of them seemed to know this was a leadership moment and didn’t thrust themselves into it. The camp loved these three men the most right now. They wanted to have one moment in time where they got just that trio and the magic that might come with it.

Billy hobbled out of the way as Greg hefted a small crate of plates onto a nearby bale of hay. He would throw while Billy called it.

“On my mark.” Overseeing the shooters was all Billy could do with a broken leg.

Adrian took his place between Marc and Kenn, pausing to let his herd have the full effect of them standing together. Adrian and his hard defenders.

The only one missing is...

Angela came through the crowd and took up a place along the front wall to watch.

Samantha and Cynthia, chatting lightly, came on her heels and chose nearby spots. During their off time, those two females were staying around Angela, like Kyle's team had done with him in the beginning.

Adrian turned to make eye contact with the senior men on duty that he could see. All of them nodded alertly.

Adrian let himself shrug off the leader's cloak in exchange for the fighter's jacket. He couldn't help the small part of him that wanted to beat Marc, but he didn't stress over it. It was his job to rattle the man—personal satisfaction came second to the lessons—and he would try not to enjoy winning too much.

Angela picked up the thought and understood Adrian didn't plan to hold back. Marc didn't either. That tiger would probably never see the inside of a cage again.

“Anyone else want a piece of the action? Ten to one on the XOs, with Adrian the fave!”

Angela raised her hand. “I'll take a part of that.”

Alex wrote her name down. “What order?”

The crowd kept calling their own bets, sure of who she would place to win.

“Adrian, Kenn, Marc.”

Silence came except for heads whipping around.

Angela grinned as she stared at Marc's shocked face. "Care to prove me wrong?"

Marc felt that edge slam into him with a brutal chill. Her taste came to his lips, that sweet, mysterious odor he wanted to drown in. Marc hooked his hands into his belt. "Care to make a personal wager on it?"

Angie chuckled as the crowd voiced approval. "I think so. Depends on what you had in mind."

Marc's eyes went to her lips. He pulled back the first thought in favor of not embarrassing her. "A date."

Angela snorted as the crowd chuckled. "We've passed that already."

Marc shook his head. "Not like what I have in mind."

Angela shrugged. "And when you lose?"

The crowd oohed and groaned at the direct challenge.

Marc's eyes went dark, dangerous. "I'll tell John to clear you for full duty."

Angela grunted amid the laughs and frowns. "Damn, Marc. I'm already betting against you. I didn't really want to see you fail, but..."

The crowd roared, and those who knew it wasn't a joke anymore, pretended otherwise. Angela had hurt him a bit with the bet, even though it was meant to be a nerve challenge and nothing more, so he'd slapped her in return by dangling the freedom she longed for.

Adrian didn't like it. Marc issued challenges to

her regularly and she'd never struck out that way.

"Let's start." Adrian revealed none of his assumptions that there was already trouble in paradise.

Not involved in the drama for a change, Kenn stepped up to the line. "Set."

Billy tossed the first plate.

Kenn's gun crashed.

4

Neil moved away from the happy crowd to do a quick check on the camp. It had been a good day for Safe Haven. They were back on full water rations, their vehicles would be fully gassed and ready to roll when they were, the garden had been watered, and they'd saved a truckload of dogs from certain death. Neil was content in his duties, but the loneliness!

Sighing, he swept the shadows around the tape, nodding to perimeter men. When he spotted Kyle coming his way, Neil waited. There hadn't been much said between them since Jennifer had come here. Whenever they were together, Neil's guilt rose up at the reminder of another young girl who'd been abused.

Kyle stared at his former friend, wanting to explain, to accuse, to ask. He did none of those. Instead, he nodded. "Look at the female tents for a minute. Tell me what you think I should do."

Frowning, Neil did as instructed.

The shadows on the tent caught his attention and held it. On the floor, one hard body was lowering itself on top of a barely rounded second form. Neil realized which canvas it was—Seth had crossed the comfort line—and waited for his usual righteous anger to spew out.

So did Kyle.

The top shadow hesitated, head shaking. The one on the bottom arched a young body that either of the men watching would have taken right then. Seth visibly shuddered but didn't make any other movement.

“She’s using sex to handle her anger,” Neil stated, throat only allowing curt words.

Kyle didn't tell him that Becky hadn't been repressing her anger. There were tray servers and duty men with bruises to prove that. Neil had missed all the fun while staying away. “She'll become an Eagle if we leave them alone.”

“And probably a camp whore not long after.” As a cop, Neil had watched that pattern repeat itself again and again.

The top shadow thrust; a short cry was cut off.

The bottom shadow wiped away tears and held on, clearly refusing to let him stop.

“She'll be strong, one of the first eight ruthless rookies Angela accepts.” Kyle didn't acknowledge the revulsion or the jealousy he felt from watching the tent.

Neil paused in his automatic urge to interfere. “Is it fair, Becky getting that in exchange for being

hurt?”

Neil wanted his conscience wiped clean, but Kyle couldn't do that. “No. Nothing we ever do will equal the debt owed to her. She was sacrificed.”

Neil had known before he'd asked, but hearing the words was another form of the punishment he knew he'd be dealing himself for years to come. “I'll support whatever she *wants*. He's dead to me.”

Kyle got a few feet away before looking back. “Just Seth?”

Neil's face tightened. “Will it make any difference in your plans?”

Kyle let out a defeated sigh. “No.”

Neil gestured angrily. “Then what does it matter?”

Kyle was tired of keeping the pain to himself. “It matters because we used to be tight, you jackass.”

Neil scowled. “Hey, you're the one who—”

“Who what?”

Neil stopped the fight before it could go farther. “Convince me, Kyle. Do that and we're all good.”

Kyle reluctantly moved back to where Neil was standing. He didn't want to let anyone in, but it was common knowledge that he wanted Jennifer, and he needed a friend now more than ever. “It's the first time I've ever felt this way...”

John suddenly stiffened. “Trouble.” He gestured at Anne with wide, dismayed eyes. “Get your gun—right now!”

Also nearby, Charlie slowed, looking around.
What’s that noise?

The Eagles in the shadows did the same. They couldn’t hear anything but watching Charlie and Angela’s reactions was natural now.

Hearing sharper, Dog nudged the teenager toward the nearby trees. *Stay low.*

Not arguing, Charlie did as he was instructed.
Eekkk...

The noise was lost in the sound of gunfire. And then a scream echoed.

Charlie started to stand.

Dog pushed on him, forcing the boy down. *Be still!*

Charlie struggled against Dog’s weight. “Let me up. I have to help!”

They’ve come for young blood! Dog shoved hard and knocked Charlie down so he could curl onto the teenager’s chest and keep him there.

Marc nailed the plates as they were thrown, now on round three with all the shooters tied.

Crash! Crash!

“That’s a draw again, folks!”

Billy’s voice was nearly swallowed by the crowd groaning and laughing, paying on bets and making new ones. It was clear the three Marines

were evenly matched, but Angela thought maybe Adrian had said something to Marc that had calmed him down. That hard glaze was gone, with a thoughtful concern now in its place when their eyes met.

Angela wasn't sure what had caused the flip, but she was a bit disappointed. She liked Marc's inner man. He knew how to handle her fears—he didn't coddle her.

Marc holstered the Colt after reloading and moved toward Adrian. "A new challenge?"

As if fate had taken the words personally, radios crackled.

"Boss, we need you at the com truck. No rush."

"Copy." Adrian looked toward Angela, who began searching, and then to Kenn, who headed through the crowd.

"We're calling this one a draw, folks. Which means Marc defended his title. That's a pass." Adrian moved through the celebrating, grumbling, slightly tense herd with Eagles on his heels.

With the mob now quieter, the odd noise came again and was heard by nearly everyone.

Eeekkkkk...

The sound was one of nails on a chalkboard, sending ice into veins.

Danger to the herd!

Crimson unease traveled the camp.

Samantha wiped both sweaty palms down her pants and brought them back up with a gun in each.

That having two was better, more fulfilling somehow, was something Samantha had come to accept.

She moved quickly to Angela's flank and saw Cynthia do the same with Adrian.

Eeeekkk!

Zack took Adrian's right. "What is it, Boss?"

"Uninvited guests." Adrian struggled for a plan.

Eeekkkkk...

In the eerie stillness of the apocalyptic Kansas sky, another sound echoed—one that Safe Haven's people knew all too well. Wings.

The Eagles pulled their air horns and began blindly blasting them toward the sky as the colony got closer, but it was already too late. The bats swarmed over Safe Haven as if it was a river, washing through the camp in a panicked flurry of sharp wings and hungry fangs. Their food source had also changed.

"*Get to the mess!*" Angela sent, causing radios to spark across the camp, but it was hard to hear over the blare of the air horns and screams.

Adrian reached Angela as she braced and began firing using both hands. He put his back to her, Marc coming to form the pyramid. They blasted through the bats they could safely hit without striking anyone in the crossfire.

It wasn't nearly enough.

"Where's the caller?!" Marc shot in a pattern that he hoped would detour the rest of the colony getting set to swarm. The screams were telling the

other bats there was food down here.

“Our tent!” Angela answered, firing.

They went that way, aware of air horns dying, people falling under the winged rodents, and the angry crimson bubble rippling over the entire camp.

“Why isn’t it protecting us?” Marc steered them into the main camp. He stopped in shock at the sight of the front of the colony zeroing in on them.

The trio hit the ground as the bats swarmed. Side by side, they rolled onto their backs and continued to fire, reload and do it again, but it was like dipping water from a flooded ship with a spoon.

“Bring the shield up!” Adrian ordered.

“No!” Marc still wouldn’t sacrifice her for the rest.

Angela began to gather energy, terrified of being exposed.

The colony began to retreat without warning, sweeping into the air in a long black tunnel of wings and screeching cries.

“Where are they going?”

“Is it over?”

Angela rolled to her feet, running for their tent. Marc stayed on her heels, scanning the injured for their son.

Adrian grabbed two Eagles running by. “Get the spotlights on! Get people blowing horns in the vehicles! Get help!”

Lee and Kevin rushed off, jerking other men with them.

Adrian saw another running form, but he didn’t

try to get the mobster's attention. Kyle was trying to make it to the livestock area, where Jennifer was helping the vet. The bat sounds from that area were loud, but the barking of the dogs was louder.

Above them, the shield flashed deeper crimson, lined in black wings as the colony circled to come in for another blast.

Eekkk!

6

Kyle hit the livestock area just as the colony zoomed down, spotting Jennifer huddled under a metal table as the vet stood in front of it, waving a torch.

Kyle dropped to the ground, crawling. Bats slammed into his shoulders, his side, clawing and shrieking as he fought to get to her. Ahead of him, the bats swarmed Chris, wings ripping into his exposed skin.

Kyle jerked the air horn from his belt and activated it as he reached the vet who was now covered and on his knees.

The bats flinched away at the noise.

Kyle shoved Chris toward the semi and crawled to the crying girl, sliding his big body around her exposed skin.

Jennifer shook uncontrollably, face buried against Kyle's arm and side as he protected her. Cramped up, she felt the first contraction coming and groaned against Kyle's arm. *Not again!*

Jennifer shifted, taking the pressure off that side. The cramp receded.

“Stay calm and don’t trigger your labor.”

John’s words came to her. Jennifer concentrated on the sound of Kyle’s fast heartbeat as she relaxed her body. Kyle would keep the danger away, and she would keep herself from giving birth.

7

Whhooooo!

Angela spun the Caller harder, already knowing it wasn’t going to be enough. There was too much noise to detour the colony.

Whhhooooooo!

The blast knocked apart a substantial portion of the incoming line, sending corpses and stunned threats sliding into tents and corners, but the rest kept coming.

Angela threw herself to the ground as the colony flew over them, dropping the Caller in favor of her gun.

Next to her, Marc sensed the ambush coming and ripped free of his coat in time to wrap it over both of them and roll.

Marc took the brunt of the hit in the shoulder as the second half of the colony flew in low and hard. Bats bounced off him, flying into the ground, shrieking.

They stayed down until the sound of the wings began to draw upward, then Marc hefted them both

to their feet.

Angela brought up the shield.

A small group of trapped bats slammed into the barrier and fell back to the earth with crushed skulls and shattered wings.

Above the camp, the main colony circled, preparing for another strike. The lead scouts sent radar and came back with a barrier, but it was too late to stop the incoming rush of blood crazed predators. They slammed into the barrier like a bomb blast.

More than half of the colony hit the shield around Safe Haven, shaking the ground it rested on. Those closest to the edges were thrown to the dirt as the dome shifted sideways from the force of the impact, but it held.

Angela swayed as the sound of dropping corpses and splattering guts echoed.

Denied their newly discovered food source, the screeching colony regrouped to circle the camp and send down sonar. At the first sign of weakness, they would swarm again.

Adrian's mind insisted it was really happening. The shield was a solid, crimson wall of protection that wouldn't even let the sight of the sky through. On the other side, the bats were still there, waiting restlessly to be fed. As soon as the camp began to realize what it was, Angela would be in danger. They would all assume it was her doing.

Marc grabbed Adrian's arm, leaning close. "We built it—the Eagles. Get that spreading now!"

Before Adrian could respond, another shout ripped into their minds.

Mom!

Angela turned that way.

Marc put a hand on her arm. “I’ll go! If he was hurt, Dog would be calling.”

Angela agreed, knowing Adrian needed her help. Injured camp members were all around them. “It’s like nature’s feeding on us when she gets hungry.” Angela couldn’t find any other explanation.

“No. She’s making rounds of the dwindling herd of humanity, taking out as many as she can during each blow. We aren’t the only ones suffering her wrath.”

Adrian’s answer was chilling. Angela shared a helpless look with the leader. Then they cleared their expressions, figured out their priorities and began helping people. It was challenging work, done while listening to the remaining bats circling above, screeching in hungry dissatisfaction.

8

Kenn appeared at Adrian’s side, Tonya in tow. “They’re not going away.”

Adrian waved Seth off to work on the list he’d just given him.

Kenn got his notebook out, ready to take down the solution he was sure Adrian had in mind. It had been half an hour.

Adrian was struggling. *All those bodies!*

“Ready, Boss.”

The bats were flying down for another round of sonar. The clicks and high-pitched cries sent shudders through the camp members.

“Boss?” Kenn blocked the view of the dead, standing in Adrian’s line of sight. It was one thing their leader would always react badly to.

Adrian slammed his eyes shut, willing the pain back enough to think. The bats weren’t going away, and the camp was discovering the shield—they were already starting to avoid Angela as she helped those who were down. The rumors while under attack from the slavers had reached enough ears to be a problem now. What had to come first?

Protecting her.

Adrian waved Zack over and pointed toward Angela. “Stay by her, as close as you can until this is over.”

Kenn heard the protective order and started writing as Adrian began giving instructions, frowning. *Why do Adrian’s first thoughts always cover her?*

Angela spun around at that thought, glaring. “Why not? Yours never did!”

Adrian grinned at her open anger, hitting his radio. “That shield we made won’t hold for long. Camp members, go to the mess. Eagles, come to the bonfire.”

As he went by on his way to the com truck, Billy couldn’t stop from taking quick peeks at the shield,

though they were supposed to be pretending as if they'd helped to build it.

The Eagle didn't realize that in a way, they had. It wasn't just the leaders who created magic. The people they brought together and the things that came from those connections, made it possible.

"What happens when we open it and they swarm down?" Kenn was waiting for orders.

"We catch them. In these." Adrian pointed to one of the crates. "And then we roast them."

9

Kyle helped Jennifer up, not liking the ashen color of her skin. He slid a bloody hand around her waist, directing them toward the medical tent.

Jennifer stopped, tugging on his arm. "Hang on."

"I can't. I have to go help Adrian and you need the doctor."

Jennifer was still concentrating on her breathing. "I'm not in labor. No pain now, just a little queasy from lying down under the table."

Kyle was torn. "Are you sure?"

"I'm fine." Jennifer hid her clenched hands. "Go do your job."

Kyle leaned in to kiss her cheek. "Go to John." He took off toward the center of the devastated camp.

As soon as he was out of sight, Jennifer moved toward the semi the vet was still hiding in. "Come

out. I need you to tell me something that no one else will.”

The semi door slowly rolled up. Chris’s surly face appeared. “What?”

Jennifer tried to sound as if she wouldn’t accept a lie. “How will Kyle honor his end of our deal?”

Chris instantly hated her distress and the man who was causing it. “He’ll use one of the whores who know it doesn’t mean anything. That’s what all of them do.”

10

“All right, watch Kenn and Marc for the setup and brace for a kick. The air pressurized cans have some recoil.”

The 10 Eagles lined up on the far side of the fire exchanged nervous, excited glances. This was one of the moments they’d signed up for—to discover if they had the steel to meet this new world and come out on the other side.

Shadows flickered eerily as they waited for Adrian’s call. The bats screeching and the crackling of the now triple-sized bonfire was the only noise.

“You ready?”

Samantha nodded, aware that Jeremy still wanted to protest. They had the camp members under canvas, the injured dragged inside, and now, they would take out the threat. Because of her time logged on hunting runs, Samantha had been given the honor of helping to light the nets once the bats

were trapped. “Yes.”

Adrian made eye contact with each of the team before holding up his hand, calming them and steeling nerves. When it dropped, the attack would resume.

11

It is my job.

Both unaware of the new battle about to begin, Dog followed Charlie’s angry march through the livestock perimeter, still stinging from his father’s laughter at finding the wolf sitting on him. All Marc had said was for him to get to the medical tent and help. He hadn’t even told the wolf to get up!

You’re going the wrong way. The master said go to the medical man.

“Bug off, Dog!”

Pups! The wolf chuffed. Didn’t Charlie understand the gates were opening? Nature was furious with man’s constant destruction. If she had her way, nightmares would be reality all the time.

Charlie marched faster, face a red glare that ignored gestures and shouts being thrown at him from crowded tent flaps. *I spent the entire attack on the ground! Dog had no right to—*

“Eeeekkkk!”

Charlie looked up in time to see the crimson shield flutter, then vanish.

Run! Dog’s order was followed by a hard nudge that got Charlie’s feet moving. The battle wasn’t

over.

The bats swarmed down in a violent rush of hunger.

The teenager found himself once again being smothered by the wolf's weight.

“Damn it!” Angela turned into the shadows.

Marc dropped his net and took off after her as she dodged the wings and ran for Charlie's frantic shouts. *What the hell is he still doing out in the open?*

Eagles hit the ground as the colony came in low and hard, and then jumped to their feet, hoisting guns loaded with nets.

Adrian held his button in. “Wait for it... Hold... Hold...”

The bats hit the empty camp and screeched in fury as they searched for food. Tents collapsed; thuds and bangs echoed as they flew into trucks and trees in the chaos. The colony remerged on the updraft and circled back for the downward spiral that would drive the Eagles away from the huge bonfire, making the people easier targets.

“Hold...”

Lined up behind the fire, 10 men tightened their fingers on triggers.

The bats swarmed toward the center of camp, drawn by the sounds and movements of the waiting team.

“Hold...”

They neared 50 feet... “Fire!”

Nets and alcohol flew out, widening to catch the brunt of the colony in the first shots. The nets brought the flying line to a halt and actually drove the first bunch into those behind them. More nets flew in from the sides, creating a trap.

Heavy bundles of rope fell into the roaring fire that Adrian had made them extend. The smell of roasting wings and fur permeated the air as the alcohol doused nets caught fire. The screeching was endless.

“Fire!”

Kenn and Kyle hit the secondary net guns.

Another large cluster of bats was brought down. They hit the edge of the flames and bounced away in squealing protest.

“Get the ends!”

Daryl and Shawn dragged the screeching net into the flames, gloves protecting their skin.

Adrian fired the last shell, wishing for a dozen more. After this, they were down to brooms and tennis rackets.

Angela brought the shield back up. It became solid, crimson edges already tinted in that green and gold. Bats slammed into it with splatters and satisfying cracks.

Most of the colony had been caught in the first 15' x 15' net to fly at them, and nearly all the rest were in other nets or burning. Less than 100 were flying around the camp in search of an escape.

Adrian hit his radio. “Take ‘em out!”

Eagles came from the tents with tennis rackets,

bats, brooms, and torches, determined to eliminate their share.

12

As things wound down, Adrian evaluated his camp and found it devastated.

Unlike during the sinkhole, when only two small areas had been affected, the entire camp, from one end to the other, was now in shambles. Tents were down, some smoldering and splattered in bat blood and dung. Animals were running loose, a few down. Sadly, they'd also had more deaths.

The mechanic and his wife had been found a few minutes ago outside their charred tent. They had been crushed in the first stampede when the bats attacked. They would join three men who'd given their lives to protect kids from the swarm, and five members of the camp who'd been caught in the crossfire of this newest war. Three had been struck by other camp members who no longer had a weapon or a haven here. Two had been overwhelmed by the bats on a volunteer patrol to collect their loose animals. They hadn't gotten the message to take cover on the last strike.

Samantha stayed in front of Adrian as the Eagles gave a sitrep, not wanting him to stare at the sheet covered bodies behind her. Ten more lives lost. He was failing them. That was the clearest thought in his head. Samantha moved closer, determined to use whatever she thought might work

to distract him.

Samantha didn't realize she'd read his thoughts and mood like Angela was always doing.

Neither did he.

"Didn't know they were doing something that big!"

"Good thing."

"Yeah, but doesn't that mean we're locked in?"

Camp members were staring at the shield in amazement. The questions and comments would have to be addressed, but the coming of dawn's light wasn't far off. Adrian wanted it left up until then.

"What happens when they realize they can't touch it?" Samantha was whispering. "That they just can walk through it? They'll know it wasn't built by Eagles."

Adrian gestured to where that was being explored by Zack's three boys. The trio was placing their palms against it and being stopped.

Samantha grunted. "Okay, so we could keep them here, but I don't understand how it knows not to let the boys through, but it will let *us*."

Kenn appeared on Adrian's right for a sitrep. "Because Angela controls it. She makes it solid or transparent. She also feeds from it."

The others gaped at Kenn's words, but Adrian's mind was racing. He would have a lot of shit to shovel to cover this one, but it would work. No one was muttering about Angela anymore or avoiding contact as she and Marc escorted Charlie to the main tents. Both parents were splattered in blood and dirt.

Looks like they had a close call. Samantha caught sight of Dog limping behind them in pride. The four of them made a striking group moving through camp.

Samantha felt Adrian's breath catch. He looked older in the dim light. All the stress wasn't being kind to their hard-assed leader. The misery coming from him begged for a solution. Samantha delivered the best advice she could think of. "Stay busy. I know how this sucks."

Adrian was humbled as she went to help Cynthia. These people had been beaten, broken when they arrived here, but that wasn't the case anymore. He'd done right by them and they were growing into their destiny. *If only I can have the same luck with Conner when we're reunited!* That time was weeks away now. Adrian was terrified of the hate that had to be waiting for him.

Since they'd taken out the slavers, everything was chaos. People were looking forward to life settling down. The problem was that they had also begun to doubt it was possible. If a few more secrets were released, the camp would be too off balance to allow Adrian's leadership to be effective. He needed a way to bring them together...or to abdicate and let someone else do it. That was an unspoken thought among all his army these days, but it wasn't Kenn that their eyes went to.

The camp had the same opinion, though a different choice. Despite Kenn staying by Adrian's side, the camp was showing a liking for Marc. It had

grown tonight because he'd chosen to go help his family during the crisis. It was fine to have loyalty, but those who were not part of the army wanted men in charge who would put their loved ones first. It was a fact that Adrian took to heart. When they found out he'd left Conner waiting, to care for this camp instead, it would be the final straw.

The blond leader wiped a hand across his brow. *Maybe being out of command will be a good thing. All I seemed to be able to do is get people killed.* Adrian had little doubt that eliminating so many men, so openly, had caused it. He no longer felt like one of the good guys.

13

Jeremy dropped his clothes into the fire. They were covered in blood, human and other. As he walked through the devastated camp, Jeremy's mind was on the conversations he'd overheard while protecting Samantha. He'd been trying hard to leave her alone and found himself paying more attention to the camp than he usually did.

"Bet this stuff wouldn't happen in the mountains. Not the sinkholes, not the animal attacks."

"And we can defend that!"

"What about the cave-ins?"

"Smaller risks there than what we're having now."

“We’re a target.”

“A lot of people think so.”

Jeremy had already assumed these people would pick the mountains, but it had become real tonight, listening to Adrian lay it out to those who he let draw him into brief conversations. Anything to keep from facing the latest deaths.

They’d lost twice as many as they’d originally thought, half from a senior tent that had been unprotected. A part of the deflected colony had flown in there and been discovered long after the rest had been burned.

Jeremy forced his mind from the awful memory that he was sure he would dream about tonight. He had other nightmares to worry over. He was about to be cooped up inside a mountain, with ghosts for company.

His mind flashed to that other moment again, the one that had ruined his life and sent him to the seedier side of things. That had been the day he’d lost Mira.

The ski lift had malfunctioned, sending them both from the seat. They’d lain on the side of the slope for hours before anyone came, hours where he’d watched her die and developed a loathing for the location. Afterwards, even when the Inspector said his fooling around and rocking the seat hadn’t mattered, Jeremy hadn’t been able to go to the cabin for his things. Every time he heard the groan and shift of the stone, he heard that awful snap again—

one of rusted metal finally giving way.

He'd ended up with two shattered legs and spent years learning to make them work again between surgeries. Mira had been buried during the first of five operations he'd undergone. None of them had been as awful as his fiancé's death.

Jeremy had turned to his skills for relief from the guilt, hacking and blackmailing his way out of a MIT scholarship and into the criminal underworld. When the war came, he'd been a rich computer geek, living on hacking thrills and bourbon. Surviving the war hadn't been his idea. Passing out in that subway tunnel the night before had been. He'd hoped to be run over before he sobered up.

Now, he would go inside a mountain to live for months where he would get to hear that heart-wrenching snap not just occasionally, but hundreds or maybe even thousands of times.

“Why don't we hook up a computer and try the internet again? There's got to be a better place.”

“It was locked down. Have to have the code.”

“Surely someone has hacked it by now?”

“That's crazy! It would tell any government left where we...”

Mind a blur of despair, Jeremy moved away from the growing argument, ignoring the part of him that wanted to explain to the crowd how many times he himself had tried to break the code.

For the two weeks they'd had power after the

bombs, he had worked on it from his laptop. Jeremy still had the notebooks where he recorded the failed attempts, but he wasn't sure why. That world was gone. It was time everyone accepted the hard, cold truth. *We're on our own.*

14

"This is the death list."

Adrian controlled himself, taking the sheet.

The Eagles were silent as Adrian read, holding their breath as they waited to see how he would take it. They were prepared to offer distractions.

Adrian let the paper fall to the table and turned away. He stood there, shoulders hunched, anguish in his heart. Twenty lives.

Dog came to Adrian's heel and stared intently. Adrian had a wall up, trying to keep himself together. Dog had to call to him with a low growl, unable to break through mentally.

Adrian finally realized Dog wanted to tell him something. Instead of the information or ideas that he'd come to expect from the no-nonsense wolf...

Will you tell the beast keeper to let me alone? I don't like the way Star wiggles.

Adrian stared. "What?"

She whimpers too. The timber wolf growled in low annoyance. *I scare her.*

Adrian felt a snicker coming and fought it. He wasn't allowed to be happy in any way when more of his people were dead. *I thought you weren't*

interested in mutts.

Dog stamped his paw roughly. *Your human wants it, not us! Tell him she's not my...type.*

Adrian snorted in mild surprise. *Where did you hear that?*

Dog leered, tongue lolling. *The pup I protect and his friend. They have an intense interest in females.*

Adrian's smirk almost made it onto his lips this time. *Got you thinking?*

The wolf's fur bristled. *I only sniffed her once!*

"Just once?" Adrian was now caught up in the personal moment with the wolf.

Dog's head lowered in embarrassment. *Okay, twice, but she rubbed against me! What was I supposed to do? In a pack, that means take me!*

Adrian's chuckle spilled out in a burst of calming energy that spread over the nervous men like a soothing balm. He was okay. They could go about their duties and let him carry the weight.

Mind the flank!

Dog's growl went through those closest as a mental shout as he padded toward the dogs circling the perimeter in a small group. The ants had been absent during the sinkhole and the bat attack, but they were following again. More than one of the mutated insects was missing a limb from the practices. Adrian and the Eagles were still dropping bait balls into the four-foot anthills, but the dogs laying down scents around the perimeter and patrolling in packs was helping to keep them back.

Adrian had instructed the Eagles to put thick nets over the camp at night from now on, and to finish the ledge around it. They would also start adding portable walls that could fold. The use of crimson paint would further convince the camp that the Eagles had built the shield. The men were refusing to say how it worked so that there was no chance of anyone sneaking in and dismantling it while they slept. The camp had accepted that answer, but the effects of the attack had given them all a new level of jumpiness.

Sighing, Adrian turned to Kevin. “Walk with me on rounds.”

The level three Eagle fell in. “You know it.”

It was well after dawn before Safe Haven finally settled down, but it wasn't the calm peacefulness they'd come to expect. It was dropping from exhaustion when their eyes refused to stay open any longer.

Chapter Fourteen
Give Me Your Line
Near Cleveland, Oklahoma
June 10th

1

It was time for the mandatory camp meeting. All around the mess, tables and chairs were set up, speakers were in place. People exchanged curious, nervous glances when Adrian's top people arrived.

These feelings of unease were hidden behind welcoming smiles as Adrian came through the crowd, a large plastic tube in one hand and a mug in the other.

Marc picked out the bloodshot eyes and suspected the cup held something stronger than coffee.

Adrian made his way to the front without responding to any of the greetings or questions. He dropped down on a front table.

The silence was awkward as everyone found a seat. Those in the quarantine zone were listening on a radio that Kenn had rigged up. Their votes would count too.

As they sat, Adrian looked at his people. Despite all he had tried to teach them, they were still sheep who would always need a strong shepherd to

keep them together. It was disappointing. *Will it help to keep trying? To try harder?* “We’re here to pick our choice for the winter. If we wait any longer, we won’t have time to get it ready.”

Adrian’s deviation from the usual start of the monthly camp meeting drew instant attention and more unease.

“We’ve been checking places as we travel. None of them are acceptable.”

“What places?” an annoyed voice called.

Adrian rolled his eyes. “The ones you were too busy grazing to see. Kenn, read it.”

Kenn exchanged a worried look with the others in command before he opened his notebook. “This is a list of all the places we’ve searched for authority, help, or permanent shelter. These searches were conducted by various combinations of Eagles and camp members.” Kenn took a breath. “Nellis Air Force Base, Hawthorne Army Depot, Nellis Bombing Range, the city of Las Vegas, Santa Clara, the Dugway Proving Ground, Salt Lake City, NORAD, Grand Junction, Boulder, Ft. Collins, Denver, Lander, Casper, Ft. Supply, Ft. Bridger, Rapid City, Cheyenne.”

Kenn ignored the mutters and groans, turning the page. “The Essex Compound, Rawlins, Cincinnati, Glendale, Tablerock, Roanoke, the Virginia Military Institute, White Sulphur Springs, Ft. Seybert, the city of Oakland, Basset, Ft. Bliss, White Sands, F. E. Warren AFB...”

The list went on for a while.

Adrian waved at Neil to pass around the albums of pictures they'd taken, verifying these places were gone or destroyed.

Tears and pale faces greeted Adrian when Kenn finally reached the end.

"We found nothing in any of these places but bodies."

"Why was all this done in secret?" Roger demanded.

A dangerous tension filled the crowd.

"Because the weight of those disappointments was mine to carry." Adrian looked at his soft people. "You don't tell an injured person there's no doctor to help. You do the best you can and handle the weight until they've regained their strength." His eyes flashed over their nods and headshakes. "We took the pictures for this moment, for your doubt."

Kenn handed out another album. This one contained shots from the places they'd searched. Every image captured death, horror, and the sense that the old world was gone forever.

Adrian pulled the cap off the tube and took out the map he'd been working on since right after the war.

Kyle stepped up to hold an end.

Adrian remained seated, pointing. "The red is our back trail. Known blast sites are in black. Debris and radiation areas in green. Purple is where we've searched."

It was easy to see he'd put a lot of time into it. There were dates, notes, and even the number of

people in Safe Haven at each location.

The camp leaned forward.

Billy subtly drew attention from a few Eagles and motioned toward the map. On it, Adrian's Montana base was clearly marked...and sat in the middle of a ground zero.

Those who understood the implications kept quiet, telling themselves he had found out later, that he hadn't taken them all that way based on a terrible lie.

"We might have tried to find one of those underground bunkers in the desert, but I doubted they'd let us in even if we could find one. I also didn't think any of us wanted to be back under the control of our government."

There were more nods at that, along with a few shouts of agreement.

Adrian's highest people began to relax, seeing he was still driving his herd.

"NORAD might have worked if not for the slavers ruining the water supply there. We haven't ruled out caves in Kentucky yet, but the reports of mutations in the water in Ohio and Indiana are too close. If the snakes are using the creeks and rivers, being underground with them is the last place we want to try to survive and raise our kids."

Women were swaying quickly to Adrian's view, many of them hugging their charges closer.

"A safe place to rebuild is the most important choice we'll make. I'll tell you what I've come up with, and we'll go from there." Adrian took a drink,

stifling a grimace at the taste of the whiskey-laced coffee. *I don't get drunk for the taste.* "We can hole up in the mountains and try to get it ready for winter. I suspect that is coming sooner than we're used to. Or we can head south, where winter won't be an issue. I hear Mexico is nice this time of year."

The crowd became almost panicked at his sarcastic words.

"South?"

"Are you crazy?"

"What else have you got?"

Angela held her breath, thinking of their dreams. *He's telling them now!*

Adrian scanned them through blurry vision. "This land is going sour. We can hide in the mountains for a while, but at some point, we're going to have to consider leaving. At least until the chemicals clear out. The mutations, we'll be dealing with no matter where we go, I think."

"Isn't there any place untouched?" someone called.

Adrian shrugged. "Not that I've thought of. Except for extreme places, like the poles or an island somewhere, the entire planet has been or will be, affected by the war."

"What about an island?"

"We could rebuild somewhere else."

"I'm not leaving my country!"

Adrian stood up, letting go of the map.

Kyle caught it, frowning. He rolled it up and slid it into the tube.

Adrian lit a smoke, letting them vent.

“We’re not leaving!”

“I would, if there were no place else.”

“We don’t know that.”

“Look at all the pictures!”

“We haven’t tried the mountains yet, and he’s already said we could reinforce a set of caves and survive there.”

“I’m not going.”

Adrian held up a hand before it could go further. “Small groups of 10 and 20 are hiding all over this broken country, surviving in their basements, subway tunnels, in bomb shelters. They’re using hardware stores, lumberyards, taking over malls and schools.” Adrian paused for effect as the crowd quieted, listening. “How many of those people will survive a winter that lasts six or 10 months? Do you think they’ve even considered it?”

Adrian shrugged at the worried mutters. “It could be longer than that. The skygrit from the war held in the heat for a while, but we’ve all noticed the chill at night, the sleet in the fog—and it’s only June.” Adrian firmed his jaw. “The thought of living under the ground or inside a mountain is horrifying to me. I want to see the sun, feel the grass, taste the rain. None of that will be possible here for decades, and I can’t wait that long. I’m voting that we check the mountains for more survivors, then head to the coast to look for a ship that survived the war.”

Adrian held up a hand again to calm the noisy crowd and went on without responding to any of the

words that had been thrown at him. “Many southern islands have an average temperature of 74° and are out of the main Jetstream, meaning they rarely get hit by hurricanes and tropical storms.” Adrian was already sure it was a waste of effort. For the first time, the vote would go against him. They would choose to set up a winter camp in the mountains and he wouldn’t be leading them then. *My successor will have that heavy chore.* He nodded at Kenn to pass out the ballots. “We’re leaving tomorrow at noon.”

“Wait.” Roger Sawyer, who had served as head of the moral board for Leon’s trial, stood up with a hard expression. “There’s something else we need you to handle.”

Adrian sighed inwardly and gave a glare of his own. “Freedom, Mr. Sawyer, includes love, race, and any number of other things. We will not start that old shit up again.”

“But these ...relationships are wrong!”

“The freedom to make your own future is never wrong.” Adrian motioned to Kenn to go ahead and pass out the ballots. “It’s what Safe Haven stands for. A smart guy like you should have figured that out already.” Adrian moved on before the ex-detective could respond. “We’ve gone through a lot of changes together since the war. More are coming, starting with our kids. Official adoption procedures are being drafted. I’m also gathering a camp council to help me keep things together and allow my time to be spent leading.”

Now, he had their full attention.

His top people exchanged glances of respect, and still, there was a slight wariness. Right now, Adrian wasn't hitting on all eight, as Kyle might have said, and his closest men and women knew it.

"You're going to hear more training and see it too, as we advance through the levels. You know what the Eagles do—they make sure you wake up every day—and they're just as needed now as they were before the slavers. When you see and hear these sessions, stay back, or get hurt. We play hard."

"So it's okay to come and watch?"

Adrian nodded at Matt's eager question, using smaller ammunition to supply a much-needed distraction. "Yes. In addition, non-Eagles may now take the advanced self-defense and gun classes, providing they work up from the beginning like everyone else." Adrian turned a page and took a quick swallow, too aware of Angela's approval over the way he handled his herd. She didn't know that he'd been doing it all his life, but it wouldn't have mattered to her anyway. She followed him for the here-and-now, not for the back-then. "Safe Haven has so many couples and families starting that we're adding a third section to the sleeping area. Couples will now have their own place, effective tomorrow night."

The crowd murmured their approval and waited to see how far Adrian planned to go tonight on that topic.

"Repopulation has to happen."

Instant silence came as the Eagles and camp realized he meant to go all the way.

“But it will always be willing, or the offender will be banished. Those are Safe Haven codes of conduct. Nowhere does it say close friendships between willing partners is forbidden because of age. As long as the female is protected, we *need* her to help us repopulate.”

Before any of them could shout, Adrian’s expression darkened. “On the other side of that, there has to be a limit, an age or a line that we use to determine what’s needed for survival and what’s taking advantage of our youth. So, where’s the line?”

The camp had quick answers.

“Sixteen, like it always has been!”

“Fifteen.”

“Why not just do away with an age line and judge them by each situation?” Tucker flushed at frowns from the other rookies. Even they knew Eagles were supposed to be seen and not heard during moments like this.

“Size,” Adrian shot back promptly, as though he’d been expecting it. “Right now, when there are 284 of us, we can do that. What about years from now when there are thousands of us again? Or hundreds of thousands?”

Tucker scoffed uneasily. “Worry about it then, I guess.”

“And that’s why you’re not leading this camp,” Adrian scolded. “Sit down.”

Tucker did, with a red face.

“If we use the same attitude our predecessors did, we’ll get the same results. I will not leave it for someone else to fix. It’s part of our duty.” Adrian waved a hand. “So, what’s your line?”

Now there was an uneasy silence from the camp, most of them afraid to volunteer a number. They didn’t understand it had been Adrian delivering a punishment to Tucker for forgetting his place.

“Anyone?”

Lee stood up. “Another part of that camp standard is justice for the victim. They pick what will help them heal. If we trust them to know what they need at a time like that, then shouldn’t we consider their wants when they’re happy?”

“Absolutely. But what if a ten-year-old likes it?”

Adrian’s bluntness made people cringe and mutter, but Angela admired the guts it took to handle this in such an open manner.

“Okay, we’ve decided that 10 is too young. How about 12?”

Another large round of protests echoed. Adrian kept leading them. “Okay, then, 14. Who objects to 14?”

There were still a larger number of complaints, especially since Jennifer was that age.

“So we’re saying 16 is where we draw the line, even though we need babies.” Adrian gestured at a back table, where he’d had Hilda gather all the girls.

“Look at them. *Count* them. In six months, that’s all. Twenty-five females to give us the next generation.” Adrian motioned again. “Now look at those who are already pregnant.”

That was a single table and it wasn’t full. It caused concern as people began to understand his point.

Adrian pointed at a last part of the mess, pleased with the quiet way Peggy and Hilda had arranged it all. “Now count how many women we have from 18 to 50.”

Shock rippled through the mess. When they were seated wherever they wanted, it was harder to spot, but now, it was hard to miss. All of them fit at three tables.

Adrian continued. “The number of men here is four times that of the women. Watch what happens when you take the age line to 16.”

Hilda pointed, sending those of age to the adult female table. It only added three.

“Thirty-eight females total, with six more once the births come. That means only one in four men will even get the *chance* to reproduce.”

“Lower, actually.” John spoke up like he’d been asked to do. “Ten of those women can’t have kids, thanks to various injuries from the war.”

The mess exploded with panic. The tide shifted.

“Make the age 11!”

“We need a law that says they have to have kids!”

“No way!”

“We’ll do a lottery draw!”

Adrian again let them go for a minute. Eagles on duty moved closer to the females. Kyle was one of those, hovering between the rear tables so he could protect Jennifer if it was needed.

When he thought they’d vented enough fear, Adrian took control back. “What happened to that moral line?”

“To hell with morals!” Mitch lifted his beer. “It’s about survival!”

“Not this camp, not ever!” Adrian quieted them with his anger. “We’re for freedom. In nature, puberty makes the choice. That has to be a part of the line, as well as willingness. We just need that starting age. We have to ask ourselves what’s the lowest number we can live with. Everyone needs to do it, from the age of 12 and up. Write it on your ballot and I’ll post the final choice. We have couples in Safe Haven that enjoy our freedom and protection. That has to continue. Give me your line.”

The camp muttered and grumbled a bit, but clearly, they understood the elaborate point.

Adrian didn’t hang around for the vote results, already certain that 15 and the mountains would be chosen. Both were a mistake, but he could only push so fast. If he had pointed out that not even one in four people had survived the war, they might have chosen a lower age, but Adrian didn’t want them fighting over little girls any more than he wanted their species to die out. In time, the age would be 14

and puberty, with a mental evaluation of both parties. If that didn't help them within 20 years, it would have to go lower. Adrian hated it, but without repopulation, humanity was doomed. On the other side, a bit of the animosity toward Ray and Dale might let up. With 200 men competing for the chance at 40 women, having two less contenders mattered.

Angela came to Adrian's side as the camp began to drop votes into the locked box. "You know what this will cause?"

Adrian's answer was silent. *It will make females the most cherished cargo we haul.*

Angela could see it in his mind, how he dreamed it would be, and instantly approved. In Adrian's world, girls as young as seven were being escorted by their male, who handled all her needs and happiness. These strictly-screened men would dote on these girls for almost a decade before any contact occurred, but in that time, they would become attached and create love matches that would lead to not just the occasional birth, but to one after the other, out of natural contentment.

Adrian flashed another image, one of girls being taught how to pick a man for themselves. Instead of advanced algebra, they were given relationship skills. "Their protectors are Eagles. They can only come from my army, and in return for the honor, my men will train them, protect them, and understand the gift they've been given."

Angela was humbled by his vision. In it, men were taught the same things, only they were drilled on it until it became a way of life.

“A new type of Eagle.”

“No.” Adrian reluctantly pushed her out of his thoughts. “A new kind of man. One not full of violence that bleeds all over the world.”

Angela’s sharp mind put it together with a snap. “You were ready for this, for them becoming attracted to younger girls.”

“Yes. They see what your generation of rookies will be like. They know the next are worth waiting for too.”

Angela missed the wording. “How long do you foresee it taking to actually have them with the girls?”

Adrian gave her a clever smile that she knew the camp had never seen.

“It’s already happening, Angie. You’ll handle the first mental evaluation when you talk to Kyle.”

Meaning Adrian was sure Kyle would cross the line. Angela frowned. “Is Jennifer in danger?”

“Would I leave them alone if she were?”

Angela hated the answer. “If it does something for the greater good? Yes.”

Adrian didn’t lie or apologize as he moved into the deeper shadows. This was what the job required.

Frowning over the revelations, Angela moved into the empty training tent and shrugged out of her jacket. She chose the new workout equipment and began doing sets, mind not on one subject, just

browsing as she worked out. Adrian needed her to jump another level in the next two weeks. That would take effort.

Angela grunted, pushing the sweaty bar up. The men used heavier weights and did harder tests, especially with the limits John and Marc had insisted on, but she was alone right now. *I'll do what I want.* John had said two more weeks before she could have full duty, but Angela was determined to earn it quicker.

Adrian studied her from just inside the flap, where the shadows were the darkest. His gaze narrowed in on her sweaty skin as she finished that set and started a different one. Pushups were hard on her. Those shoulder muscles were still healing, but she didn't give up until she'd finished the full set.

Her actions spoke of someone determined to do important things. Her workdays included time training and learning, but even her off days found her doing something for the camp. She spent time with her son, did her shifts, and volunteered. When those things were put with everything else that she'd given, it was enough to make Adrian take notice. He liked her routine, her attitude, her ability to calm him. Then there was the way her hair beckoned and the way she smelled. *I can't get her out of my mind!*

Lee saw Adrian take a place in the shadows, but he didn't join the leader as their radios crackled.

“Hello, Safe Haven. This is the first transmission of American Waves. Good evening,

good wishes, and good will to you all.”

Having already read the first script before giving a copy to Adrian, Lee tuned it out, but around camp, people stopped to stare as Kevin’s smooth timbre began lulling them into slumber. It was a brilliant way to quell the jumpiness.

“We’re going to start with a request format and go from there, but first, we’ll have a few minutes of something I have personally longed for. Happy long belated Memorial Day, Safe Haven, and to everyone else out there listening—we salute your determination to survive and we honor your losses.”

The sound of Taps filled their minds with ghosts and awful flashes, but Adrian had told his men things would always get worse before they got better. Starting the new radio station in respect, allowing the camp a night to grieve, would generate a layer of scab over the bleeding wounds. With enough moments like it, there might even be true healing.

Staying in the shadows, Lee wished Adrian could find some of what he was always giving his people. If the blond man lost faith, they were doomed.

2

When Angela emerged from the tent, the shadows were deep. The first thing she saw was the glow of a cherry in the darkest of them. The smell of pot smoke came to her, along with another,

sharper scent she instantly identified.

She waited, noticing the closest Eagle could barely hear them. Angela frowned when Lee gave her a pointed look and turned his back.

“You okay?”

“Yes.” She could hear that he wasn’t. So much death and loneliness had Adrian at a personal limit.

“And you?”

Adrian wanted to tell her everything was 5-by but lying was more than he could manage. “I will be.”

“Soon?” She heard him sigh.

“Probably not. What I need isn’t...available.”

Angela didn’t like the misery in his answer. “Is there anything I can do?” She frowned. She hadn’t meant to make *that* offer.

Adrian’s mouth opened, eyes already begging. “Tell me to go away and do it right now!”

Need blazed between them, raw and sharp.

Angela didn’t hesitate, despite the lust thumping through her body. “I belong to Marc. Go choose a whore.”

He was gone a second later.

Angela let her feet take her to where she had wanted to be all day. She ignored the witch whispering of the pleasure she was missing. Marc was moving them through the levels of sex at a pace she was comfortable with. Adrian’s relief source wouldn’t get that consideration, or any other, until he’d satisfied that burning need.

Not all men become monsters. You must know

that.

Angela didn't answer the witch. *Let one of the others tend Adrian. He was right. I'm not available.*

3

“When did you know mom was the one?”

“As soon as I saw her. That was the day I went against Mother Brady for the first time in my life.”

Charlie and Marc were hanging around the mess, watching to make sure the crowd didn't get unruly. There were stares and murmurs as people went by. Now that the threats were gone, last night's brutal match was the talk of the camp. For Marc, it was the start of another stress, one where he had to be careful not to let the inner man come forward too often. He was still denying that part of himself, not ready to face it.

“Was it hard to pick between her and our family?”

“No. I knew she was perfect for me in ways that they could never be.” Marc was jerked into the past. “She was my kind, long before I knew what that was.”

Charlie pushed in gently, sure his dad wouldn't be bothered. He observed the moment with an intense curiosity that was usually lacking when it came to the details of their beginnings. He still hadn't gotten over how young his mom had been, but each moment he witnessed reinforced the bond, the irresistible need for each other. That was what

Charlie was hoping for, why he was storing information. He was delighted when Marc began rolling through it as if he was there.

Welcome home.

Her voice was in my head, confirming her gift and my sanity. I grinned. "It's great to be back."

Worlds spun in her gaze, tempting, pulling. I reluctantly tore my eyes away from her sweet face.

Angie was wearing a short white skirt and a blue top that was too adult for her in my opinion. Her eyes darkened to the exact shade to match it as she picked up my thoughts. I watched her little hands close her coat and felt bad for my observation.

"It's okay. Georgie picked it out."

Why did that bother me so much?

Angie moved closer and the air parted, teasing my nose with vanilla. She smelled good. She was within a foot of me, ebony ringlets swaying against her pale skin, and I understood what she wanted with a slight shiver of anticipation and a shudder of fear.

She stopped, unsure because of my reaction.

I slowly opened my arms to her.

I expected the usual quick hug of family and was shocked into stillness when she slid those tiny arms around my neck and placed her soft hair against my chin. Then the sensation hit, and I couldn't move. After only a second, I melted and hugged her back. My eyes closed as peace settled over me. I'm sure

she knew how rarely I was shown physical affection, but I wasn't sure how to tell her that I would need this again now that I'd had it. It was as if the entire world had vanished, leaving only calm and an edge of everything being almost perfect.

We stood there for a long time, just holding onto someone who understood how important the contact was. When she slowly moved away, (I couldn't. I didn't have the will power), it was as if a cloud had come over the sun and I realized it was her reaction, not mine. She had a deep need for me, though I had no idea why, and that craving sealed the deal. I'd never been this wanted before. I wouldn't give it up.

"How long this time?"

"A month or two. Then the training."

"Early."

"Yes. She senses something, I think."

"And then back to the farm again come fall?"

"Yes."

"Then we'll have this moment, at least."

I was lost. It was exactly how I felt.

I know, she sent silently. That's how I found you.

It was a relief to know I hadn't imagined any of it. She had the family curse, and I was the only one she'd trusted enough to tell.

That made me smirk. I could almost sense her worries ease. Standing there beside her, my own problems weren't gone, but they weren't as big anymore.

We settled into the cold patio chairs, blocked from sight by tall bushes and trees. Our eyes

remained on each other in fascination. With no prying adults observing our every expression, I stared at her pale skin and those violet eyes that I could swear were blue a minute before. She was a perfect china doll I could never admit to wanting to play with. My gaze swept over her. I felt my heart tighten. She was amazing, beautiful. I sensed that when she was older, I might beg to kiss her.

“I’d let you.” She flushed, sparkling at me.

I blinked in surprise. “Okay.”

I’d asked Uncle Larry some careful questions about girls while he taught me to work on the farm. I’d left him with the impression I meant my new girlfriend, Jeanie, and he’d left me with an image that filled my thoughts every night after that when I tried to sleep. He told me to be careful about age.

“Men get old, Marcie. We age and grow bitter. Get a younger woman and be sure you really like her. You’ll be together a long time in this family.”

Now, staring at the forbidden fruit, I thought I understood. Angie had a face I would never get tired of. My heart thudded in real pain. It was one I would miss over the coming years. There was no way my mother would let this happen, and there was only so much sneaking I could do before she found out.

“I might be able to make it go away,” Angie offered sadly.

“No!”

My quick answer drained the misery from her face and replaced it with a slight grin that I wanted to make bigger. I wanted to hear her laugh again, though it was a risk. My mother could be anywhere by now.

“She’s helping your sister with her dress.”

I was relieved to hear it and I didn’t think to doubt the information. As we stared, there were so many things that I suddenly wanted to say, to ask.

She knew them all without me having to say a word if I couldn’t figure out how to put it. It was great.

“Yes, it’s true. You won’t tell?”

“No. How can you do it?”

“I just always could.”

“Born with it?”

“I think so.”

Which meant she had unanswered questions, yet she’d never been exposed. That meant she was smart. My mother would have her shipped off the same day she found out.

I saw Angie wince. “Sorry.”

She shrugged. “Not your fault.”

“Not yours either.”

Her eyes darkened again, and I shook my head firmly. “You didn’t choose to have it.”

The eight-year-old was silent, but I caught her thought.

Then why are they so mean to me?

I didn’t have an answer for that. All the punishments that should have gone to my uncle

were being dealt out to his wife and stepdaughter.
“She’s trying to run you guys off.”

“Yeah.”

My gaze went over Angie again, this time lingering where it wanted. I felt my pulse increase. Angie was a baby right now compared to me—at least on the outside. On the inside, she was where I was—a lonely preteen who couldn’t wait to grow up.

“She’s looking for you now.”

I nodded, not unconcerned, but I’d chosen this place with my mother in mind. I used to be allergic to the plants out here and still avoided the area. It was among the last places she would search. First though, she would go see if I’d discovered the dirt bike in the garage and taken it out for a spin. Which I would, tomorrow, when it would be warm enough to stay out on it all day.

I looked at Angie, wondering if she’d ever been on a dirt bike.

She shook her head.

“Tomorrow, down by the old tire swing.”

“When?”

I thought fast and tried to account for my mother’s extra chores. “Noon.”

We would be alone for hours, away from everyone.

Angie grinned at me, showing those dimples, and again, her happiness jerked me into a world where only the two of us existed. It wasn’t weird, like when I flipped through the magazines in my closet, but I knew they were connected. When she

leaned closer, I held my breath to keep from touching her hair.

“I made this for you.”

It was a grass ring, the kind you handed to a friend and then yanked the top off, except this one had been repeatedly woven around itself until it was a solid object, able to be worn.

I watched my hand go out as if it was someone else’s. I took it slowly. Our fingers touched, silk meeting sandpaper... I winced at a sharp flash of lightning. Where did that come from?

“Me. Sorry. It gets out of hand when I’m...sometimes.”

I wanted to know what she’d been going to say, but I could sense her unease with the subject. She was afraid someone might overhear.

“Did you miss being home?”

That was a hard question to answer. I shrugged. “Parts of it.”

“You don’t belong with them either.”

There it was. Honesty. And I would be expected to use it with her, I could tell. “It’s more like they don’t belong with me.”

She wanted to ask if she did, but I wasn’t sure what to say. If I got a vote, she would be. My mother wasn’t going to give me one.

I could steal it, though. It wouldn’t be much, but it would be better than nothing. The idea of not being around this little girl hurt me. Already, she’d found a way into my heart. I was looking forward to

tomorrow in a way I knew to be wrong but couldn't help.

"I'll fit you in somewhere," I whispered, giving her my promise. "I'll make you a place that no one can ever remove you from."

"And you did."

Both males jumped.

Angela threw on a stern facade. "Let's go have some hot chocolate while you tell me what that was all about."

Marc chuckled as Charlie sputtered. "Nothing, got sidetracked."

Angela let her worries go in favor of the amusement. "I guess I'll have to torture it out of you, then. Come on, get to the center table. Worst joke tells all."

"I have to help the vet put the dogs out." Charlie grinned a bit. "Why don't you guys go ahead?"

Both parents chuckled at the obviousness as the teenager left.

The couple spread peace as they walked through camp, but it didn't help the tortured man watching them. Adrian was struggling in his fight with temptation. He waited until Angela was out of sight, then took what was available to him.

Who wants me?

The mental call floated through the settling camp, drawing females his way in confused eagerness.

Adrian studied them harder than he usually had

to and managed to draw a tiny reaction with his choice of Tracy. She was a distant member right now, quiet, and mostly unnoticed, but she had the required black hair that would melt against his hands and maybe help him achieve a release. With that, his control would be back in place for a while...he hoped.

Adrian locked eyes with her, pulling.

Tracy gave a short, breathless agreement. Her one thought stole his reluctance.

I can smell like her too if you want.

Adrian dropped his head in shame. *Yes.*

It wasn't against their will, but he'd never claim them. They had to feel like the whores they'd be called if exposed, but Adrian never viewed them that way. They gifted him with these moments.

When? Tracy was certain of the answer. The vanilla would wait for next time.

Adrian eyed her freshly washed skin with naked lust. *Training tent—now.*

Tracy's secret smile was only noticed by a few, but to those who were aware of the escalating problem, it was good news.

4

Acutely aware of Marc walking behind her, Angela got chills from the heat in his thoughts. Marc wasn't holding back anymore, and the past, their past, was alive again in her heart. In the brief time they'd had together, they'd loved as deeply as

two people could. He was eager to have that side of their relationship returned.

As she turned around, their eyes met over the crowd. The low roar of so many voices faded into only them.

My Marc.

Oh yeah, baby!

Reality snapped in a second later with a crackle that sent static through every radio under the tent.

“Scchhhhh...”

“What the hell was that?”

“Some kind of pulse?”

“Yeah, a pulse,” Angela agreed quickly.

When the conversation was flowing normally again, she found Marc in the far corner, talking with Daryl. His gaze was everywhere—the camp, their surroundings, the tables. It was a fascinating pattern, appearing to narrow in on something different with each sweep. *What is he watching now?* Angela eased in gently.

Marc’s vision was shadowed, faded out to stretch into a battlefield grid with thin green wires outlining the perimeter. Red dots were scattered over this lined area. Marc’s military mind narrowed in on those farthest away, estimating their alertness by the way they moved.

It was his gift, his ability to track any member of his team, and it was thrilling to discover. Had he always known he could do it? Angela stopped a snort. He probably thought it was normal, that all leaders were naturally so efficient.

Angela saw two shadows slip into the dark training tent, one instantly recognizable, and forced another cheery smile onto her face. She joined Marc, who was now chatting lightly with Daryl about the lack of rain.

Adrian had taken her advice and picked one right out. He was kissing that slut, loving her. Angela shoved the images away and headed for the cooler instead. *I need a beer.*

Adrian ducked out the back of the tent, leaving a concerned, untouched relief source behind. He stayed in the shadows and made his way to the empty medical camper.

He dropped onto the cot, exhausted mentally. No one had died today, but what about tomorrow? Nature wanted him dead and she wasn't going to give up. When he'd chosen to exterminate the slavers, he'd marked himself, and through that terrible bond, his people.

Adrian was almost ready to face the choice, set to put his plans in motion early to keep any more of them from dying. He drifted into a restless sleep with a grimace of pain on his face.

5

Morning mess found a calm camp eating or packing for their departure time of noon. Most of the conversation was about the meeting and peaceful—15 and the mountains was now a verified

result. They were going to set up house inside the stone of Georgia.

As he walked, Marc searched for effects of the bat attack that hadn't been repaired yet. There was only the occasional bat corpse or decaying body part as boxes and crates were repacked. Some of the wounded rodents had crawled into dark crevices to die. Dog had told him the bats were looking for young blood, otherwise they would have done more damage. Knowing it could have been worse helped Marc let go of the fear. He'd told Adrian and increased security on their youngest members.

He would also watch out for his own. Charlie now had an extra shadow, one that many of the Eagles had been surprised by. Marc hadn't spent a lot of time on it. Charlie and Kenn needed to come to terms over plenty of things, Marc was sure, but more than that, Kenn was trying to earn his place back. He wouldn't slack off. Marc had paired Kenn with Zack for Charlie's security. That one wouldn't slack off either, and he would now die for Angela or her son.

After a week of things being quiet, more people were still signing up for the defense class every day, which was good, but the requests to keep the shield up at night had come directly from the camp women. When Adrian refused, the restlessness of the hens was rampant. It hadn't been this bad when they were being stalked by the slavers, but the Oklahoma towns they were passing didn't help the mood. Kicked-in doors under brackish blue skies

were bad mood setters. It often ended in Angela bringing the shield up just to give Adrian a break.

During the daytime, it was the Safe Haven they all knew, though. The herd had settled back into twitchy grazing. It was Adrian who hadn't relaxed at all. Losing 20 members of his camp in one night had hurt their leader. His guilt was obvious. The camp was reassuring him often—his bloodshot eyes would have had them doing it even if the Eagles hadn't mentioned that he was feeling awful over the attack, but it wasn't enough. He clearly needed something else.

Marc was sure his top men had a plan. None of the Eagles liked seeing Adrian upset, but for Kyle and Neil, it actually hurt. Marc ducked into the training tent, wondering which relief source they would send to him and if it would work. *Sex isn't a cure-all.*

Expecting to hear hens clucking, Marc noticed the silence despite there being 11 females waiting in here for him. He hardened his satisfied tone into the one he'd used for the government. "Who's ready to get dirty?"

Before anyone could answer, Samantha came through the flap behind him. "To hell with getting dirty. Tell us what she wants in an XO."

Marc realized they were all waiting for him to answer that one. "Ask her."

"We have." Cynthia leaned against the tent wall, already wrinkled and sweaty. She'd been here an hour early for a workout.

“She says a good XO already knows why they’re needed.” Tracy arched subtly, making sure he noticed her long, black braid and exposed nape. She’d spotted him staring at Angela’s neck.

“There ya go.” Marc was unfazed. He noticed it, but Tracy had two huge strikes against her. She was screwing Adrian and she wasn’t his Angie.

“But none of us understand.” Anne frowned at Marc. “At this rate, she won’t have an XO.”

Marc doubted Adrian would let that happen. “Sorry ladies, I can’t help you. I suggest you examine the duties of the job and be sure you can handle it.” Marc pointed as Charlie came to the open flap. “We’re using the same lesson you got yesterday. Pick a partner and start showing her.”

Charlie viewed the females warily. He hesitantly went to Anne, the only one he knew.

The nurse welcomed him, unknowingly becoming a contender by the teenager’s choice. After all, he was Angela’s son. Wouldn’t she lean the same way?

Anne was aware of the attention on them, but it was second to having Charlie in her mind, telling her what to do, how to get through this. She was in better shape than she’d been in a long time, but it was coming with a price. Soreness and bruises were constant companions.

Anne kicked out, stumbling.

Charlie concentrated. Shoving into her mind, he helped her control her body in an acceptable parody.

Marc gave his approval. “Good. Now do it

again, and everyone else pay attention. Next time around, we all do it.”

Anne fell this time, pulling attention her way. She flushed darkly. “What!? Ain’t you ever seen an old woman on her butt before?”

Samantha snorted. “Sure. We just usually help them up when it happens.”

Anne gave a grunt, getting set to do it again. She was glad it was only going to be a couple more weeks of this. Even with Charlie’s help and Adrian’s lies, it was too much.

John had told Adrian that last night after she’d hit the pain pills and heating pad again as soon as she came through the flap. And Adrian had agreed, finally letting her and John know what the plan had been all along. She was never supposed to remain an Eagle, only make the rookie level so that it would bring in more of the women who were leery of getting hurt.

After that was settled, the men had quickly fallen into a grim conversation about test results and the increasing levels of chemicals John was finding. The herd of bison in South Dakota had indeed died of radiation exposure, as had other specimens in the rear of Adrian’s semi. The fallout was spreading, growing in some places by debris and containments in areas that used to be heavily populated. Bomb parts now littered this land and all of them were toxic.

Anne slipped, about to fall again, and found a strong arm subtly shoving her into place.

Samantha didn't say anything, but she stayed close, respecting the older woman's attitude. Samantha understood they might end up on a team together. Anne needed to know these things, and Angela would be grateful to those who made it happen.

Samantha tried not to think that way and failed. She knew she needed to make peace with Cynthia—they would all be on these teams working together if Jeremy's words were true. But Samantha wanted it. She was growing into this life, adjusting to everything from guilt to embarrassment as she trained. The only mistake she couldn't find absolution for was Rick. Every time she had it contained, something else happened.

Samantha stayed close to Anne and put her thoughts back on the lesson. She didn't notice the Eagle guard who'd stopped in the flap on a round.

6

Jeremy wasn't breathing. The sight of Samantha in Eagle gear, dripping sweat from wild, damp hair as she followed Marc's lead was enough to send him into a sensual daze. She was a tiger, with pale skin and golden mane in vivid contrast to the others here. He wanted her, enough to do almost anything for even a chance. *Why can't she feel the same?*

"That question has been asked more times than any other in history."

Jeremy was startled back into the moment.

Behind him, Angela forced a chuckle through the agony he was sending. “Saw it on the internet.”

Heartbroken, the XO let his defenses down enough for the answer he had to have. “What can I do?”

Angela hated his despair. Jeremy was like Marc. He was one of the boy scouts this new world needed so desperately, but the truth wouldn’t help him right now. He had to find Samantha’s needs on his own.

“Come when she calls and eventually snap, blow up on her or Neil, lose your place. Then, take off into the west and never return.”

Jeremy stared, open mouthed, in shock.

Angela raised a brow. “Not happy with that one? Okay. Let me try again. Come when she calls, eventually accept the situation, and find someone else to fill the down time. Mate, have a child, spend a few decades yearning for Samantha over your wife’s shoulder.”

“Oh, shit!” Jeremy exclaimed in revulsion. “Try again, will ya? I’d take the first one over that.”

Angela was bringing him around, making him view the options, and Jeremy intended to take advantage of her advice—if he understood it. *Why can’t women just say what they mean?*

“Another good question. Perhaps you should ask the Creator since we don’t have a clue either.”

Jeremy chuckled. “Fair enough.”

Angela saw that Samantha had noticed them talking. The storm tracker didn’t like it, despite knowing she only had eyes for Marc. *Interesting.*

Angela slipped her arm through Jeremy's, comfortable with their friendship. "You could try the opposite—make her jealous or ignore her, honestly try to let go. You have a lot of doors to pick from."

Jeremy started to protest, but Angela insisted. "You don't have to settle for a woman you don't love, and you will not have to leave camp. There are other solutions. We'll find one that works for you."

Jeremy's male heart overflowed at her kindness. He pushed a quick kiss to her soft cheek, not even noticing her scent. His nose, his body, only came to life for Samantha now. "Thank you. For being what we need."

Behind them, Samantha tripped and fell.

Anne was there to offer her a hand up.

Angela grunted, waving Jeremy on to get coffee. She'd realized now what it was that she was supposed to be doing. Helping, fixing, growing. Righting wrongs was on that list too, and she threw herself into these goals, rising early and staying up late to accomplish enough to be satisfied. Besides all the normal responsibilities and duties, her mind also required progress with herself. On the days she didn't think she'd made any, sleep was hard to come by.

Right now, fuel and water were the issues she was trying to solve. The garden was producing enough to add an extra meal or two per week to the supplies, but it was running through their water reserves. They were all right for the next 10 days,

thanks to what they'd gathered in Wichita. That should get them to the springs in Arkansas, where they hoped to collect and clean as much as they could carry.

However, that meant traveling every day, and they were about to be into the reserves of jet fuel they'd been taking from airports and refineries. Most of the normal gas they'd gotten in Wichita had been used to refill their basic services. Watered down, the jet fuel would run their vehicles for only a little while before causing serious problems. Adrian was already estimating multiple stops to pick up new cars and trucks as these broke down. They were counting on finding more gas and water in Arkansas. If they didn't...

Angela refused to finish the thought, noting the guards on the parking area were getting them ready to roll. It was a late travel day, something a lot of them had come to enjoy. An easy wake up where they could do what they wanted until around noon and then not having to wait in mess lines when they made camp, was great. Each vehicle was being loaded with a basket, and now, thanks to Li Sing's generosity, people even received their favorites when the supplies were available. It also saved on water, something no one had realized yet. Adrian was so smart it was scary.

Angela swept the camp one last time, hesitating. The breeze was strong this morning and had a hint of burnt rot that made her stomach twist. The layers of grit never really went away, but there were days

it was so thin that most of them forgot it was there. In brief, wonderful moments, they were getting their country back.

On one side of camp, rookie jackets flashed proudly through the games and tents in service. A third of them were female. Most of the camp was packed and people were starting to load into their assigned vehicles. The only classes still going on were with Marc and Doug. The gentle giant was working with Matt, teaching him how to load a pistol. His father was viewing in drunken pride from the edge of the area. Mitch was allowed to drink during his off-duty times and he made sure not to miss even one of those moments.

Thanks to Angela's punishment, Matt was now getting what Mitch had wanted all along. Thanks to Cynthia, so was Matt. It was clear that he was developing a crush on the reporter.

Angela hoped it was harmless. When Cynthia realized what was happening, she would shut him down, and that would be the end of it. Until then, he was working extra hard for her attention, and no one was interfering. They all wanted Matt to make peace with the things eating him up inside, but that didn't mean Adrian wasn't already deciding where he would be useful. Now, it was drawing sketches for Cynthia's paper. Later, it might be more detailed images, like blueprints.

Or Presidential symbols, Angela thought, picking out the official tryout notice for her team on the board. Without the alcohol and with a hard, daily

schedule that included showers and healthy food, Matt's face was clearing up. He wasn't using the wash they'd given him yet, but once he did, Angela was positive his skin would clear the rest of the way and allow Matt to feel more normal. It would also help lessen the bullying kids inevitably did to each other. That was another of the problems with society that Adrian would try to conquer in time.

Matt dryfired clumsily. Angela saw Mitch's pride ease and the love he felt for his son. It was his only redeeming quality, other than his skill on the radio. The black jacket Mitch was wearing was a bad copy of Eagle gear, as was the tool belt he'd recently added. The drunk didn't have the heart to dry out and go through the levels like the rest of them, but he sure liked it when the new arrivals mistook him for a guard. The Eagles loathed it, but no one had interfered there yet either. Everyone knew Adrian was about to hit Mitch and make it hurt. Most of the levels, and quite a few of the camp, were looking forward to it.

7

“You look as if you're not having a good day.”

Charlie shrugged but didn't answer.

Adrian took up a place next to the teenager along the rail they were using for part of their perimeter. “I've got a minute if you'd like to talk.”

Charlie had been lingering, hoping he might get this type of opening. Adrian seemed to sense when

someone needed a private moment.

“Something going on I should know about?”

“Nothing bad. I just heard something and now it’s stuck in my mind.”

Instantly worried, Adrian took a quick look around to verify only their personal shadows would be able to hear. “What was it?”

Charlie’s timbre became a low, intimate draw that was shocking.

“I offer no future, no claims, only the right here and now.”

Adrian gaped at hearing his own passionately spoken words.

Charlie went on, stuck in the repetition of his mind.

“Tomorrow, it never happened, but tonight, no one else exists. You’ll feel me forever.”

The teenager stared at his stunned idol, exposing boyhood curiosity. “How?”

Adrian hesitated.

Charlie pushed on. “I know about sex, but it’s a chore for them, right?”

Adrian snorted through his misery. “Where’d you hear that?”

Charlie flushed, looking down. “Around the showers.”

“Listening to the hens cluck?”

Charlie was torn between guilt and that edge of youthful discovery. “I don’t want them to talk about me that way!”

Realizing the teenager was having his first

moment of male anxiety, Adrian leaned back and handed out a valuable piece of advice. “You have to be good to them. That means all the little things you’re already picking up, but also, romance.”

Charlie was clearly confused, and Adrian concurred. “I know, but it’s the way they work. I use words because most men don’t. It gives me an advantage.”

“Why don’t you ...”

“Ask them outright to satisfy my needs?”

Charlie leered as much as he thought was acceptable. “Sorta like a perk of leadership!”

“Not unless I want to claim them.” Adrian scoffed. “I have to be careful where I take relief. So will you.”

Charlie was pleasantly surprised to be having such an adult conversation. It gave him the courage to seek the information he wanted most. “What makes it so they’ll never forget?”

Adrian pushed away from the rail, refusing to let his mind go where it wanted as he spotted Angela striding confidently across the camp. “Physical pleasure, combined with consideration and respect.”

“Physical pleasure?”

Adrian turned toward his dusty camp. “That’s all you get from me, boy. These questions can be answered by the careful observations that you’re already making...and by talking to your dad. He certainly knows what he’s doing.”

Twenty minutes later, Adrian rolled his convoy out. As he did so, the feeling of not doing it for much longer stung him like drops of acid.

We're two weeks from Arkansas. Fourteen days left to lead.

Chapter Fifteen
Chosen, Not Used
Outside Bixby, Oklahoma
June 15th

1

“**T**hanks for agreeing to help me out with this. The list has really grown.”

Jeff, who had no clue how he was going to deliver, glanced around uneasily. “Show them the basics, and then stand there and take a beating, right?”

“For now, yes.”

“And it’s just five minutes, right?”

“Five each, yes.”

Jeff swallowed. To show them the basic positions, he would have to touch the females on Neil’s list. Jeff had picked up kai as quickly as Seth. He was being trained to take some of the load as the camp’s second instructor. Now that females had been in the Eagles for a bit, the camp had adjusted to seeing them training as hard as the men.

“There they are.”

Jeff turned to see eight females in full Eagle gear running toward the tent. Wrapped in tight black, titties bounced, asses shook, thighs rippled, and male heartbeats tripled in the space of a second.

“Oh, holy shit!”

Neil would have echoed Jeff’s expletive if he’d had the breath. Samantha running toward him was erotic enough to make his nuts suddenly drop in anticipation.

“Neil, man, damn. I’m, uh, it’s been a while, buddy. I’m not sure I can do this and remain...professional.”

Neil grimaced as his growing flesh brushed the sharp edge of his pants. “Almost a year for me.”

Jeff’s voice was oddly soft. “A bit longer on my end. I’m a widower. Three years before the war.”

Neil glanced down and spotted the shiny ring on Jeff’s hand. He’d never noticed before that it was a wedding band. The distraction had blood returning to the head he needed it in. “I didn’t know that.”

Jeff shrugged, expression darkening. “Everyone in Safe Haven has a story.”

Neil heard the females hit their target and begin wrestling for whatever it was that Doug had declared their totem. “After this, we’ll both be ready for a beer and male conversation. My tent once Adrian’s done snickering over the report I’ll be too screwed up to write?”

Jeff welcomed the gesture of friendship. “I’ll be there.”

Samantha noticed Neil and Jeff joking and had the same reaction as the rest of the females around her. She stared. They were both attractive men with high places here, and there was enough need in this group of women to light up a city block.

Samantha smirked as the males started noticing the vibes, sentences stopping mid speech, expressions growing dazed. Being single had its perks. She was free to let these two men be driven crazy—by her, as well—without all of the drama that came with a relationship.

As she lounged in the shade, cooling off and waiting to be called into the small tent, Samantha admitted the truth. She could handle it with Neil because she knew he'd do anything she wanted for even a moment of her time. It wasn't something she planned to exploit, but he had to understand the terms. She didn't want to be a couple. She was an Eagle who would pick a relief source.

Or two. Samantha spotted Jeremy as he and a few of the rookies went into the gardening area to help pull weeds. Moving at a brisk pace, Jeremy's thick arms called sweetly.

Need took her by surprise. Samantha couldn't help the heated stare. He had a beautiful body, and those tank tops he'd changed to definitely suited him.

As he climbed into the semi, the laptop-toting genius turned and caught her staring. Jeremy stumbled at the warmth he read there.

He caught himself before he could smile in welcome, remembering the problem. She wanted him *and* Neil. *Will she get her way?*

Jeremy vanished into the coolness of the first garden truck without acknowledging her silent call. *Too soon to tell.*

As soon as he was out of sight, Jeremy's shoulders slumped. *But not if I can help it.* He didn't want to be a friend with benefits. Neither did Neil, but this time, it wasn't going to matter. In the future, they might both have what they wanted so desperately, and have nothing at all at the same time. It was heartbreaking.

2

Jeff felt his heart thump heavily in his chest as one of the waiting rookie females gave him a bright smile. *Damn. She's a curvy brunette. I like those.*

Crista saw that she'd finally caught Jeff's attention. He was the reason she'd signed up for the Eagles, though not why she'd chosen to stay. Crista had joined Safe Haven in Nebraska. She'd been eyeing Jeff since their first argument outside the supply trucks. She hadn't known the rules yet and had forgotten to sign for what she'd taken. When he insisted, she'd told him to sign it himself, that her hands were full. He had, muttering about rude Barbie dolls with more legs than manners.

Being classified that way, especially considering the stiff competition in this camp, had gotten Crista's attention.

Does he still see me like that? She moved closer, being sure to flip her hair and arch her chest. Jeff's head swiveled her way as if drawn by a leash, and she grinned. *Sweet!*

Jeff tried not to look down her gaping shirt as

the rookie stopped in front of him.

“Sorry I told you off.”

Jeff, who had forgotten about the brief encounter, frowned absently. “I probably deserved it.”

Crista flipped her head, sending beautiful shards of heat into his eyes as he narrowed in on her hair.

Not above using her assets, Crista quickly ripped the ponytail holder off and shook. Her action drew several male heads her way—Jeff wasn’t the only one who had a thing for brunettes.

Crista took her time stroking her fingers through. When she finally stopped, Jeff was standing inches away with an intense look on his face.

“If you do that again, I’ll be banished for taking what you’re offering!” He stepped back, hard enough to ache. “Be careful playing games with grown men.”

Far from intimidated, Crista followed him, sliding into his personal space as if they were a couple. “Promises, promises...”

Understanding fell in a lot of ways, but Jeff wasn’t as blindsided as she wanted him to be. He leaned closer and disappointed everyone watching by giving her a harmless hug.

Except that it wasn’t harmless. He throbbed against her hip.

Her soft laughter filled his mind. *She’s sexy!*

“It’s about time you noticed me.” Crista placed a lingering kiss to his cheek and felt him fight not to

turn his head. “You should ask me out sometime.”

She slowly moved out of his tense embrace, flipping her hair again. “I’ll wait a week or so, let you think.”

Jeff remembered how to breathe. “And then?”

Crista waved a hand at the other males who were eyeing her wild hair as if it was water. “One of them will, and I’ll say yes.”

She sauntered back toward the other cackling rookies as she replaced her hair holder.

Jeff looked toward Neil in desperation. “What the hell do I do now?”

Neil allowed himself to chuckle. “Hold on for the ride, I’d guess. She’s a wild one.”

Jeff thought about it, and grinned. “She does have the three things I need—brown hair, courage, and great legs.”

Neil’s laughter echoed. Life was improving for so many of them that the trooper couldn’t help but feel a little hopeful. The mistakes he’d made wouldn’t ever be forgotten, but in time, he wouldn’t hate himself as much. Not that it mattered. What did was how Becky felt. Until she was okay, forgiveness was too far away to consider.

3

“All right, folks. Five minutes!” Radios crackled with Kevin’s calm voice. “We leave in five.”

Danger!

Unease rippled through Angela, strong enough to make the shield flash into solid red around the packing camp.

“What is it?” Kyle was her personal shadow today. He instantly feared the concern coming from her frozen form.

Angela didn’t answer, concentrating. *What has nature thrown at us this time?*

The shield going up so fast in broad daylight drew attention. Adrian followed his instinct. “Everyone get to your vehicles. Mitch! Get the check off started. Now.”

Pleased that their new radioman didn’t know how to do it yet, Mitch hurried that way, dragging Matt along when he would have stayed with Doug. “You ain’t no Eagle yet, boy. Till you are, you’re with me!”

Matt didn’t struggle, but inside, he burned. He’d much rather be riding with Cynthia. *She’s wonderful.*

Angela shuddered as the images from the witch came into clarity.

Fire is roaring through the dry valley in a merciless path of death and devastation, zeroing in on human targets. It is finding them in basements and cellars, in malls and sewers—flushing out battered refugees as fast as it can spread on the stiff wind.

Marc and Adrian came to her side, but Angela was trapped in a mental horror. *It’s everywhere!*

Adrian knew it had to be bad for her to be on the

edge of panic already. He made a motion the Eagles had hoped never to see again once they'd finished that week of classes and drills. *Under attack, training lesson F.*

All their hearts picked up. The men began spreading the word and preparing themselves. Lesson F was where the camp fled for their lives. Half of the Eagles would keep the herd together, while the rest would try to eliminate an unknown threat.

Adrian heard the radio count off start and went to his semi, sure Marc would bring Angela. She was still searching through doors and growing steadily paler. When she let the shield come down, there was going to be panic. What to do first?

Prepare them for it.

Adrian waited for Mitch to pause for air and hit the button on his mike. "We have a problem folks, but we're not sure what it is or what direction it's coming from. Once the count off finishes, we'll lower the shield. I expect we'll be running a bit from there, so listen to those radios!"

Now, camp members were fleeing toward their assigned vehicles instead of the usual straggling they did on late travel days. Adrian struggled with himself as he waited for everyone to get in and be accounted for.

While they did the count off, the dogs began to growl restlessly in their cages. The rabbits huddled together into a corner of their hutch. Their few birds pecked at the pens in frustration.

Seeing people taking the time to gather tents, Adrian interrupted the count again. “Leave everything! Get in your vehicles now!”

Understanding Adrian wasn’t going to wait, those few hurried toward the convoy, leaving their belongings.

Outside the shield were other noises that didn’t match their enclosed camp—pops and cracks that reminded them all the fight for survival wasn’t over yet.

As the call came, “All here, A–Man.” Angela let him know what it was they were about to face. *Fire!*

Angela was at a level of terror Adrian had never felt from her. He recognized it as a personal ghost, storing the information as he climbed into his seat, starting the engine. *If we survive, I’ll help her with that.* “Bring it down.”

Trembling in the seat next to Marc, Angela forced the panic to ease, to release their shield. It dropped like a stone and sent raw panic through the herd.

They immediately stampeded.

The fire was everywhere—on the ground, devouring the grass, licking up trees that hadn’t seen rain in weeks. The dead trees wilted under the onslaught, crashing to the ground in showers of bright coals that started new streams of winding flames.

As if spotting the fleeing convoy, the front wall of the fire shifted, racing toward Safe Haven. It

already had them surrounded on three sides. The Eagles were horrified to find it less than 500 feet away in some places. Would the shield have held?

The fire roared as it swept up the trees. The sound of exploding branches and debris rattled through the smoky air.

The inferno raging in their rearview mirrors was merciless, overtaking the area they'd just evacuated and consuming everything left behind. The fire came from the sides as well as the rear, squeezing them together as they fled along the rollers and debris.

The Eagles on the outer perimeter had the worst of it, trying to avoid the flames while keeping the fleeing vehicles together. Seeing familiar faces waving people in the right direction helped, but it didn't keep those men from inhaling a lot of the smoke as they sped along the outside line of cars and trucks.

"Drive into the creek!" Adrian blasted out the order in that irrefutable timbre of command. It was the only place to go.

Eagles began escorting vehicles into the lightly running creek, trying to keep a count. Through the smoke and screams, the flames continued to advance.

Adrian's next shout over the radio drew more attention from the stampeding herd. "Get in the creek! Stay together!"

Cars and trucks circled back toward the water.

Adrian coughed as he watched. He and his

shadows would be the last ones in.

Vehicles streamed by, some panicked and flying along the grassy ruts, but many had fallen into a sloppy version of their travel line, doing what he'd tried to teach them.

Adrian hit the button again. "The water's gonna be cold, expect it. Tell the kids and get the animals up off floorboards. I don't want one drowned dog!" He was satisfied to see even the panicking cars start slowing and falling into line.

"If you're in a truck, get out of it. The flames might spread to the top from the wind. Keep your vehicle at least 15 feet from any trucks as our fire crew comes through."

"I'm letting the animals out." The vet wasn't leaving them to burn.

Adrian nodded. "Yes, but wait until we're all in the water or we'll run them over."

"Copy."

It sounded as if bacon was frying in a giant skillet now. The pressure from the explosions made Adrian's head pound in time with the pops and flashes of heat that surrounded him. *This wasn't natural. Someone just tried to kill us.*

Unlike the total chaos of the bat attack, Safe Haven had gotten enough thinking time before the fire reached them to be able to handle this crisis with more care. Less than 10 minutes after the shield went up, every vehicle was sitting in the creek, windows up, fans off, with the edges of their coats and shirts over their mouths to avoid the smoke.

The wall of flames reached the creek minutes after the camp. Smoke began to pour over the convoy. Sitting in water, the vehicles were nearly inaccessible to the smoke from the bottom. The liquid prevented the fumes from getting through entry sources that were flooded, but the sound of people coughing still became almost as loud as the crackling hunger of the wildfire. The sense was one of being trapped by both fire and water.

Adrian kept his calming tenor flowing over the radio. “Someone kill those smoke detectors. Let the animals go by. Don’t try to touch them. They’re as upset as you are, and they’ll bite. The Eagles are coming to stand guard around the vehicles. Keep an eye on them and be ready to give them a break from the smoke. Don’t be afraid to take a ten-minute shift in their place. We won’t leave until everyone has been accounted for.”

It was all ear candy, and most of them knew it, but the desired effect was calm through the fear. Knowing the fire or water could take them at any time was terrifying but having Adrian and his army surrounding the convoy with protection kept them together. The fire, roaring along the dry grass, had them trapped on both sides as it leapt from low hanging branches to dusty debris near the narrow end of the channel. If not for the water and the warning, Safe Haven would have fried.

An hour later, the wide creek was full of wild animals and uneasy people. The camp was surrounded by guards and barking dogs that had the Eagles keeping tight grips on leashes. Their dogs wanted to charge the unexpected furry guests.

Adrian eyed the fire line—the charred edge that came all the way to the very bank of the creek. Nature, or a traitor, had tried to kill them all with one brutal blow, and even the animals they were sharing this wet haven with seemed to know it. They were lingering despite the humans moving restlessly around the stopped convoy.

“We didn’t lose anyone, Boss. All accounted for.”

Adrian’s relieved expression soothed the ache in Kyle’s heart at being away from Jennifer. “We’ll have camp set up in an hour.”

“Keep us set to roll,” Adrian refused. “Ash is hard on the lungs. We have to get ahead of the line.”

“What if the fire’s still burning? We can’t spare the water once we leave the creek.”

Nearby, Ray was leading his team against the remaining flames on the opposite bank, long hoses suctioning up reeking, rushing water. The stocky football coach had the volunteer crew working together and he was making progress.

“We’ll only camp near water from now on. Until the rain comes back, we’ll have to be on guard. This could happen again, while we’re sleeping.”

Kyle scowled at the thought. “When does this

shit go away and leave us in peace?”

“It doesn’t.” Adrian swung toward the kids’ campers that were also being wetted with creek water. “We have to survive it.”

Nearby, Zack had an arm around his youngest son’s shaking shoulders, offering what comfort he could. His mother had died in a fire right after the war, and the boy wasn’t handling the memories well. All over the creek-bound convoy, the same thing was happening. People were reaching out to each other.

It gave Adrian hope. Nature would try to kill them, but she couldn’t succeed. He moved to where Angela was standing, with Marc not far away. “Should she be doing that?”

Angela turned to see Jennifer helping the vet guide animals through the water, her pant legs rolled up to reveal grossly swollen ankles.

Angela shrugged. “Maybe not so much of the bending, but the freezing water will be great for those legs.”

Adrian noted Kyle close by, making sure the girl didn’t get hurt. Even the wolf stopped to sniff her on a round. When Chris had started letting the animals out, the wolf had been there to collect his dogs and put them to work. With little else to do other than stare at the ruthless fire, the camp had started noticing Dog. A few of them were realizing the animal was like some of the others here—special, and on their side.

Jennifer was also making progress, though

Adrian doubted she could see it yet. Having Charlie and the wolf around was showing the camp that they'd been wrong to believe the former slaves without hearing Jennifer's side. She'd spent last night in the female tents with Hilda and Peggy. Adrian hoped more had come from that than just their warnings about the evils of men.

Adrian saw Kenn and Tonya offer to give Ray and Dale a break. The tired men willingly let the second-in-command and his woman fight the battle.

Adrian didn't frown at the thought, as he would have not that long ago. Kenn was making substantial progress with the whore-turned-pharmacist, but because Adrian had publicly punished her, Tonya was now considered forgiven. The camp, in all its snobbery, had others to shun.

"You're losing hope."

Adrian noted smoky vehicles being checked to determine if they were still drivable. "I'll survive. It's these people I'm not sure about."

Angela's alarm bells sounded. She spun for the danger.

Before she could find it, Adrian did. "Damn. She picked a bad time."

Angela turned to see Jennifer approaching Kyle. The camp's women had talked to Jenny last night. If she was ending things with him right here, there was definitely trouble coming.

“I need to talk to you, about our arrangement.”

Kyle tensed, sweeping to figure out who was close enough to overhear.

Only Daryl. The XO gave his team leader a look that said he was staying close in case this was the moment she asked him to back off.

Kyle was expecting that. He’d had a long night to get ready for this. He just hadn’t planned on such a public scene.

“Kyle.”

“Now?”

Jennifer was enjoying the wonderfully cool water. “Yes.”

Hating the way his toes were frozen even as he sweated, Kyle leaned against the front of Adrian’s semi. “Okay.”

Jennifer wasn’t sure how to start the conversation, but she was determined to get what she now needed from this too. “I’d like to make an official deal.”

Kyle had been expecting much worse. The relief rush made him forget to be careful with his wording. “What kind? My options are a bit limited at this point.”

“Meaning the trade that you made for me with the den mothers.”

Kyle flushed darkly, full of shame and need. “Yes.”

She scowled at him. “Would you have ever told me about it?”

“Unlikely.”

She took that in, still considering and comparing, but in her heart, Jennifer knew what she wanted. "I'm not old enough for you."

Kyle's face twisted into pain.

She sighed at his grimace. "Sometimes I wish I was. You deserve to be rewarded for what you've done for me, for all that you do here."

Before Kyle could protest, she held up a hand. "I know you're a killer." Jennifer didn't stop at his shame. "I also know how deeply you carry that, how you worry that you're evil."

To hear it put so bluntly was hard for the proud man. He forced himself to be brutally honest. "I killed my first man at 14. The mark was my uncle who had talked to the FBI. My father ordered it, but he wasn't totally evil. He did teach me to be loyal and have honor." Kyle omitted the talkative prostitute contract. He was obsessed, not insane. "I do have blood on my hands, Jenny, but little of it is innocent. Not that it matters to this new life. In fact, it made me perfect as Adrian's assassin. I won't change that. Not sure I could anyway."

She'd begun to frown. "But where can a man like that fit into my world?"

"Anywhere you want," Kyle answered as the dim moonlight glinted off her freshly washed hair. The need to touch her was one he conquered.

"I don't want you to use a camp whore."

Kyle reeled. "Excuse me?" He stared at her red cheeks and shiny curls, heart thumping. "Where did you hear that?"

“Do you have one yet?”

Kyle was sure he shouldn't lie. Her age meant nothing when it came to that. “Chosen, not used.”

Jennifer scowled, hand going to her hip. “If you want me, you won't. Suck it up and wait!”

“What are you saying?”

“That I...I won't share you! Not even now.”

Kyle's cold, hard heart lurched. “Why do you care?”

“It's not because I owe you.”

Kyle realized that light being on so late last night in the common tent had meant a lengthy conversation where she hadn't let Peggy or Hilda's words influence her in the least. “You *don't* owe me.”

Jennifer shrugged. She had her own views about that, but she wasn't ready to share them, any more than she was him. “Can you wait?”

Kyle's expression lightened. “Yes.”

“Are you sure? 'Cause if I find out you went to someone, I'll...”

Kyle raised a brow, letting his tone of control be heard. “You'll what, Jennifer?”

She dropped her head. “I'll be crushed. And I can't ever forgive that.”

Kyle's reaction was one he couldn't have censored even if he'd wanted to. He leaned forward, reaching out to her. “Then I won't.”

Jennifer slid carefully into his big arms, still surprised to feel safe in them instead of captive. “You promise, Kyle?”

He gave it to her, lost at the sound of his name on her lips. “My word as an Eagle, Jen. I’ll never touch another woman.”

Jennifer felt it then for the first time, the desire under the fear. It was strong enough to make her lips part in surprise. She wasn’t a stranger to sexual pleasure. Cesar had thought it the height of fun to bring her to the edge and make her beg for release, but she’d never thought she would *want* to be with a man that way.

Kyle heard her breathing grow rough. Her body tensed against his. He had enough experience to know it wasn’t fear. He was getting through to her, showing her how beautiful a relationship could be when the man cared enough to make it that way. “I need you. In time, you’ll feel the same.”

“What if I don’t, Kyle? I don’t want you to be caring for me forever without getting something from it.”

Kyle almost groaned. She was so good, and he was so bad. “I’ll prove it to you, here and now. I *know* we’re a match.”

Jennifer sensed it would cross the line, but she was tired of playing by Safe Haven’s rules. If she were truly free, then free to have a relationship had to be a part of it too. She liked Kyle, and clearly as more than a friend or she wouldn’t care if he had a whore.

She wanted a chance at the future she saw in his eyes when he stared at her while she played with the puppy, while he helped her pick out baby clothes or

they assembled furniture. His face was streaked in soot, adding to the menace of his profile. Except, she knew better, didn't she? Despite him being the big, strong man, she would have the lead in everything they did. "Yes. Show me how you know I'll want your touch."

Kyle's mind screamed, but his heart was in control. This was the moment it might all come down, but he would still have her. "Close your eyes, Jenny."

She did, nervously, as he slid a slow hand behind her neck. She sighed at the sensation of her skin against his.

Kyle leaned in.

Her pulse increased as she realized what he meant to do.

He moved slowly, giving her time to pull away, and was rewarded when she didn't.

Eagles and camp members were scowling at them. Adrian and Angela motioned men their way, but it was too late.

Kyle kissed her.

Jennifer was braced for it, determined not to get him in more trouble than he already would be, but the feel of his lips against hers had an unexpected effect. He didn't move or shove his tongue into her mouth—he just kept them connected and let her have the sensations. His breath was warm against her cheek, and ragged enough to blow her hair back in short bursts. *I make him feel this way.*

The thought would have been terrifying with

anyone else, but Jennifer knew he wouldn't do more. With that in her mind, the teenager let herself have a first kiss, given in respectful desire.

Her chest hardened against his; a shudder ran down Kyle's length. He was almost at his limit already. No other female had ever hit him this way. He gently pushed his lips against hers, sending electricity through them both...and for one instant, she pushed back!

Kyle slowly broke the kiss, triumphant as her hand came up to touch her lips. For that one second, she'd *wanted* him.

Facing it was as hard as it had been to handle the fact that she had liked some of the things Cesar had done to her. Jennifer understood Cesar had been taking advantage, but Kyle hadn't, and he'd caused that reaction with only a bare brush of his lips. *What would his hand do?*

Kyle had been hoping for all of the things he saw flashing across her face. He took another step away as Eagles flooded his peripheral vision. "They may keep us apart now, but I'll be there when you're ready, no matter how long it takes."

"And then?" she asked, a bit fearfully.

"I'll love you, as much as Marc does Angela. You and our family will be my life, even if I lose my place with the Eagles. You'll never regret giving me a chance to love you."

Kyle took a third step back as his body prepared to shove through the guards to get to Adrian if it came to that. "I'll agree to anything you want or

need from me.”

Jennifer’s heart took control. She followed his retreat, waving back the glowering Eagles getting set to grab him. “Yes.”

Kyle forgot to breathe.

So did everyone else watching when she slid a gentle hand along his jaw.

Jennifer smiled, one of those amazing expressions of happiness that sent a ripple through the shield and drew more attention. “Yes, I’ll be yours.”

Kyle had enough time to press another soft kiss to her sweet lips and then he was dragged away. He didn’t resist.

Doug spun him toward the livestock trucks that were now being reloaded. “Get out of sight for a while or they’ll find something the fire hasn’t burned to hang you with. Half the damn camp just saw that!”

Kyle didn’t care. *She said yes!*

6

Evening fell thickly over the dazed camp as they waited. The fire danger was over, but Adrian was watching for the animals to leave the creek before he took his people away from it. That provided a lot of time to kill and right now, with nerves already on edge, the camp wanted someone punished.

“Halt there!”

About to climb into his truck, Kyle stopped.

Daryl nodded to the teammates that had come at Angela's call. It was time to do what they'd planned and hope it would be enough.

Kyle braced as his team surrounded him.

The camp watched from inside and around their vehicles.

Daryl took his place in front of Kyle. "You are guilty of a moral violation."

Kyle knew what was coming. He approved the choice even as he dreaded it. If the camp saw a punishment, they might not insist on a vote.

"Your team has chosen to deliver a punishment. Would you rather stand trial?"

Kyle forced his mouth to open. "I accept my team's fists with gratitude."

Satisfied the mobster understood this was being done with love, Daryl motioned to the others. "First wave."

Daryl stepped back as the blows began, each team member around the circle taking their shot. The hits were ugly punches designed to drive in the point.

Kyle didn't fight back. He just tried to remain standing.

Thud!

Whap!

Thud!

Daryl was the last to go. He stepped in front of his team leader with a clenched fist and a wounded heart. "If you cross the line again, you'll stand trial."

Thud!

Daryl's blow took Kyle to his knees. "Do you under—"

"What are you doing?!" Jennifer shoved by Daryl to get to Kyle. "He didn't do anything wrong!"

Kyle tried to push her out of the way. "Move. I deserve this."

Jennifer glared when Daryl moved forward. "Don't make me hurt you."

Daryl hesitated, but the wolf didn't. Dog padded around the uneasy man to grab Jennifer's wrist. He carefully began dragging her away.

The Eagles expected a scene, but a moment of staring at the wolf made the girl reluctantly allow herself to be removed.

Daryl motioned to the others. "Second wave."

Kyle closed his eyes. *She said yes!*

Thud!

Adrian didn't stop Daryl when Kyle sank to the ground, nor when he held up a hand for mercy. Kyle had known this would happen and crossed the line anyway. He wasn't above correction, and that meant none of the other Eagles were, either.

The camp didn't like it, but they also did. It was awful to watch their top Eagle be beaten until he was groaning and spitting blood. It was also justice and a severe warning to those here who had plans to claim an underage female. The whispers that had started after the camp meeting would vanish. The new line was 15. It would be stuck to.

Across the creek, shadows moved through the

smoke that was still lingering. Seth and Becky were in the back of his truck while Kyle was being reprimanded by his team for much less.

Adrian caught Daryl's eye before he could order the fourth wave. *That one—now.*

Daryl followed his line of sight to where Becky's bright hair could just barely be seen against Seth's straining arm.

Daryl scowled, causing attention to turn that way.

Adrian allowed the camp to find out together, as they had with Kyle—confirmation that both team leaders had been breaking the rules. It didn't matter that Becky was now legal by the new age line. She hadn't been before, and there was no statute of limitations on a violation like this.

When the camp members started turning to look at Daryl and his team, Adrian nodded in personal satisfaction. *Do it.*

Daryl shrugged, motioning his unhappy team to follow. What the boss wanted, he got.

The wolf came to Adrian's side. *There is fresh food here—rabbits to the north.*

Adrian waved Kenn over.

Dog tensed but went on with his report. *People and animals are following us, living off our scraps. Those we pass are starving.*

Adrian felt that blow.

Dog stretched his neck up in concern. *Can we wait?*

“No, but maybe we can help them anyway.

We're going to start leaving supplies in our old campsites, for those who come after us. Kenn will take care of it."

They were carting around extra things. Water and fuel wouldn't be in the packages, but they had an abundance of basic medical supplies, soup, crackers, and Poptarts.

Not the least bit surprised to find Adrian communicating with the wolf, Kenn wrote it in his book. Knowing he had his own bit of magic had eased that savage beast in Kenn's mind.

"Also, get a recon together—go north."

"We've already got one going to check out the city," Kenn reminded. "Use them on the way?"

"No. Take a group of the females out. Do a rookie field evaluation and hunt."

Kenn's head snapped up. "Me?"

Adrian snickered. "Afraid of being alone with a bunch of rookies?"

Kenn snorted. "It's the female part that concerns me. They all have guns now and I'm not their favorite person."

The two men chuckled, Adrian sealing his emotions behind the mental walls that had allowed him to keep so many secrets this long. One exposure might cause the rest to tumble out, but until then, he was the guardian. What did he need with sex, or even love for that matter? He had absolution and power. That should be enough.

Adrian's gut twisted. But it wasn't. He wanted his son by his side, and he wanted Angie.

He distracted himself, looking at Dog. “Why don’t the flies eat through your fur?”

I’m an alpha. Our scent is stronger.

“Will your scent on the other dogs help them with the flies?”

Dog’s golden head swiveled up to stare at him with an incredulous expression that was too human for Adrian’s comfort.

I hope you’re not serious.

The blond leader shrugged. “It was only an idea. I don’t like them to suffer.”

Dog snorted. *If you want them to smell like me, tell them to keep sniffing Star. They’ll die with my piss in their noses.*

Adrian grinned as the wolf resumed his patrol. Dog might not like mutts, but the vet had matched those two up well.

“Star is part wolf. I think that matters, but I’m not sure why.” Charlie joined him.

“She’s in heat, I’d guess.”

“I don’t understand much about that.”

Adrian chuckled ruefully. “Few men do, son. Have you thought about talking to your mom on this one?”

7

“Would you like some company?”

Tracy’s sultry voice sent chills through Kyle’s stomach. After that kiss, he was on the edge and the camp knew it.

“No.”

Tracy had been fairly certain. She frowned a bit, moving closer. “What do you need?”

Kyle couldn’t tell her. It was wrong, but the fantasy played in his head in constant repeat.

“Kyle, I’d like to be your relief.”

To have it spoken so openly, *so hopefully*, cracked Kyle’s control. “I need to fuck and forget, and for her to never find out.”

Tracy blinked at the growl, body lighting up at the passion. “The first I can do. The second, not even Adrian can. There are too many eyes here to keep even one time a secret.” Tracy moved closer. “Unless...”

Kyle’s head snapped up, waiting tensely. Now the whore would demand her price and he would pay it. Kissing Jennifer—*twice!*—had lit his fuse.

“Unless you see me out of camp.”

Kyle waited. Surely she wanted something in return?

Tracy read it and shook her head. “It’s FND, baby. I don’t need anything else.”

Another convert, Kyle realized as her scent blew over him, stole his breath. Could she handle his needs? There wouldn’t be any consideration for hers.

Tracy picked that up too. She took advantage of only Daryl’s eye being on them in the early morning shadows. “Your relief, big boy, not mine.”

Kyle shuddered. He wanted...needed! to be as deep in something as he could get.

“What if I lean against that rail and give you 60 seconds right now? Daryl won’t..” Tracy stopped at the bruised muscles twitching erratically in his jaw, the fire filling his eyes.

Kyle wasn’t sure if he meant it or not, but the question was out before he could stop it. “Will you?”

Tracy arched her chest as her nipples hardened. “Can we make it 90, and you spend the extra time in the front?”

Kyle didn’t remember moving, but she was in his arms an instant later. He held her tightly, not sure he could stop or go through with it. The lie to Jennifer had fallen easily, but the actual choice was torture.

Tracy, who had passed novice at this years ago, made it easy on him. She pressed a soft kiss to his clenched jaw and then slowly turned around in his rigid arms. She braced herself against the fence rail. “I want a kiss when you’re done, one taste of those lips before you go back to her.”

Kyle broke. He shoved Tracy forward, hand going to his buckle.

Daryl kept a sharp eye out for his team leader, filled with relief when Kyle raised the whore’s dress and growled in lust. Jennifer was safe for a while and so was the dream.

struggling as the wind gusted harder. It jostled the plane's two passengers violently.

Lightning flashed, brilliant and blinding. They both jerked as the control panel exploded in a series of sharp cracks and flaming sparks.

The cabin went dark.

"We're going down!" The pilot sawing on the stick as he fought the downdrafts rattling them. "You have to jump! Tell them about our island. Take them to Pitcairn!"

The plane slanted downward as both engines cut out.

Charlie jerked up in the bedroll, the sound too real to just be in his dream.

He stumbled from his tent while still fastening his jeans. Half a dozen other camp members were already out of their tents and scanning the sky for the first plane they'd even heard in six months.

He and the others who'd been drawn from their tents stared at the gritty sky for a long time, but there wasn't any smoke signaling a crash, and the sound didn't come again.

By morning mess, most of them had convinced themselves it was a dream.

Charlie knew better. He stewed over it while he got his shower. *The island woman made it. Kettle is home.*

Chapter Sixteen

The Wire Coming Down

1

Samantha paused on her way to the parking area, unable to stop from scanning the sky. No one had spotted the plane, but there was no mistaking the sound.

A plane could mean many things and one of them was danger. It might mean there was authority somewhere, government who would want them to fall back in line with the old rules and the old ways that had destroyed everything. There was no way Adrian would allow that to happen. They would be fighting again, this time against the better armed government.

Samantha continued to the vehicles, aware of Doug and Peggy sitting together again at the mess. They were becoming an item.

“Look at that!”

Leslie, part of the six-female clique in camp that usually caused trouble, caught Samantha’s attention. She and her sisters, as they liked to call each other, were mocking a passing camp member for her brightly shaded hair.

Candy’s styling tent was popular with the females who had lived lives of monthly hair

appointments before the war. The comments hadn't been noticed by the woman yet, but Samantha didn't think it would be long before the bullies got louder. They were having too much fun being the center of attention with the Eagles on duty. Now that a few of the females were rookies, they were being evaluated as mates and they knew it.

Samantha noticed Neil's shadow lurking around the edge of the parking area. He hadn't noticed her yet, too busy doing what the rest of the males here were. She thought Neil would take his time getting around to it, though. Samantha wasn't blind to the way his attention followed her, how he stayed away even while making sure she had what she needed for the garden. He was hurting.

Jeremy, on the other hand, had become preoccupied with his laptop for a reason he refused to tell anyone. The camp had several bets going as to what it was, but all Samantha ever saw him do was try a code system that she wouldn't have told even Adrian about. Jeremy hadn't asked her to keep it to herself, but she knew he trusted her with it. She wasn't spending much time around him either, but whenever he agreed to spare her a few minutes, the laptop was always along.

Jeremy joined Neil in the shadows.

Now both of her moody males were staring at the sisters. Something inside Samantha flipped. *They're wondering if the other females might satisfy them, might replace their need.*

Can they get away so easily? Do I care?

Her feet moved. Yes, but only because of her ego. It allowed her to be smoother than she'd planned to be as she stopped by the six females.

Leslie noticed her first and dropped her head. Samantha didn't give the others time to react. "If I ever see it, hear it, or hear of it happening again, I'll go to Adrian. Using dirty tactics to make the Eagles think you're hard won't fly with these men, ladies. They'll know the difference the first time Angela breaks your nose and you quit."

Samantha leaned back a bit, hands loose and ready. She thought she'd probably win, but she was hoping it wouldn't come to a fight. She didn't want to hurt any of them, and with these odds, she would. Anything less would guarantee a loss and Samantha just wasn't wired to take that. It was something she'd never known about herself before the war. She loathed losing—anything.

"It won't happen again."

The others stared at Leslie in surprise.

Samantha hoped it was genuine regret in Leslie's words as she faced her friends. Leslie was tall and blonde—the platinum kind that came from a bottle—and Samantha didn't consider her competition. Her beautiful nails and lightly painted face didn't last through a single lesson with the Eagles. She always looked like the rest of them when it was over.

"I want to talk to you guys about some things." Leslie turned to the others.

Samantha wanted to hang and observe, but she

left instead. Leslie's expression said they would welcome her into their group, maybe even give her the lead. It was tempting to the glory seeker inside, but to the Eagle, it was forbidden. Samantha would never cross that line.

Neil and Jeremy were helpless to stare as Samantha walked by, both revealing enough need to make each of the six sisters feel dismissed. Samantha didn't notice, but the men did. Other women suffered in comparison. They watched her head confidently for the parking area, where their team was loading up for the hunting trip.

"Is she going where I think she is?"

Neil stared, heart thumping. She had to know who had duty over the run. "Yes."

Jeremy groaned, spinning for his tent to get the laptop he'd been using as a buffer. "It's going to be a long morning."

"Yep." Neil grunted, pushing his trooper hat back to watch her climb into the passenger seat of the truck being driven by Shawn. He grinned suddenly, catching a glimpse of her looking at him as she closed the door. "Maybe I can make that easier on you, buddy." Neil hit the button on his belt. "Permission to switch out?"

"If you have to," Adrian allowed with a frown in his tone.

"Jeremy out, Samantha in." There was a stunned silence for all of five seconds. Neil held himself in place, waiting.

"It's your funeral."

Jeremy sounded relieved.

“Copy the switch.” Adrian now sounded amused.

Neil glanced at Samantha, hoping to have drawn even anger, but it didn't appear that she'd noticed.

Neil's shoulders slumped. “It *is* gonna be a long damn day.”

Inside Shawn's truck, Samantha chuckled. She was studying Neil through the mirror. *So he's ready to play again, is he?*

Behind her, Neil's team also snickered. They liked the idea of her and their team leader, but they couldn't imagine her sitting around the fire with him like the other couples did. She wasn't that type.

Neil was thinking about her words. She didn't want any strings, only to spend time together when the mood struck. It felt so much like something a man would set up that his mind wouldn't even let him consider it for more than a few seconds at a time. She wanted him—*as a whore*.

Neil's body twitched at the thought of being Samantha's relief source. Sharing, no. Her occasional contact? In a heartbeat. It just wouldn't be enough for him.

2

“Someone will find out. It's too soon.”

“It's covered.” Adrian had his teaching wall firmly in place. “Today's training says flame throwers and shotguns, and the radio had elevator

music playing.”

They also had smoke detectors on the perimeter to keep the camp from being twitchy. The next time a wildfire wanted to trap them, they’d have more than a two-minute warning. Another of the effects was for Adrian to tell each Eagle team to choose a member to send up as their medic. During the height of the chaos, John, Anne, and Angela hadn’t been able to keep up with the flow of injuries. They had to have more doctors.

Nervous, Angela studied the targets, not sure she could do what he wanted. The only time she’d done this, she was in danger, and having Marc’s eyes on them didn’t help. He was her shadow.

“Angie?”

She met Adrian’s eye, her own baby-blues narrowing. “Yes?”

Adrian snapped his mouth shut, understanding the challenge he’d been about to offer, Marc’s method, was off limits. *Fine. Honesty is better anyway.*

“Yes, it is. Give me a minute and I’ll try.”

Adrian waited, again thinking she was so much more than he’d hoped for. It was crazy the way she could keep up with him and the others here, but none of them really knew what she might be capable of in time. Safe Haven held a lot of power now, but Angela was the strongest.

Angela dug deep, finding the fear and loathing that she’d experienced during the wolf attack, when Max had shown her that fire could save lives as well

as take them. When she began to mutter, deep orange flames spun out of her fingers and began to travel up her hands.

Angela heard Marc move for the extinguishers and slung her arm toward the first tree in a bit of a panic.

Tiny flames glided through the air to dissipate with the light breeze.

Angela drew out another handful of fire, and lingered with it, realizing it wasn't burning her. She threw again, harder this time.

The fire died out before reaching the tree.

Adrian gave an instruction as she pulled more for a third attempt. "Try to shape them before you throw."

Angela paused, looking at him with power filled eyes that roiled like an ocean. "Will you do something too?"

Adrian heard the note of worry. She was oozing unease at this display.

Angela snorted, slinging her arm again. "Unease. Yeah, let's go with that."

The flame ball sprayed the lower branch and trunk but didn't catch.

Angela hated these weaknesses that he found and drew out, but each one they conquered healed something inside her. It was worth the pain.

"What would you like me to do, Angie?"

"What can you do?" she countered.

Adrian's eyes flashed. "More since you came."

"Like what?"

Adrian's hand rose toward the bottom of the first tree.

Angela heard the raw hum of power that she'd been so certain no one else put off but her.

It vibrated from the leader, causing the bubble above them to ripple with a fresh blast of golden color. The tree he was aiming for, however, began to crack and wither, falling into splinters.

Angela turned to him in confusion as the tree died. She found him staring at her injury.

"I kill. It's what I was put here to do."

"You also create!" Angela was shaken by his demonstration.

Adrian thought of the blood on his hands and slid them into his pockets. "I'm a necessary evil for this new world. Later, when things have calmed, someone purer will take my place."

"Purer?"

Adrian sighed. "Right there, and you can't see." He leaned against a tree that wasn't in their target zone. "Why do you think we need female Eagles so badly?"

"Survival, the future."

"But for what role? Why can't it stay like it is now, with two separate halves of an army that can come together when needed?"

Angela had to think about that one. She did it while pulling the flames forward. They wound around her in a sensation of dangerous warmth and addictive power.

Angela brought her other hand up to form a ball,

rolling slightly... The fire curved into the perfect sphere of her palm. She threw it as if it was a baseball, hitting the next mold covered tree in the lower branches.

The flames shot upward, cracking and cackling in gleeful release. But it didn't take the tree down, quickly burning out on the mold.

“Again.”

Angela obediently pulled more fire, stifling a yawn. She used up energy fast doing physical magic. She wondered briefly if Marc would mind being drained tonight and flushed at the thought. No, he wouldn't.

The flames in her palm weren't hot, though there was no mistaking the heat coming from them. Angela stared at the fire for a long moment, trying to banish her fear of burning alive.

When she tossed it, a streak of Adrian's golden light went flying by to merge with her ball of flame. It hit the tree in one huge blast, showering enough heat to send the moldy pine up in heavy orange and black plumes. It burnt quickly, snapping and cracking.

Angela understood in a blinding flash. “There's no limit to the damage we can do when we throw together!”

Adrian had to swallow the praise. He was too emotional to deliver even a single personal remark without crossing a line. “Yes. Harder days are coming. We're going to need everything we can gather. That means magic, as much as beans and

bullets.”

Angela gave him what he needed, scared but willing. “I conquered the Eagles. Give me a timeline to get the camp to accept me for what I really am...and behind me, the rest of us.”

Adrian’s chest cramped, but in joy rather than pain. He’d foreseen this moment long, cold months ago, and obsessed over what to say. Now, with so much death on his conscience, the words fell easily. “Before we leave our country. Only knowing what we can do will give them the courage to go.”

“I know we’ll have to, and that we will, but I’m scared of why.” She scanned the hostile landscape. “It’s bad right now, but we could make a stand here.”

“Things are going to get worse. We need them out of the crossfire.”

“So we can teach them how to rebuild America,” Angela confirmed. These nights, her dreams and his were often linked. They were learning it together and trying to catch everything. “When will you start bringing us together to do things?”

Adrian shrugged. Another of his secret dreams was coming to life and he couldn’t even celebrate it with her. “When the camp can handle it, and once again, it’s all on you.” That’s why it had to be someone who was stronger than she’d ever given herself credit for. This was no easy role that he’d assigned.

“Do you know yet, what it is that we’re all being

brought together for?”

Adrian shrugged again, feeling Marc’s eyes burning holes into his back. “I have a list, with a few of the more likely at the top.”

“Do I want to know any of them?”

“Not if you want to sleep tonight.” He turned away. “Take down the rest of that line if you can. Marc’s got enough restlessness to fill you back up.”

Angela didn’t turn to look. Marc would do his duty and let her handle hers. Things were good with them that way now.

Marc waited patiently for Angela to burn the remaining trees. He’d heard enough of their conversation to have his other worry confirmed, but it was little compared to watching Adrian and Angela work together. That one combination blast had sent a jolt into his heart. *Why can’t I have a gift like that? Then I could compete.*

Angela didn’t frown or let him know that she’d caught the bitterness in his mind. *He doesn’t understand what it’s like.* Marc wanted to have power, but it didn’t work that way. The power held them. They eventually learned to control or cage it.

Angela joined Marc, covered in a fine sheen of sweat. The last tree was the one she should have started with. Sending the ball of flames 50 feet was exhausting after the first throw. It had taken 10 to get the tree to flame up.

Angela sagged against the fence. She didn’t know if her terror of fire had been conquered yet,

but if not, she definitely had a good start on it.

Marc gave her the towel in his back pocket, the one Adrian had handed him without speaking.

Angela smiled at the thoughtfulness.

Marc gritted his teeth. Adrian was trying to make it clear that he wouldn't interfere, but the smell of him on the cloth was causing Angela to inhale loud enough for him to hear.

Addictive! Angela covered, dropping the cloth. "Tell Hilda there might be mold in the laundry water. Time to change it."

Marc snickered happily as they headed for camp.

Angela lowered her tired lids to hide the deceit. Every time jealousy brought something between them, she would either kill it or find a way to use it in their favor.

3

"She wants you."

Charlie's quiet words sent apprehension through Kyle. They'd moved, gotten the camp reset and settled down. He'd done his usual job—after John's care in the ambulance while they rolled. He was covered in scrapes, cuts, bruises, but none of them were serious. His team knew how and where to hit as a punishment.

"Kyle."

"I haven't been banned from her, have I?"

Charlie shook his head. "No. They know that

will backfire but be careful. Not all of the camp is satisfied.”

Kyle nodded. “Tell her 10 minutes.”

Charlie’s tone was full of Angela’s disapproval as he repeated her exact words. “*When she’s asleep, so I can have your full attention.*”

Kyle’s shame flooded his face, but triumph settled into his heart. Jennifer was his. Everyone knew it now.

Charlie shook his head. *Adults are so blind.* He walked to Marc, who was standing outside the tent where his mom was set up. They both stayed quiet until Kyle was out of earshot.

Marc wondered if this was going to be another of those private conversations. He’d dreaded them at first, not sure what to say, but that had changed.

Matt walked by on his way to the training area, but he didn’t look at either of them. Marc understood the pimply teen was probably feeling left out of the new friendship Charlie, Jennifer and Becky were enjoying. Seth and Kyle were relieved by it, though. They knew what Charlie could do for their girls here, but more than that, the protective men hoped he would tell them if something was wrong that they hadn’t accounted for.

“Anything I can do?” Charlie offered.

“Think it’s all good. You’re welcome to hang, though.”

Charlie nodded happily.

Marc studied him with quick glances. He was still getting taller, but thanks to the training and

healthy food, Charlie was starting to fill out in other areas as well. He was more muscular, skin tanning, hair growing longer. He and Angela had both seen female gazes following their son. Ready for him to be a part of the couples forming here or not, Charlie was a handsome boy who was drawing notice. Soon, some lucky girl would find herself the center of his world.

Marc slung an arm around Charlie's shoulders and noted they were firmer, wider than a week ago. The teenager looking at him in concern was so much like glancing in a mirror that Marc suddenly felt old.

"You're not. Stop it."

Marc grinned. "Then slow down a little with the growing up, will ya?"

Charlie's head rotated toward the mess, where Hilda was instructing a large group of new women. In that gaggle, half a dozen females looked at him invitingly.

Charlie stared at the tables, clearly appraising.

You don't like anyone yet, my ass.

Charlie sniggered, but didn't respond. When he'd said he wanted to be sure the first time, he'd meant it. And that required a basis for comparison. The problem was that he had yet to find anyone who compared so he could implement the test. The woman he had his eye on was just that—a woman. These younger camp females didn't even make him stare anymore. Actually, none of the herd did since he'd accidentally gotten a glimpse of Tracy through the peephole in the female camper. *She has the*

biggest breasts I've ever seen.

She was also servicing a number of the Eagles—including Kyle if rumor was to be believed. Charlie thought that was improbable from the way Kyle doted on Jennifer, but he didn't care. Neither of Tracy's main men were interested in anything serious. They both had other plans. At some point, Tracy would be free, and Charlie wanted her. It didn't bother him in the least that everyone called her a slut. In fact, that was part of what Charlie liked about her. He had taken the talks with Marc and Adrian to heart. She would know how to keep him satisfied, and then he'd never cheat. It was a perfect solution to all the drama he refused to become a part of.

And if you find someone else who draws you later? Charlie's witch asked spitefully. *Will you stay with someone you don't love?*

Charlie didn't answer. That was why he had to be sure. He didn't ever want to cause someone the pain that the people around him were suffering. As long as he wasn't sure, he would wait before revealing it. When he was ready to do that, however, he wanted to be set to compete for her.

"I'll be around." The teenager moved toward the training tent for a workout.

Marc sighed. *There goes trouble.*

from Angela. “I’m not the enemy. I used to be a teammate.”

Kyle ducked into the tent, leaving the flap open. “I know.”

“Then why the dread?”

Kyle only snorted, carefully lowering himself into the chair across from her and the small folding table. It reminded him so much of Adrian that he had to smother a frown. He’d noticed Kenn bringing it in as he climbed from the ambulance, along with a set of envelopes, but he hadn’t made the connection. Adrian had her doing meetings for him. *What else did I miss during my obsession?*

Angela let him work through it, not interrupting with any of the scolds or praise she could have given. Kyle was an extremely smart man. He hadn’t earned his place with impulsive decisions. She was sure Jennifer wasn’t one either.

Nor was his time with Tracy—the worry he was trying to hide. Kyle didn’t have to be concerned. Angela approved the choice, though she was unable to help feeling a bit vindicated that Adrian’s relief source wasn’t spending enough time with him to be satisfied. “Let’s start with why. And don’t feed me that shit you’ve spread around the camp. *I know better.*”

Kyle flushed, forced to reveal part of his long-hidden ugliness. This was why he’d been staying away from Angela despite the incredibly strong bond they shared. “There’s no way I can keep doing this job for him unless I settle my mind.”

Angela waited for him to explain, sensing the determined person headed their way.

“I’m evil. The things I do are wrong. The Eagles are good. Getting rid of these killers is right. It’s as if I’m being ripped apart.” Kyle closed his eyes. “She can save me.”

“That’s a lot to put on one pregnant girl’s shoulders.” Angela leaned forward. “Exactly how will she save you?”

“I’ll teach him that it doesn’t matter if he kills, so long as it’s for the greater good.” Jennifer was in the flap, Dog at her heels.

Kyle dropped his head in shame.

And concentration. There was now a door in his mind that would always be closed to her. Kyle mourned the loss even while being grateful for the return of his control.

Jennifer didn’t look away from Angela. “Am I allowed to speak for him?”

“Yes.”

Reading them both, Angela discovered that Kyle didn’t want Jennifer to take any of the fallout if he was banished. That’s why he’d set it up this way. *How sweet.* And naïve on his part. If he was voted out, the camp would find a way to hurt Jennifer for disrupting the flow of the Eagles.

“Come in.” Angela noted the bigger belly, the stiffness of Jennifer’s movements. She looked better, but it was obvious she was much too young for what her body had been forced into.

Kyle stood, directing Jennifer into the chair.

Angela gestured. “What would you like to say?”

Jennifer wasn't one to play games when it came to getting what she wanted. “Kyle asked me to be his mate. I've said yes, with conditions.”

Angela's eyes spun to him in sharp disapproval. “Really.”

Kyle groaned. “I need her, Angie. In so many ways, I can't list them all.”

“And what about her needs?”

“I'm taking care of them!” Kyle snapped back guiltily. “And I've made their deal!”

“But you haven't stuck to it, otherwise we wouldn't be here right now.” Angela didn't like this part of her job, but she didn't cut him any slack.

“I *asked* him to kiss me, to be sure I wanted him.”

Jennifer's words were a lie. Kyle's stunned face was the evidence. Angela snorted, leaning back. “The camp won't believe that any more than I do.”

Jennifer locked gazes with Angela. “That doesn't matter to me. He and I have an arrangement in place, one that *I* like.”

There was steel in that tone, in those golden eyes that resembled Dog's. Angela studied the girl, evaluating. “The camp will say you're too young to know what you want or need.”

“But he isn't,” Jennifer pointed out. “And you all trusted him before me, right?”

Angela admired the girl's tactics. “Yes. We never expected Kyle to react this way to any female, let alone one so young. It makes us worry.”

“It does the same to him, but I’ve talked to Charlie. Wasn’t that how you and Marc started out?”

Angela opened her mouth to scold and realized she was trapped by a 14-year-old girl who had the heart of Adrian’s *highest* Eagle. That said a lot, didn’t it?

Kyle was staring at Jennifer as though she was his reason for breathing. It was an expression Angela and Marc had shared for all the years of their childhood, and that included when it would have gotten him arrested. Love knew no boundaries of time or distance. “I’m going to recommend that you be declared an adult, so your choices are your own.” Angela raised a hard brow toward the surprised mobster. “That is what you were hoping for when you planned this, right?”

“Yes.” Kyle forced himself to talk past the lump in his throat. *Why did I think Angie didn’t know?* “She needed time to get to know me, to feel the connection. I’d never hurt her. I gave that promise during our first night together and I meant it.”

“And if she grows up and wants freedom? A new man? You gonna be like Kenn and stalk her?”

“No!” Kyle protested. “I’ll let her go.”

“Like hell you will! Just be good to me, and I’ll never want anyone else.” Jennifer scowled, flushing at her outburst.

Kyle was lost in the daze of getting what he wanted most—to be allowed to love her.

Jennifer smiled, hand over her stomach. “You

make me feel safe.”

“A friend can do that too,” Kyle was starting to realize how crowding her emotions, trying to give her no other choice, had been wrong.

Jennifer tilted her head as he knelt in front of her. “You are my friend. You have been all along.”

“It doesn’t have to be more...” He was unable to hide the misery behind the offer.

Jennifer blushed. “I was going to insist on that, being friends only, but something Chris told me made me realize I want more.”

“That was where the...relief question came from?” Kyle asked, letting his hand cover hers as the babies jostled for position.

It was as if they were alone as they worked out the bonds holding them together. Angela took it all in, concern easing.

“Yes.” Jennifer forced herself to come clean. “He said you would take a woman here, in secret, to keep from hurting me if I didn’t want you like that.”

Kyle stiffened. “They’ve been informed I won’t be using their services.”

“They? As in more than one?” Jennifer’s cute face squashed up in anger. “That makes me want to hit you!”

Kyle chuckled, delighted. “Really?”

“Yes.”

“You can. I’d never hit you back.”

“Even when I tell you that I’ve already signed up for the Eagles?”

“No. Never.”

His hand over her stomach had tensed for an instant, but she hadn't felt her usual flare of fear. It was liberating. Jennifer finished making it clear that she wasn't nearly as innocent as she'd led everyone to believe. "When we were in that farmhouse, I had to make a choice. I knew I could use the things you were feeling to control you. That's all it was at first for me, aside from how safe you made me feel. I saw what you could do for my baby and I chose to lead you on. I'm not sorry I used you that way." She looked at him in regret and victory. "I'm also not saying all this to keep you out of trouble."

Kyle took her confession to heart and delivered one of his own. "I knew you would, Jen. I used your worry over the delivery and Safe Haven's reaction. I'm sorry, I just..."

"Want me," she supplied.

"Yes." His hand curled protectively over the top bulge, caressing what would be his son or daughter in a couple of months. "Them, too. I can't take away what he did to you, but I can swear it won't ever happen again. We'll be the family you're missing."

She sighed as his touch began to settle the babies down. Her pale hand against Kyle's extremely tanned fingers was a harsh contrast, a bad omen of their compatibility her mom might have said, but Jennifer didn't listen to that voice. Her mom hadn't always been right, like being an escort. Jennifer understood now that her mom could have been one of Adrian's Runners if she'd wanted to be. Instead, she'd liked her life of moral depravity.

Jennifer hadn't, but that experience had kept her alive during captivity and she was grateful for it now. Without her mom's voice whispering, telling her what to do, she would have been one of the hundreds of corpses Cesar left in his wake.

"I like the deal we have." She flushed. "And when I'm stronger, I think you won't scare me as much."

Kyle pressed an intense, chaste kiss to the back of her hand. "We'll go slowly, with *everything*."

Jennifer stood up, silently insisting on being held.

Kyle surrounded her with his killer's arms, heart complete for the first time in his life. *I'm wanted!*

Angela slipped out of the tent, smiling. *Love. It screws with everyone at some point.*

5

"Why are we stopping?"

Shawn pointed toward the edge of the creek where a group of wild turkeys was foraging in the bushes.

Neil's truck came to a stop, lights flashing off.

Samantha realized this was their prey. She was relieved. She hadn't been looking forward to more deer.

"You stay with Neil."

She ignored the happily observing men in the seats behind her. "What?"

Shawn tried not to smirk. He liked Samantha

and didn't want to offend her. "He switched you for our XO. You'll play that role today."

Samantha swallowed nervously. Neil had done it on purpose, so she would have to spend time with him.

Wasn't that part of why you wanted to come along? You wanted human contact. Now, you're getting it. "Fine!" Samantha closed the door, heading for Neil's truck, but even in her anger, she knew not to scare the birds away by slamming it. Safe Haven needed the food.

Samantha slid into the passenger seat of Neil's truck with a sharp glare that dared him to try starting a personal conversation.

Neil kept his mind on the mission. "This is what I need."

Samantha scanned the brief list he'd prepared while driving, judging from the messy writing. His scrawls were usually neat and tight.

It didn't appear to be anything she couldn't do. "Okay."

"We're the flushers. We make the noise, and the rest of the crew captures them in nets."

"Taking some alive?"

"Yes. Chris thinks he can raise these too."

Samantha shrugged. The vet appeared to be doing well so far. Most of the animals he'd added to the collection were still alive, with quite a few of them pregnant. That thought had need, sharp and heavy, settling into her gut.

Neil leaned over to pull something from the

glovebox, letting his scent hit her. Charlie wasn't the only one who was studying these postwar females. Neil had noticed Samantha used a light spray of perfume. He'd taken it to mean she liked her man to smell good too. He subtly waited for any reaction. With the windows up, she should be getting a full blast.

Samantha was. Neil's musky, tempting scent was one of her favorites. Polo on a man with that attitude of control was attention getting, but she was smart enough to know it was being used as a weapon to wear her down. She hit the window button and began breathing through her mouth.

Neil frowned, quickly sitting back. She didn't like it. *Damn. Something different?* Sighing inwardly, the trooper skipped on to the next ambush. He grinned at her. "Ready to go be covered in glory?"

Samantha couldn't resist his excitement or the challenge. She leered. "You know it."

Neil did. She wanted the same things that he and the rest of Adrian's army did, to be useful and be recognized for it. They were a perfect match. If only he could make *her* see that.

Samantha joined the men at the rear of the vehicles, taking her air horn and the long, thick leather gloves the flushers were required to wear.

As she and Neil softly stepped toward the far end of the creek, the nauseating thrill of battle fell over her mind. This is what she'd come for too, as much as the human contact. She didn't have to have

a man, but she was desperate for this ego boost.

“Ready?”

Samantha was unable to keep from flirting at Neil’s innocent question. “Born that way.”

Neil’s eyes flashed with hunger. “Prove it!”

Samantha hit the button on her horn instead of grabbing him, scattering the turkeys.

She and Neil stayed back, occasionally hitting their horns to keep the birds from fleeing. Gunshots rang continuously as the team took aim.

When they’d bagged enough for a good stock, nets were brought out to capture the requested dozen. The angry birds fought hard. It took them more time to load the birds into the trucks than it had to actually capture them with the nets. Turkeys were mean.

“You gonna live?”

Neil slung blood onto the browning grass. “Affirmative. Just got my first turkey bite. Can’t go until the award shows up.”

Samantha had a number of scratches and marks too, but only Neil was bleeding.

Neil did quick first aid, dumping alcohol over the wounds twice before adding ointment and a bandage. He looked up as he finished. “Did you do yourself?”

Samantha flushed at her thoughts, aware of the others lingering at the rear of the trucks. Except for the three snipers in the trees, they were alone. Her lips twitched. “Later, maybe.”

Neil came over to the hood she was leaning against. None of her injuries appeared to be serious. He let it go but he didn't back off. "Can we talk a minute?"

She tensed.

Neil grunted. "I'll make it quick and then you can go back to ignoring me."

Samantha didn't tell him that was the only way she could leave him alone. "Get it over with, then."

Neil's pitch lowered, gaze softening. "I miss you. I'd like to spend some time together that isn't work."

Samantha wanted that too. "Not a good idea."

Neil snapped his mouth shut. "Fine!" He spun toward the creek to get their used equipment.

Samantha followed. "Neil, hang on."

He stopped but didn't turn.

She sighed again. "I can only treat you guys the same."

"You know, by now, our team will survive?"

"Yes." Samantha sighed ruefully. She should have known Neil was smart enough to understand what she'd done.

"What can I say to convince you?"

"I don't think there is anything. I'm not made for what either of you have in mind."

Neil spun around, embarrassed that he wasn't enough for her. "What do you want from me?!"

"Why can't you both be a friend?"

His response wasn't a surprise.

"I can't share. I'm barely okay with being

your...” He stopped himself.

“Whore?” she supplied coolly.

Neil winced but didn’t deny the title. “It’s not what I want, but if that’s the only place you have for me, I’ll take it. I don’t even see other women now.”

Samantha was instantly elated. It meant he hadn’t picked anyone.

“I need to think.” She was flooded with nervous confusion. *Am I really going to do this to all of us?*

Neil grunted. “I’ve finished my shopping now. I’m ready to buy or steal, whichever you’ll allow.”

It sent her to their second kiss, to the one he’d wanted for comparison. Apparently, it had done to him, what it had to her. Samantha paused on the way to the truck, nose filled with his scent. She didn’t want the drama, but she did want him. “You smell good, Neil. Too good for a hunting trip.”

The trooper leered, confidence restored. “Wait until you get me fresh out of the shower. I smell like a French whore.”

She spun around, ready to let him have it at the continued game when she’d said she needed time to think, and saw he was just as surprised by the spark as she was.

Samantha groaned, moving for Shawn’s truck. “Damn you.”

“For what? I was—”

Splash!

Samantha turned back but didn’t see him. “Where’d you go, Neil?”

Her call brought the Eagles her way. Neil

wouldn't leave her alone. They knew that.

Samantha hurried to the creek edge. Had he fallen in? "Oh, Shit!"

"Shoot it!" Neil fought for breath as he was dragged back down.

Samantha fumbled for her gun as her eyes found the end of the large python coiled around Neil's body. Its head was floating on the ripples as they struggled. She fired without hesitating.

Neil choked, going under as the coils tightened.

"Neil!" Samantha jumped in with her knife in hand.

It only took them a minute to get the snake's corpse off Neil and pull him onto the bank, where he lay coughing and chortling.

Samantha stayed by his side. "What the hell, Neil? You know things come out of the water now!"

He was still giving the occasional cough. "Distracted."

Samantha flushed as his team frowned at her. "Not my fault. I didn't switch out members."

"But you did show up when you weren't on the list," Shawn pointed out. Samantha shooting at Neil hadn't been funny at first, but now, it would become a team joke.

"I always go on the hunting runs!" Sam protested.

"Yes, you do." Shawn eyed his team leader. Had Neil left her off the list on purpose?

"I didn't think you wanted to be around...me."

Neil had started to say *us*, but he hated to draw attention to the way he'd left his XO in camp to take her along.

"I don't!" She sighed. "Didn't. Stop pushing me, Neil!" Samantha shoved to her feet but stayed close. "You want a hand into the truck, or should we just roll your ass back into the damn creek?"

Neil chuckled, full of the adrenalin that came from surviving. "A hand would be nice, thanks."

The rest of the hunting team watched her slide an arm around his waist and tense when his came up to her shoulders. It was the first time they'd been this close since he'd kissed her; lust sizzled off both of them. Neil's reaction was to be expected—he was a man, and he'd almost died. For Samantha though, the needs appeared to be just as great. None of the team was surprised when she placed a soft kiss to his cold cheek.

"You gotta stop doing this shit to me, Neil."

Neil was so surprised by her action that he grinned like a fool and caved without any further resistance. "Sorry, Sammi."

The Eagles chuckled and went to finish loading the turkeys and supplies. It was time to go home.

6

Kevin drew on his courage. "Would you like to have dinner with me?"

Cynthia looked up in surprise. Other than lessons, the males here hadn't shown her any

interest. She raked him with a brutal gaze.

Kevin was neat and clean, and not so much bigger than her that she would feel intimidated. His body was lean and tight, his short, blond hair neatly kept. He looked like an all-American playboy. *What does he want with me?*

Kevin slid onto the bench without waiting for an invitation. He was certain there wouldn't be one. "You're legal now."

That revealed a lot more than she'd expected. The reporter leaned back, studying him. She'd seen Kevin watching her, had run into him more than once during her sneaking and spying, but she hadn't thought it was an attraction on his part.

Kevin waited patiently, taking in her scent, the glint of her hair in the brief sunrays struggling through the grit. He found her sexy and exotic, and always had. Now that she was accepted, and he'd waited long enough to be sure she and Jeremy really were finished, he intended to make himself known. The other Eagles hadn't decided how to handle her yet, except to treat her as a teammate, but Kevin wanted more. Especially after sticking his nose in her business.

"Yes."

Kevin blinked. "Yes?"

Cynthia snorted, slightly attracted to the heat she read. He wanted her, and he wanted her to know it. "When?"

"After I get back from Little Rock."

"Sure."

Kevin stood up, waving to someone over her shoulder. “I asked Adrian to put us together for some of the training lessons, to see if you might like spending time around me. Is that okay?”

The feeling of being chosen, of it being done publicly, made Cynthia blush. She was willing to give him the same chance that he was extending to her. “Thank you for telling me. I wouldn’t have liked it if I had heard that from the camp.”

Kevin slowly reached forward and took her hand, officially declaring her as his choice. He placed a soft kiss to the back of it and met her eye. “I’ll never lie to you or cheat. I don’t beat women, and I’ll help make you strong enough to kick my ass anytime you feel like it. I’m not much on kids, but we can compromise in the future. Oh, and I like Matt. I could help you with him.”

Cynthia gaped. *And people say females deliver too much information at one time!*

Realizing he’d revealed more of his feelings than he’d meant to, Kevin let go and stepped back, cheeks dark red. “Sorry.”

He left with a stiff stride that told her she would have to make the next move now or he wouldn’t come near her again.

The reporter tried not to smile at the feeling as the camp stared at her, but she couldn’t stop the curve of her lips. *Being wanted feels nice.*

A loud whistle got Seth's attention, but it was already too late.

"Becky?"

The couple scrambled for clothes. Despite the beating he and Kyle had taken, they hadn't been banned from their females and both men were still spending every minute alone with them that they could steal.

"It's your mom..." Peggy froze at the sight.

Seth helped Becky finish pulling the shirt over her bare skin, then wrapped his Eagles jacket around her shoulders, lovingly adjusting it.

"Mom." Becky stiffly greeted her parent.

Peggy's daze broke. She left Seth's tent without a word.

Now on duty nearby, Samantha saw the older woman and understood where she was going, what she meant to do. The storm tracker reached her before she got to the mess. "Don't do it."

Peggy didn't answer, too furious.

Samantha grabbed at her arm. "Listen—"

Slap!

Samantha reeled back from the unexpected hit, letting go.

Peggy turned toward the crowded mess, toward the people who would help her lynch Seth. It wouldn't take much to convince them that 15 was too young.

Sam grabbed her again, ducking the swing this time. She gave Peggy a light head butt that sent her to the ground. "Sit there a minute!"

Peggy didn't answer, only raised a hand to her throbbing chin and glowered hatefully.

Sam knelt down and kept her voice low. It didn't hide her loathing. "This mess is *your* fault. You were too busy caring for Adrian's kids to tend your own. You owe her!"

Peggy's face turned bright red, but she didn't interrupt.

"Rick raped her. He would have killed her. If not for Seth, she would be dead, maybe by her own hand. He's helping her in the only way she *asked* for, and she's surviving. Don't you dare make her feel ashamed for that!"

"He's a monster!" Peggy spat, meaning Seth.

Disgusted, Sam stood up, glaring. "By all rights, she should hate you. Accepting Seth might be your only chance at saving your relationship with your daughter. I'd think about that before you go gathering a mob."

Samantha left the woman on her ass in the dirt, where she belonged.

Around them, the Eagles nodded in agreement and respect. Samantha was earning her place among the Eagles. They had orders to prevent a riot from happening, but she had beaten them to it.

Peggy stared as the blonde woman vanished into dawn's shadows, the words stinging. It was all true, every bit. Realizing she'd gotten her child hurt was a terrible burden. Peggy began to sob in guilt and shame. "I'm so sorry!"

Surprising everyone, Doug appeared behind

her, unable to ignore Peggy's anguish even though she deserved it.

He knelt down. "Come here, lass."

The emotion in his voice allowed Peggy to accept his comfort. She let the big man hold her close while she cried.

Samantha's day had been a full one. Her night, however, was slow and frustrating as she struggled with the last line of morality holding her back. It wasn't that she wanted to act like a whore. She wanted to act like a man. It was a hard adjustment mentally, to be evolving in these things while she went about regular camp life. Some nights, she wasn't sure how she was doing in her fight.

Something's coming.

Samantha felt the chill and closed her eyes as the mental door swung open.

On duty nearby, Neil and Jeremy both noticed, but it was Marc who came to her side and gathered the information.

Neither Eagle mentioned it, but both men felt left out. Neil's choice to give his team a break had been a solid one, but that wouldn't hold much longer. They were almost ready to get back into the action.

8

"She's right." Doug tried to be gentle. "It's gone too far now."

Peggy didn't answer.

They were in a dim corner of the mini mess with Allan covering Doug's post. He'd let her calm down and then brought her here, glad to be doing something more useful than just guard duty for a change. "Lass, he—"

"Saved her life."

Doug let the curt interruption pass. "When you see them together, you'll understand."

Her hand tightened on the cup at the thought of being around the couple.

Doug understood in a sudden flash of intuition. *That* adult male wasn't the one she'd chosen for her daughter. How much of Becky's freedom had been intentional? "You set it up for her to be with Neil!"

The hard woman didn't blink. "I want her to be more than some Eagle's woman. He would have taken her there."

"*You* want. What about hers?"

Peggy's snort was bitter. "She doesn't know anything about the real world."

"Not true," Doug denied firmly. "She's a war survivor, a rape victim, and Seth's lover. Those things are unchangeable. Your dreams for her are dead, like she should be."

Slap!

Doug didn't react, though everyone close enough to hear or see it did. He knew what he'd drawn, what he was forcing her to accept.

Peggy shoved herself to her feet. "I hate you!"

Doug was surprised to register the sting. He

hadn't felt much of anything for a long time. "No, you hate yourself."

Fury...and awareness. "I have, for most of my life." She stood there, torn.

Doug nudged her cup of untouched coffee. "Sit down and tell me why."

He didn't think she would. The gambit of emotions crossing her lined face was dangerous for a man with only a small amount of female experience.

The fight went out of her in a rush. Peggy sank down, looking at the bright red handprint. "I'm sorry."

Doug gave her a small smirk. "I expect you'll find a different target next time."

To his surprise, she chuckled, bitter but no longer violent.

"Aye."

There was a lilt to her word that shook him. Not so much the sound of their shared heritage, but the attraction it aroused.

Doug shifted subtly and refilled his cup to buy time. He stole a quick glance at her. She was staring toward the male tents.

Doug grunted, drawing her attention. "You have questions, I'd imagine."

Peggy traded some of her anger for fear. "What happens now?"

"They'll leave until she's older if you refuse to accept it. They're not going to be split up any more than Kyle and Jennifer are."

“She’ll leave me?”

Doug didn’t tell Peggy the couple was making plans. Seth hadn’t taken his correction as well as Kyle. “They’ll probably trail camp. You could go out for visits, but if you can’t support them here and now, so they can stay, I’d guess you won’t be welcome.”

“I won’t see her?”

Doug delivered the rest of the truth without malice. “It all depends on what choice you make right now. She doesn’t need you to rouse these people against Seth or Adrian. That won’t help her and she’s smart enough to know it. She needs you to be her mother.”

Chapter Seventeen

You Caused This

10 miles south of Muskogee, Oklahoma

June 19th

1

“**C**onvoy halt. Emergency plan A.”

There was a pause of fear...then the entire convoy began yanking on steering wheels and searching the apocalyptic landscape through dusty windows. The heavy winds that Samantha had warned them of were gone, leaving fresh debris to be cleared or avoided. It also added huge trees that hadn't been able to withstand another storm, making driving tense as limbs cracked and popped above them.

Adrian waited. Kyle was probably staring at Jennifer right now. The hum of raw power had to be filling his truck.

One minute, moving slow.

Adrian waved the scheduled guards forward as his camp fled for the mess that was going up in record time. The canopy over it was now lined in lead. Three full teams struggled to erect it as camp members ran into them and each other, shoving.

I don't feel a direct threat, but...

“But it's dark when you look.”

How do you know that?

Adrian got out of the semi without answering, heading for Marc's Blazer.

Marc was on guard outside it.

Charlie and Dog stayed near Jennifer as Kyle patrolled the stopped refugee camp with his team and a group of female rookies.

Adrian waited impatiently, ready to reveal all sorts of secrets to save lives this time. He was tired of letting people die because the herd couldn't handle the things they could do. He wasn't sure how much more of that he could take.

Thirty seconds.

Which direction?

Ahead.

Adrian waved two teams to their flank and sent three to the front.

Angela got out of the Blazer with the witch's red eyes in plain view for anyone to see. "Be careful of these!"

Marc started to step in front of her, but Adrian was already there. He grabbed her arm, meaning to turn her back to the vehicle.

Lightning flashed overhead, thick and hungry.

Angela moaned at the feel of Adrian's hands on her skin. *Yes!*

His instant wave of need in response washed over her as if they were alone and allowed.

Adrian jerked backward, but too late. The witch lunged forward, drawing what he'd been denying even in their dreams.

Marc blocked the view from the overloaded mess, simmering. He knew she occasionally took energy from other men, *but to see it!* He instinctively knew that Angie didn't crave *him* that way.

May I? the inner Marine begged.

Marc growled. "No."

The sound of it snapped Angela and Adrian out of the intense power-lock. They stared in horror. There was no one to blame, no scene to cover up and no crime committed, but the line had been crossed.

They're here!

Adrian turned from Marc's fury, now more determined than ever to stay back. When she and Marc failed, it had to be because of them.

Marc didn't care about the approaching threat or the asshole that had just walked away. What he cared about were the dangerous realizations he saw in Angela's eyes. She had all of the truth now—Adrian wanted her in his bed—and her reaction, *that moan!* said she felt the same on some level.

Angela scowled, full of shame and anger at the unfairness of paying for not having done anything wrong. "I've always known, but you just couldn't leave it alone."

She grimaced, confirming Marc's suspicions. "And neither could he."

Angela left him there, moving toward the front of the convoy to join Kyle.

Now, may I kill him?

No. Marc moved to Angela's flank, not bothering to stand between her and Adrian as they waited for the slowly approaching vehicles. He'd already thought of trying to keep them apart. That was a waste of time. Marc still hadn't found a better solution than the one he was already employing.

"Because there isn't a solution to be found," Adrian forced the words out. "Feed her more and shit like that won't happen."

Marc wanted to snarl, but the man inside asked when she'd drawn from him last.

"It's no excuse." Angela couldn't take the shame. "I'm sorry for the disrespect I've shown you."

Marc's inner man almost came forward anyway when Adrian didn't tell her the truth, that his need was pulling, not hers.

"Not true." Adrian moved forward as the five vehicles got closer. "She'll always have to draw from someone else. Her needs are more than *you* can satisfy."

Any hope Angela had for peace between them vanished with that one statement. Now that Marc knew, he would always suspect, always search her with those concerned blue eyes. His jealousy wouldn't give him any peace and Adrian knew it. He'd made certain Marc would hurt too.

Not like what Adrian is suffering, the witch reminded. *How does he continue to function while being eaten up that way?*

Angela shoved the witch back in fury. *You*

caused this with your dream walking, promising him what he can't have!

The witch cackled ruthlessly. *And who says he can't, my pet? Keep the shields of the past up if you must, but there is no denying what we saw—what you felt.*

Angela's frustration boiled. There had to be some way to change that future. She didn't want to be Adrian's. She wanted Marc!

Marc turned suddenly, waving Neil over to take his place. Angela and Adrian weren't acting as if the approaching cars were a threat and at the moment, Marc didn't think he could stand to see even a single look pass between them. It wasn't just Angela's fragile emotions that Marc worried over. This time, his competition wasn't a sullen, powerless wifebeater or a group of rookies who didn't know what they were doing. It was Adrian, and that extremely manipulative man was none of those things. He was dangerous.

Angela motioned Jennifer toward Adrian. *Keep helping him.*

It was the first silent order she'd given to any of the females.

Jennifer gaped for a few seconds before reluctantly moving that way. Dog and Charlie were her escorts.

Angela followed Marc's stiffly marching steps. When he got into his Blazer and began to dig in his kit, her footsteps quickened. His rifle was in there.

Marc considered it, but only briefly. Not only

would it make her hate him, it wouldn't change what had happened. He would have to find a way to live with it.

Not just you, Angela sent, hesitating by his door.

Marc grunted, hitting the window button. "Need a few minutes."

Angela got into the passenger seat instead.

Marc growled, not lighting the smoke he'd taken from his kit. "This isn't like last time, Angie, where a quickie in the training tent will fix me."

Angela recoiled in surprise.

"Damn." Marc leaned his head back against the seat. "I'm sorry for saying that."

Angela tried to meet him halfway. "I'm sorry, too. I've tried hard to control the hunger. That's the first..." Angela paused, unable to finish. It had gotten away from her once before, back in South Dakota. "Second time."

Marc's face tightened as he understood, but Adrian's words were rendering him incapable of thinking about anything else. "Is it true?"

Angela wasn't in any shape to lie to him. "Yes."

Marc's grip on the wheel tightened. "But, with him?"

Angela forced the words out. If she didn't tell him, Adrian would. "His energy is like mine. It refills the power."

Marc's pain was on his face as he looked at her. "I'll step aside."

Angela forgot about the edge he was dangling over. She grabbed his jacket and dragged him

toward her. “No, you won’t!” Angela stopped them inches apart. “I’ve wanted you since we were kids, Marc. That hasn’t changed!”

May I?!

Marc nodded and stepped back. The usual consideration she got from him would be absent with the Marine.

Angela moaned softly when he kissed her, but she felt the difference. Marc’s hands were rough, pulling her closer with no care for her fear. His free hand went behind her neck and pulled her onto his lap before she could protest. His hands went to her head, bringing her to him for an intense kiss.

Angela was swept away. This was the old Marc, but all grown up. He didn’t hold back or worry over mental issues. He was wild and hers!

Angela kissed him back.

Marc began to understand that all the holding back he was doing had backfired. Marc pushed her sweet lips away, eyes blazing. “I need you!”

Angela nodded shakily. “Whenever you want.”

Marc hissed. He’d been waiting for her to be ready, but it was clear that he shouldn’t have. She needed to be bonded with him on every level.

Marc was watching emotions flash across her flushed face. He wasn’t hot and bothered like he had been in the training tent—this was a different type of heat—but if she kept looking at him that way, she might get a reminder of why vehicles had back seats.

Angela leaned forward, smiling a bit at the

thought. "I'd prefer a bed."

Marc grinned, eager to get her into one. "What the lady wants, she gets."

Marc saw the first trace of apprehension enter her eyes.

"Soon?"

Marc sighed. He'd figured on three more weeks of barely satisfying necking, but that was no longer necessary. Except, it was. He wouldn't change his plans because of what had happened. That would be letting Adrian come between them and the man inside refused to allow that.

"Will you kiss—"

Marc lunged forward to claim her mouth.

2

After a few minutes of talking, the five vehicles continued on their way, and the camp watched them in uneasy surprise. They weren't joining? Didn't they understand they'd just found safety?

Adrian climbed into his semi and lit a smoke. His hand shook as he keyed the mike. "They're passing through. Let's get things loaded up, and our passenger lists checked."

The small caravan was seven cars and trucks, each with a glittery name on the windows or doors. There was a tool truck, a heavily barred mail truck announcing currency exchanges, a clothing jeep covered in poles and plastic, and even a book wagon. Each store was lined in shelves and baskets

that were woefully lacking in what they claimed to have.

The vendors were all female, as were the passengers. It gave Adrian concern, even as he understood the need for it. The females running that show, Carol and Marsha, weren't about to give up their independence and join Safe Haven, where they had to live side-by-side with those who'd destroyed the world. Adrian was sure they wouldn't be the last all-female group they met in these new apocalyptic times.

Adrian didn't watch the group leave, confident his Eagles would. Right now, he needed a few minutes to get back in control.

Adrian's eyes went to the mirror. He would have to fix this when they made camp and he had an idea of what would help, but it was hard. *Her reaction!*

Adrian drew in a thick lungful of smoke and blew it back out in a furious stream. Tracy had better be available. The heat would have to be released this time.

Adrian watched Angela kiss Marc, saw Marc's hands tighten on her shoulders.

Fuck!

Adrian started his rig and then ground the cigarette out on the back of his hand in a frustrated attempt at distraction.

His teary eyes went to the mirror. Her head was on Marc's chest, a small smile on those cherry lips.

Adrian grimaced in misery. Seeing them

together hurt more than any burn. It was the worst pain he'd ever felt.

3

Marc was aware of Angela's lingering tension as they climbed from their vehicle. Instead of words, they chose to watch Kyle get camp set up.

Things had changed for Kyle here. He was no longer as admired or respected, but there was little anyone could say about his actions. He was polite to Jennifer, treating her as a ward while everyone got used to them being together. The camp and Eagles weren't taking it easy on him, but he did have a bit of backup. If he hadn't, Angela was sure Adrian would have helped the couple. Ten minutes around them said the same thing Seth and Becky had already given up trying to explain to offended people. Right or wrong, they were going to have their way. The easiest thing to do was let it run its course and protect the females if they ever needed it.

Angela doubted it would become a problem. Both of those males were smitten, unable to think straight at the slightest brush of their mate's hand, and the females were wearing grins and secure cloaks of contentment. Those pairs were here to stay. Safe Haven would have to get used to it. It appeared some members were trying. There hadn't been a request for a moral vote yet in either case. As long as Peggy didn't protest, and Kyle waited until

Jennifer was older to touch her, they might end up happy. It was a perfect setup, guided into place by fate and their perfect leader.

“I’m nobody’s perfect anything.”

Angela winced. Hadn’t she shut that door, not wanting Adrian to sense that she and Marc were about to...get closer?

“Too late for that.” Adrian, on his way to the parking area to supervise, pointed toward the small farmhouse. “Enjoy your clean bill of health in a real bed.”

Flushing, Angela went to unload her things and get set for tonight’s meeting. She didn’t like the camp thinking she was getting special treatment, but Marc wasn’t above taking advantage of Adrian’s need to keep her safe.

And you, as well, the witch reminded. *You’ve more than enjoyed being alone with him.*

She was cleared for full duty now. Angela didn’t plan to mention it. She was sure that Adrian hadn’t gotten Marc’s okay, only John’s.

Angela let go of her annoyance, waiting to enter the house until Daryl said it was clear. She marched by the recon team with red cheeks at the knowing looks and comments being exchanged, but she didn’t insist on a tent. She wanted any private time with Marc that she could get. That hadn’t changed since their first meeting all those years ago. In a few days, she would have to give up their late nights in place of her duty, though. She was going into Little Rock. Marc wasn’t.

Kyle caught up with Angela before she made it inside the house. “Do the babies die? Is that why you’re looking her over for your team?” He’d tried hard to resist asking the question but failed.

Angela stopped, wanting to tell the truth, but also to keep hiding it. What was the right thing?

“Please! I have to help her.”

The witch wouldn’t look for Kyle, but it was a question that Adrian had already asked. “What would you give to prevent it?”

Kyle was crushed. That meant they died. He’d expected to be upset, but this pain! He wanted Jenny’s babies. “What do I have to do?”

Angela pushed the witch back, preferring to handle this one herself. “Adrian already made that deal for you. If it can be done, he’ll see to it.”

Kyle’s face relaxed as much as he was capable of. “Thank you.”

“I see darkness when I look, Eagle.” Angela delivered the short warning as she headed inside the house to drop her gear and get cleaned up before the tryout. “Brace for it.”

4

“It’s good that everyone brought their guns. My Eagles don’t go *anywhere* without one.” Angela swept the slightly crowded tent, almost shocked by how many women had shown up to try out for her team. She’d been optimistic when she directed Samantha and Cynthia to set up one of the common

tents that would hold 40, but it had been a good choice. She had nearly that many waiting patiently for her to begin, eager to fight for her right hand. The honor, the sense of power, was enough to make her laugh aloud. But she didn't.

“We're going to talk. I'll take notes. If I need you to do something that the others have already done, they'll instruct you, so holster those competitive attitudes. I want women who will work together, no matter who directs them. If you already know you can't do that, bow out now.”

Samantha forced herself to her feet. “I should go, then. So should Cynthia. We'll kill each other for that slot.”

Angela motioned them both forward. “One minute. Tell me why you should get it.”

The females had only been prepared for battle. Neither of them spoke.

Angela didn't mock them, but she made her dissatisfaction clear. “Both of you deserve the place, but neither of you can give me what I need from it. You're too full of yourselves, still, to fit the role.”

Before they could protest, Angela held up a hand. “It's not a terrible thing, ladies. Every soul in this camp is going through hard adjustments, learning to adapt to the challenges that are thrown our way. You two are no different.”

“Does that mean we're excluded?”

“Only from XO. You'll both have a place on my team—if you can handle the pecking order when I

post it.”

They left, cloaked in disappointment and failure they weren't sure how to handle.

As they exited the well-guarded area, Samantha and Cynthia stayed together. Doing rounds had become a routine for them, as well as taking the late shift, but there was nothing else to do right now.

“Do you think it was the drama with our personal lives or the fact that we don't get along?”

Samantha shrugged, stinging. “Both, I'd guess. Probably more, too.”

“But, you're like them. I don't understand why she passed you by.”

Samantha let the truth out, no longer wary of the reporter. “A lot of people like them are here now. Adrian's been gathering our kind.”

Cynthia hadn't considered that. “What happens when there are enough?”

“I don't know. Maybe we can heal the world.” She headed toward the garden. “Or maybe we'll finish destroying it.”

Cynthia noted the unhappy tone that matched her own. “You need a hand in there or something?”

Samantha started to shoot down the pity offer. Then she saw how Cynthia was braced for scorn. She was making a genuine offer. *Why?*

Cynthia read it and shrugged. “I'm a bit...lost. I thought you might be, too.”

Samantha let go of their grudge in that moment. “I am. Not as much as before the war, but the last weeks have been rough.”

“It’s as if there’s no anchor,” Cynthia agreed. “The camp’s divided. I sleep alone at night, and I’ve lost the one thing I thought I wanted most.”

Sam raised a brow. “Thought?”

“I wasn’t going to be the best papergirl,” the reporter confessed. “I’m a lot like Kenn when it comes to being a glory hound.”

Samantha was surprised to hear such an admission. She delivered one of her own. “I was more concerned about trying to keep up mentally. Angela’s so much like Adrian that it’s a bit intimidating.”

“I know, right?”

On duty, Kyle listened to the females going through the same levels of anxiety his own team had and understood the moment Adrian had hoped for was here. These two had surrendered their competition and come together. It was only one instant in time, but it would lead to more. It was how he and Cris had become so close after competing for Top Eagle.

Kyle winced at the thought of his late XO. Daryl was good, but he and Cris had been a matched set.

Kyle saw a small group of scowling females come from the tryout tent. He slid into the shadows to get the uncensored version he would report later, if he thought it was called for.

“How was I supposed to know? I didn’t think females had to kill. I can’t do that.”

“I think I could, but only if my life was threatened.”

“How many of them who stayed can?”

“Only a few,” Kyle muttered, wondering if that was the line Angela had chosen to use in her selections. Having a right hand who would kill for you was hard to find and invaluable to have in this world. Curious and oddly flattered, Kyle kept observing.

The next feet to leave the tent belonged to those who halfheartedly complained about the physical requirements, but Anne didn't appear unhappy as she ducked out of sight with the others. Instead, the nurse looked extremely satisfied.

Kyle guessed she knew the last weeks of training had been what pulled so many females into that tent. Angela would end up with roughly 20 workable recruits from which to choose a team, and Anne was now off the hook. She could spend her time with her husband—where she'd wanted to be all along—but now, she could protect him. The little old lady may not be able to keep up as an Eagle, but she was definitely a gunslinger.

More women emerged—a small group wearing the slumped shoulders of people who knew they weren't making the cut this time around, that more work was required.

“So I panicked and said something stupid,” one of them muttered to herself as she avoided the other sullen, silent females. “Not the first time. I'll try

again.”

The trio vanished from sight.

Kyle inched closer. The noise from the camp dropped as everyone settled in for the night. Kyle found he could now hear the voices inside the tent.

“Two more, ladies, and then we’ll get a bit more personal with those remaining. Answer this question honestly of yourself because it will be a requirement. Can you handle being injured? Since I joined Safe Haven, I’ve been stabbed and shot.”

Kyle heard Angela exposing her scars and then their timid reactions, thinking she was smart to handle it that way.

“Wow.”

“Ah, man. That’s gross.”

“Uh-huh. No way.”

Another group of females exited the tent, leaving roughly half as Angela asked her last question. “Will you defend me and this team against the camp?”

There was complete silence until Angela broke it.

“There will come times that your orders go against camp rules. When they find out, they’ll resent you, as they have all the Eagles who’ve had to make that choice. In time, it always changes to acceptance because the reason behind it was valid, but at the time, it is extremely hard to live with. If you can’t stand with me against everyone else in camp, including Adrian, it won’t work.”

“We think you should be leading anyway—the camp females.”

Kyle had expected most of the remaining females to leave. He was surprised by not only the answer, but by its source. He hadn’t noticed the redhead entering the tent. *How did she get in?*

Angela studied Tonya’s flushed face in the thick tension. “Why? He’s done well by *all* of you.”

Tonya didn’t drop her eyes. “Kenn says you’re purer, that you won’t sacrifice as quickly or risk lives as often without better reasons.”

Angela leaned back in her chair, more than surprised. “Why does Kenn think you’ll make a good Eagle?”

Now, Tonya did look away, shrugging. “Cause he’s sleeping with me, maybe. I’m not sure.”

Angela suspected that too. “Why do *you* think you can?”

“Because I’m harder than any of the women you’ve interviewed.” Tonya’s voice lowered into a slightly shocked misery as the others protested. “And, because I didn’t even know I wanted it until he said you wouldn’t take me.”

Angela understood that challenge had brought Tonya to the tent. She raised a brow, ignoring the other smirking females. They thought the redhead had blown it, but honesty was everything. “And if I told you that I won’t stand for a team member who spies and reports to Adrian?”

Tonya lifted her chin. “Then I’d say good luck, ‘cause that’s in the job description.”

Angela stared at her. “Yes, it is.” She studied Tonya’s tense profile, her acceptable clothes, and those fiery green eyes. She was trying to fit in and succeeding. Would she be able to bring that determination to a team? “Can you shoot?”

“Level three.”

“Self-defense?”

“Level two in kai. Kenn teaches me in his downtime.”

“Organization, following orders?”

“Won’t be a problem, no matter where I’m put. He’s helped me get a schedule down that I’m good with.”

The other females realized Tonya was being interviewed. Her answers were too good for this to be a joke.

“What about your lust for power?”

Tonya spoke her heart. “It’s fading in place of the dream, like with everyone else who joins this damn refugee camp.”

Angela was satisfied. “Thank you for coming.”

Tonya shrugged, turning toward the flap. “Just seemed like I was supposed to.”

5

“Hang on.”

Kyle caught Tonya’s attention as she ducked out.

Tonya braced to hear that she’d never be allowed to be one of them. Kenn had warned her the

senior Eagles wouldn't like it.

"You gave good answers." Kyle studied her thoughtfully. "You really think you can kill?"

Tonya was astonished that Kyle hadn't cut her dead yet. "Yes. I have enough hatred to let out when it's needed."

Kyle motioned to a mutated ant hunting in panicked circles as it tried to pick up the scent of its colony over the dog odors. "End that. Now."

Tonya had noticed the training lessons using knives on the mutations. She slid hers out of its sheath. She didn't know why she was being given a chance, but she wanted it.

The throw was good. Not great, it only stuck in the ant's rear end and caused it to emit a low shriek. Still, she hit it. Kyle was impressed.

"Finish it off this time." He tossed her his knife and was surprised again when she caught it.

Tonya flipped the knife around and threw harder. It pinned the ant to the ground.

"Very nice."

They both spun to find Angela at the flap.

She raised a brow. "Anything else I should know?"

Kyle shook his head. "Nope."

"Good. Carry on."

She vanished back into the tent.

Kyle snorted. That felt so much like Adrian that it was perfect. She was going to be a good leader.

Tonya retrieved the blades with no sign it bothered her to rip his free of the ant.

Kyle took his knife, seeing she automatically wiped hers on her jeans. Interesting. How much was this one ready for?

Tonya gave him a nod, understanding she'd gone up in Angela's opinion. "Thanks."

Kyle pointed at the training area where half a dozen of his remaining team was practicing on the ant colony lining their western perimeter in search of scraps. "Tell them I sent you. Stay a few minutes and make an impression."

Tonya's mouth fell open. "Why? You hate me."

Kyle thought of how Adrian had put her to work during the sinkhole, and of how she'd still been at it come dawn. "No one hates you anymore. You've been forgiven. Don't stop earning it."

Tonya smiled, one without greed or seduction. It made her beautiful. "You're in good with the girl. She digs you a lot now."

"I hope so." Kyle grunted, fading into the shadows of the tent he was guarding. "I'd miss this shit."

Inside the tent, Angela's stony gaze raked the 22 females waiting restlessly. They were the best of the lot, minus those she'd sent away first. Angela gave them a challenging smirk. "Who's ready to get dirty?"

She approved of their wary expressions. They were right to be concerned. Next, to narrow down the field, was work with animals. The vet was bringing a load of dogs by, the ones they'd found in

the library in Wichita, and they stank. The rest of the evening would be spent grooming those fortunate animals and noting who had the stamina for it. After that, she would take them to the kids' area.

Adrian had three failsafe ways to determine the character of a camp member. Angela planned to use them all. No one could hide their true nature around animals, children, and the elderly, all in the same night. Come bedtime, she would have her list ready to be posted. As it was, she now knew who was going to be on her right, and it was as much of a shock to her as it would be to everyone else.

Chapter Eighteen
Rookie Rules

1

“Can I go with you?”

Kenn regarded the sexy redhead who had just appeared at his side, pleased that she'd spent the last half hour helping clear ants from the perimeter with Kyle's team. He was also shocked that the mobster had not only allowed it, he'd evaluated her during, studying her as he did with all their rookies. “Depends.”

Tonya frowned. “On what now?”

“On you being able to keep your mouth shut and follow orders for two hours.”

Tonya didn't censor her reaction to his joke. She hugged Kenn tightly and pressed a quick kiss to his scruffy cheek. With a shaggy crew cut and pouty lips, she still thought he was as good looking as Adrian. *Does he think about me that way, compared to Angela?* Tonya let it go. It didn't matter. He was hers now, and that did.

Seeing Kenn and Tonya moving through camp together drew attention. Tall and dark next to slender sexy red, it was sometimes like watching a model and her bodyguard with the way Tonya liked to strut and Kenn liked to smirk. Cool and calm

again, Kenn had started to regain the respect he'd lost. The camp females were beginning to let him know they were interested again too, but he wasn't. Earning back his place and providing one for Tonya were his goals now. No one could hold a candle to that. Kenn felt he'd done something nice for Tonya by securing her a chance for a team slot, but in reality, she would probably cause chaos. He might even get in trouble for it, but if she did well, Angela would honestly evaluate her, like she was doing with Samantha and Cynthia.

That sent Kenn's thoughts to the small group who'd been enjoying the bonfire lately. Seth and Becky were often joined by his team, and Ray and Dale, with the vet sometimes in tow. Adrian was pleased to discover that they'd made friends. Seth and Ray were directing camp traffic and putting up with glowers and silence, but Kenn had little doubt where they'd be in a few hours. And the thing was, it was drawing other people he hadn't thought would ever mix with them, such as Kyle and Jennifer. The campfire group, as they were becoming known, had nearly a dozen members. Adrian said they were healing each other's wounds. Kenn didn't question it. His need to fight was gone. And he owed them for that, didn't he?

Kenn wasn't sure, but he was willing to keep proving he belonged here, though many of Adrian's top men had now shown that they too, were human enough to screw up. All he had to do was join the group at the fire, Tonya with him, and he would be

accepted. Maybe even forgiven, but if he did, that wouldn't be the reason. If he went, it would be to tell the camp that he'd had enough of their treatment. Seth and Becky, Kyle and Jennifer, Ray and Dale, and himself with Tonya—they'd all made mistakes, but it was time to let it go and pull together. It was something Adrian would do himself if he could have gotten away with it.

2

“Got a minute?”

Adrian followed Angela into the deepest shadows, where only their two personal guards could hear them. When she turned around with that V standing out in her chin, Adrian caved. “Just tell me and I'll do it.”

Angela was satisfied he understood. “Make sure he sees you with someone tonight. And then, make sure he keeps seeing it.”

Adrian had already thought of that. “Anything else?”

Angela held out a sheet of paper. “This is my team.”

Adrian looked it over without revealing how he felt about those eight names.

Angela didn't wait for a response. She left him there and went to get cleaned up.

Nearby, Marc watched with dark eyes. When Angie was inside the shower camper—Jeff lurking in

the shadows—Marc turned to look at Adrian.

Adrian pretended not to notice Marc, instead breaking his own rule about being with a woman publicly. He motioned toward a willing female and was out of Marc's sight seconds later.

The camp wasn't surprised to see Adrian with one of the relief sources. They'd come to expect it after understanding he wasn't the type to have a mate.

Marc's eyes narrowed in thoughtful speculation. He looked toward the showers, and then back to where Adrian was disappearing into the rear of his semi. *Angie set that up.*

What did it mean?

Nothing, he decided. She wanted Adrian satisfied so he would stop sending out those waves of need. Marc could live with that.

3

Word spread that Kenn was taking a team of female rookies out of camp.

The women Angela had interviewed in the tent began to show up at the parking area where he was packing the truck. Some stared in envy, some snorted in embarrassed scorn, but the rest understood a big moment could change things. By the time Kenn had the vehicle and gear ready, there were 20 women waiting at the tape with eager faces.

Kenn started pointing, picking a team of eight lucky rookies for their first mission out of camp.

“Samantha, Cynthia, Tonya, Crista,” he paused, ignoring the mutters at his girlfriend being chosen. He swept the group and picked out one he was surprised to find. Shouldn’t she be at the bonfire with Seth? “Becca, Tracy, Leslie...” There was only one spot left. Kenn sighed, doing his duty. “Peggy.”

The older woman didn’t move. She swept the teenager in worried concern. She’d come for a minute with her daughter, not to chaperone, Kenn realized in relief. Then he frowned. She still didn’t understand that little Becky wasn’t little anymore.

Kenn waved at the stack of double vests in the rear of the truck. “Get one on and get in.”

After they reluctantly helped each other, the females automatically headed for the back, leaving the front seat for Peggy.

“Hey!” Kenn pointed as heads swiveled. “She’s here as a rookie, same as you. No special consideration is warranted.”

A mad dash for shotgun ensued.

Kenn snickered as the first three women there began to fight it out. While they were struggling, a slender form climbed into the rear and then over the seat to claim the spot.

“Time’s up!” Kenn’s shout directed the fighting trio’s attention to the now claimed passenger seat.

“Hey!”

“You didn’t fight for it!”

Becky raised a brow at their surprise. “Why fight for it if I just can take it? Rookie Lesson 9:

How to properly supply your own needs.” She sneered, showing an ugly side that made her mother’s eyes narrow. “I’ll be able to give her everything as XO because there’s nothing else I want. She knows that, and now, so do all of you.”

Becky was the youngest female here, but she’d made it clear that she wasn’t to be dismissed.

“Let’s go.” Kenn was worried about a real fight starting.

Becky wasn’t finished. “I want time from each of you, training me in the ways the men won’t.”

Samantha sat up, shoving Tonya’s tightly packaged butt over so she could see Becky. “Why would we do that? You’re obviously holding a grudge, and we’ve pretty much let it go.”

Becky’s eyes blazed. “Of course, *you* have. You didn’t pay for your mistakes the way I did!”

Instead of the expected guilt, Samantha’s mind flew to her journey to Safe Haven. “That’s not true. I’ve paid the same price you have, a few times over.”

Becky considered that. Knowing Samantha was also a rape survivor absolutely made a difference.

“You know we’re going to have to work together?” Samantha asked pointedly.

Becky snorted. “Teamwork is a hard lesson. I hear you guys aren’t so good at it either.”

Samantha had the grace to flush, still stinging from Angela’s dismissal.

“We’ll learn it together.” Tonya was overjoyed to find herself here, a part of the solution instead of

the chaos.

It drew attention to her, including Kenn's.

Tonya scowled in return. "What? You guys weren't the only ones who had shit to work through. Even outcast pole dancers can have a place in paradise."

Kenn waited for them to deny it and finally allowed himself to celebrate his success at her transformation when none of them did.

"Boo-ya, baby," he murmured too low to be heard. Tonya wanted to be an Eagle, a real one, and Adrian could now support that. Some of the camp's hardest, most loyal and trustworthy women were the outcasts—females the men went to in secret when Adrian's strict rules became too hard to obey. The boss wanted the entire herd in his army—that included those who had been kind enough to offer quiet comfort to his Eagles.

Kenn looked at the silent females still on the ground and then to the sneering girl in the passenger seat. All of this had come about because Angela had had the strength to overcome what he'd done to her. The shit he'd put her through had been bad—enough to break some of the men he'd served with before the war.

Kenn felt his heart, that small, cold, organ he'd had no use for, swell with new life. He had no hopes of holding her again, or even getting closer than they were right now, but it was a tiny secret that he would hold close as he went through his days. By never giving in, Angela had healed him enough that

Kenn was finally able to love someone other than himself.

“Are we done here?” He used gruffness to hide the happiness his male mind told him he was required to cover. Decades of training beaten into him wouldn’t allow anything else.

“Yes.” Becky sounded more adult than any of the camp had ever heard from her. “We were something else before. Now, we’re Eagles in his army. We’ll all honor that.”

The tension broke with those familiar words.

Samantha offered Cynthia a hand and pulled her up. They shared a rueful look, then offered a hand to Tonya. She took both hands with a smirk, then shoved her way past them to take the seat behind Becky.

Everyone else chuckled, including those watching from the perimeter tape. They’d caught glimpses of the men at moments like this and hadn’t understood. Being set free from society’s preconceived notions that women were weak was intoxicating.

Another sharp flood of happy excitement filled the cabin as they left.

Kenn knew that he’d chosen the right females for this quick recon. He’d been training the women, but he hadn’t been allowed to be alone with any of them except Tonya, until now. Knowing that he had regained the boss’s trust boosted Kenn’s mood and increased his willingness to keep training them. He would please the entire camp with it, but more than

that, he would be atoning to Adrian and Angela.

“Did that just happen?” Marc was shocked.

“Yes.” Angela understood what it meant. “Things will be better now for the Eagles.”

Marc sensed she didn’t want to talk about her team. “Charlie’s had a lot of questions lately.”

Angela sighed, not ready for her son to become a part of the couples forming in Safe Haven.

“Angie.”

She stopped. Charlie did have a crush on someone. Marc was thinking it. “I know he’s growing up. I don’t have to like it.”

Marc chuckled. He hadn’t told her the details, but he knew she suspected they were guy talks. “We’ll handle it. Another day.”

She smiled gratefully. She was tired and a bit restless, a feeling all of the Eagles were sharing as they pushed hard to reach Little Rock. Despite the personal torment, Adrian would have slowed their pace to avoid spooking the herd. Kenn and Angela, however, agreed that the evidence of nature’s determination to wipe humankind from existence would keep this camp rolling with few complaints. They didn’t like being out in the open anymore. As a result, they were now just days from Adrian’s goal.

Marc guided Angela toward the room he’d prepared for them. It ran the length of the house and had a wide mattress he had checked and covered in clean sheets not long after seeing Adrian direct her

there. Thick drapes would even hide their shadows. Marc's respect for their leader increased even as the inner male gloated. Giving this couldn't have been easy.

Marc flashed a menacing glare at two rookies lingering in the shadows, their envy clear for all to see. *She's mine. Go away or die.*

They left in a hurry.

"Where's the fourth tattoo?"

Marc's head swung her way. Angela snickered at his expression, stopping at the door. "Just curious."

"My ass."

Angela's heart thumped. Heat rushed to her chilly limbs. "What is it?"

Marc leaned against the door, folding his arms across his chest. "That's for me to know and you to find out."

Angela loved it that she was getting the old Marc. She had Adrian to thank for it. He'd let the tiger out of the cage. "Come on. Tell me your secrets."

Marc's breath caught. He had a lot of those, but the only one he could think of right now was wrapping his hands in that silken hair and kissing her until they were both aching. "On my left cheek. It was a dare."

"It better not be me again. On the hip works, but I don't think I'm okay with you sitting on my face."

Marc chortled and advanced. He reached out to tickle her. The instant their skin touched, electricity

flew.

Angela tensed and backed up.

Marc followed her. "What is it?"

Angela wasn't sure what to say. Flirting was fun, and she was attracted to him, but the fear of physical contact hadn't gone away. She'd just learned to hide it better. She wouldn't be healed until these flinches were gone. She suspected letting Marc make love to her was the key. If she got through it without him hurting her...

Marc gently placed his hands on her shoulders. "I scared you."

She flushed, loathing her weaknesses, and right at that moment, Kenny. "I'm sorry."

Marc pulled her close for a soft hug. "You've got nothing to be sorry for, baby."

"I don't want to be this way."

"I think I've got it covered."

"You've made plans?"

Marc didn't deny it. "I keep going over them in my mind too. Wanna be sure I don't miss anything!"

Angela laughed, shoving at his chest.

Marc quickly leaned in to capture her lips. He stayed still, sending heated thoughts.

Angela pushed back, arms coming up. She loved his kisses.

Marc caught the thought and slid a hand to her hip as his tongue rubbed her bottom lip.

Angela gasped.

Marc dipped in to taste her. *Sweet.*

Her nipples hardened against his chest, tongue

brushing his... Lightning flared.

Marc pulled back. *Not so fast. Slow down, think!*

Angela's lips were cherry red and already swelling. He smirked. *Okay. A little more.*

4

Adrian ducked into the privacy of the training tent, only to find it full of Eagles. He disappeared into the big hay room, nearly growling at Doug.

The males exchanged curious glances. What had the boss so pissed?

Headed for the showers, Neil paused in the flap at the sight of Marc and Angela kissing. The embrace was torrid, heat flaring.

Behind him, others came to the flap and gawked. The pair had been a legal couple for a while now and had exchanged a couple of public embraces, but this was the lust of a man and woman wanting to complete the act. It was easy to understand why Adrian was upset when each of them was now filled with a milder version of blinding jealousy.

Angela broke the kiss reluctantly, gently stepping back with sexily mussed curls and well-kissed lips. "Feel better now?"

Marc understood the why and the where, realizing she'd made sure it was seen by everyone, including Adrian.

"Yes, actually."

Angela didn't grin. "I won't do it again, hurt someone this way to prove I'm loyal to you."

"You didn't have to this time."

She cocked her head, the slightly disdainful curl of her lips saying she hated the idea, but she wasn't above hurting him. "Yes, I did, but now that it's done, you have to do something to ease one of *my* fears."

Marc's interest picked up. "What?"

"Tell me tonight isn't about making sure he can't come between us."

"Nothing's happening tonight, Baby-cakes." Marc grinned. "Unless you jump me."

Angela laughed and let Marc guide her inside.

Neil went back inside to talk to Adrian. He entered the hay room, staying out of the way of the blond working out with only his hands and his shadow. Neil understood. Didn't he have his own jealousies when he saw Samantha being given lessons? In this case, it was Angela being reintroduced to passion. Adrian wanted that slot for himself.

Neil's thoughts of a coming meltdown resurfaced. Adrian hadn't reached a limit yet, not by any means, but he was finally showing the pressure. It was time to try to head it off.

Adrian stopped, turning to look at him.

Neil had another of those moments of instant realization. *Adrian heard that thought.*

In too much pain to pretend at that moment,

Adrian grunted. “Yes, I did.”

Neil blanched. *Another thing he kept from everyone.*

“Not everyone.”

Neil’s first thought came out of his mouth. “Why not me, boss?”

Adrian gave a slow, bitter smile. “That was the question I asked when those two flanked me through the dust storm, but you chose the mess.”

Neil didn’t respond, locking down on his thoughts.

Adrian went back to his workout. “Is this a problem?”

“No.” Neil had accepted that Adrian was different a long time ago. It was the shock and embarrassment of discovering Adrian had been reading their thoughts. It explained how he was able to keep up.

Adrian quickly disabused him of the notion. “Her magic rubs off. I couldn’t do that before she came.”

Neil forced his mouth to work. “But you *can* do things?”

“My gifts are what I’ve always done, manipulate pieces into place. Before the war, it was used for government and personal purposes. Since then, it’s become a weapon to fight extinction.”

“Who knows?”

Adrian’s face flashed sorrow. “Kyle, Seth and the woman now moaning in Marc’s arms.”

Neil was appeased. “We should keep it that

way.”

“Yes.”

There was a minute of silence as Neil tried to figure out what he could offer in place of what Adrian was hurting over. “Do you... Can you talk to me about it? Or Kyle?”

Adrian shrugged. “When it boils, I may. All good right now.”

Neil understood the leader was still fighting and took hope from it. As long as he was strong enough to do the right thing, it might all work out. Neil left the hay room with a censored version of an explanation and a lighter heart. He wasn’t as upset over the love triangle thing now, despite knowing how badly it could go.

Adrian couldn’t say the same.

5

The radio crackled with Kevin’s alert voice. “Recon team is on the way back, Boss.”

Marc woke, looking down at Angela’s sleeping form. She was curled onto his chest, hands tight in his shirt so if he moved, she would know.

That means as much as the way she calls for you in her sleep, the inner man stated. *Stop pushing or you’ll force them together.*

Marc knew that to be good advice. He would try to act as if nothing had changed.

“So will he,” Angela stated sleepily, glad Marc had calmed down, “But it doesn’t matter either

way.” She slowly sat up, locking eyes with him. “I’ll say this once, Marc. Please listen.”

Marc nodded, expecting to hear a promise of fidelity.

“I miss my baby.”

Angela didn’t add anything, just let him put it together. It was an endless ache that she hadn’t shared with anyone.

Marc’s heart broke for the pain in her eyes, even as that inner voice said this was another clever distraction technique.

“That was earlier, Marc! This is real. When we settle down and it’s safe enough, will you give me—”

Marc was kissing her before she could finish the plea.

6

A group of camp members were lingering around the QZ when the rookie recon team pulled in. A full team of off duty Eagles also labored on make-work nearby. Everyone wanted to see how Kenn had done. The training sessions and classes were awful, with fighting, flirting and repeated explanations taking up most of the time. After Kenn’s promise that it would get better, they were eager to see how he had handled all eight females alone.

Angela and Adrian also needed that information. They were standing together, watching as the Excursion pulled into the parking area.

Behind them, Marc stood in the shadows, sweeping with his mental grid.

Kyle lingered nearby, eyes on Adrian.

“Welcome back,” Kevin greeted them on the radio.

The truck lights flashed in response. When no oral answer came, the Eagles on duty moved closer. That wasn't Kenn's usual MO.

Angela also took a few steps forward.

The doors on the Excursion opened. The female rookies got out. They all headed to the rear in a rush, not looking at anyone. The women weren't fighting or talking. They were...pulling a gurney from the rear?

“Hang on.” Angela stopped Adrian from moving that way.

They watched the females take up places around the gurney and heft it into the air. From the way it tilted dangerously, it was obvious that Kenn was on it. The women struggled to keep it balanced as Becky and Tracy directed the other six women toward the medical camper.

Eagles rushed forward to help.

“Let them be!”

Angela's shout froze the men who were obeying centuries of training. They looked to her in confusion as the women hauled Kenn's unconscious body into the camper without dumping him out of the gurney.

Angela ignored the silent requests for clarification. They didn't need her to tell them what

Adrian had been trying to teach them all along. Instead, she moved toward her rookies with a pleased smile she made sure they each felt as they came back out of the camper and gathered around. “Who has my sitrep?”

Adrian grinned. He hadn’t been sure about how she was handling them. He had let Kyle into his head a lot more than she was doing with any of these women, but female Eagles had to be handled differently in some areas. He was coming to realize that through watching their reactions to her aloofness. It got results.

Angela motioned toward the mini mess when none of the rookies answered. “After each run, you’ll meet me for a sitrep. Eventually, my XO will perform that honor.”

Samantha kept her eyes on the ground. “When do you want us there?”

“Ten minutes.” Angela’s tone hardened. “The first thing I’m going to want to know is what happened to your team leader.”

There was a round of uneasy, guilty looks exchanged among the eight sweaty, dirty females.

Angela raised a brow. “He got hurt saving one of you when you failed to listen to an order?”

Again, Samantha spoke, voice barely a mutter. “Not exactly. He, uh, forgot rookie rule six D.”

Angela’s mind pulled it right up. *Always account for the reactions of your team.* Her lips curved upward. “Caught in the crossfire?”

The females shared another round of glances, all

guilty.

Samantha shrugged uneasily. “In a manner of speaking.”

“Okay.” Angela let them go. “Ten minutes.”

Samantha glanced around at her team and then motioned toward the filthy Excursion. “Get the nets over to the holding chiller so John can run the tests.”

Angela noticed the immediate obedience and stored it. Apparently, the women had worked some things out and Samantha had come out on top. *Interesting.*

7

The mini mess was crowded.

The group of rookie females hesitated in the flap as three teams of Eagles turned to grin at them.

“Damn it!” Samantha swore under her breath with harsher words.

“Understatement.” Cynthia flushed darker as she spotted Kevin and Jeremy in the crowd.

The six females behind them nodded in agreement. They all moved toward the center table with red cheeks and stiff shoulders.

Angela had set it up for Li Sing to bring over beers and pretzels—a favorite of the returning teams. The small man moved happily through the crowded tables.

Samantha took a beer with a tired smile, understanding they were being treated as full Eagles. The feeling would have been incredible if

not for the report they had to give now.

Angela waited for the rookies to get settled and then opened her notebook.

Samantha and Cynthia automatically followed her lead.

Angela shook her head, motioning. “You’ll use these from now on.”

Charlie dropped a stack of glossy notebooks onto the table and backed into a far corner to observe.

Angela passed the books down the table. “I was told Kenn is awake, okay, and refusing to take an all-female team out of camp again. *Ever.*”

Eagles around them snickered. They’d already made bets on what had happened. If it were a threat to camp security, Samantha and Cynthia would have already told someone.

“Well?” Angela insisted.

Samantha cleared her throat. “We rolled north for a little while and saw lights.”

“Kenn wanted to check it out.” Peggy was sitting next to her daughter.

They also looked like they’d managed to work some things out.

“So we get the usual lecture about staying close, blah, blah, blah.” Crista tried to ignore Jeff’s eyes on her. “But we kinda freaked out when we saw the rabbits.”

Angela opened her mouth to question, already missing a piece.

“It’s Kenn’s fault.” Becky jerked her thumb

toward the medical camper.

Cynthia nodded. "That's true. All he said was get the nets out and be ready."

"And we were." Tracy flushed again. "Sort of. It might have been okay if Tonya hadn't thrown her gun."

"Well, I thought shooting was a bad idea right then!" Tonya defended, hand coming up. "It's not like I could make out what he was screaming."

Cynthia glared at the redhead. "None of us could, genius. It was just incoherent babble at that point."

"Stop." Angela couldn't take any more. She turned to Samantha. "Start from the beginning."

Samantha drew in a calming breath. "The light was a small brush fire. We got close and found a bunch of rabbits."

"Swamp bunnies," Becky added wistfully.

Frowning, Samantha continued. "The fire was flushing them our way, so Kenn had us get the nets out."

"Only he forgot to tell us what to do when the entire herd ran our way," Crista stated.

"Hopped," Peggy corrected.

"They panicked." Samantha tried to remain calm. "Nets dropped, women ran, rabbits bit and scratched. It was *lovely*."

Angela ran a quick look over them. "Bit and scratched? You guys look fine."

Samantha glared toward Leslie. "*You* tell her this part."

Leslie cringed. “I, uh...screamed,” she admitted with an embarrassed grimace. “Loudly. And the herd turned...and ran toward Kenn.”

“Hopped,” Cynthia corrected.

“Right, hopped toward Kenn. He shot a bunch of them, but man, were there a lot of rabbits.” Leslie’s voice lowered. “So I suggested we throw our nets.”

“We realized it was a mistake when he started screaming.” Samantha swallowed the laughter as best she could. Kenn under the netting with all those rabbits was the funniest thing she’d ever seen.

“Samantha yelled to cut him loose... So we all rushed over with our new knives,” Leslie informed them.

Angela groaned. The people around them weren’t even trying to contain their laughter. The sound was rolling across the camp. “What then?”

Samantha wasn’t capable of continuing. She had her head buried against her arm. They’d gotten a teammate hurt. Laughing was wrong.

Cynthia took over the sitrep. “He screamed some more, then we got him up and made sure he was okay. He said he was going to move the truck so we could try again. He growled at us to gather the bodies of the rabbits and then take the live ones left in the nets and put them in the truck.”

“So we did,” Tracy said quietly, seeing Cynthia wasn’t going to get much more out before dropping her own head. “Man, was he pissed when he got in. Those rabbits were all over him.”

“He ran out of there so fast!” Becky exclaimed.

“Hopped,” Samantha corrected without raising her head.

“He did hop, didn’t he? They were really latched onto him that time.” Crista shrugged. “Anyway, he was screaming again, and we didn’t know what to do. We couldn’t shoot them off him. And then Tonya stepped right up like she had it covered. When she threw her gun, we all just thought *Hey! That’ll work!*”

“So they all did too,” Samantha grunted from under her arm.

The mini mess was an explosion of laughter; men were on the floor all around them.

Angela was struggling not to join them. “And after that?”

“Samantha and Cynthia got us to stop throwing things, and we started using our boots on the ones still biting him.” Tracy didn’t look up. “We’re not sure who got him in the head. We were just kickin’ away...”

Peggy was the only one capable of speech. She finished the sitrep with a straight face. “We only dumped him twice on the load up. All in all, I think it went pretty well.”

Chapter Nineteen
All That Buzzing
The Arkansas State Line
June 22nd

1

Marc studied Angela from the tent flap, unnoticed by her or the group of Eagles she was putting through their paces in the first aid class.

Even healed, Angela's shoulder wound was the ugliest thing he'd ever seen on a female. It was clear the students also viewed it that way, but it didn't matter to her. She felt a duty to these people and nothing would stop her from honoring it. Marc had chosen to help her...and Adrian.

There's a flash of the bitterness. Marc hadn't thought he had anything in common with Kenn, but over the last month, he'd learned more about himself than he ever wanted to. That possessive streak was news, but it had been there all along, and now, he had a place to put it. Every time the flashes came, he planned to think of how it felt to walk into that rest stop and see her body.

Marc shuddered, unable to stop the reaction. *Yeah, that's where it belongs.* Better to carry the heart-crushing sense of loss than to become Kenn and push her straight into Adrian's waiting arms.

Angela noticed his mood change and raised a brow. *Do you need me?*

Marc shook his head. *All my life.*

The blush rose over her cheeks, gaining Eagle attention. To their credit, none of them cracked a joke, though it was clear from the smiles the guards wanted to say a lot.

Marc ducked out of the tent to take up a spot in the nearby shade. She had a number of guards in this zone, but Marc liked to stay close. These men were good, he knew that, but he wanted to be able to sleep at night. He often lingered nearby even when off duty. He tried to give her space during those times, understanding it was his fear that needed to be sated. The Eagles mostly approved, though he'd gotten a few glares from people who sensed his edge of possessiveness, but it wasn't for anyone's benefit but Angie's. *The things she's capable of!*

Marc lit a smoke, scanning the area. Her gifts were growing, daily it seemed, and the camp was noticing. She was the first one to alert them of new arrivals now, usually settling into the chair as they pulled in. She was predicting and confirming Samantha's weather reports, something the camp didn't know of yet, and she was giving answers before they were asked.

Marc had talked to Adrian about it this morning, but the leader said she knew what she was doing. After everything that had happened, Marc had doubts that Adrian would have stopped her anyway, even if it meant trouble with the camp. He was

getting too much of what he needed to interfere. Marc frowned slightly. *It's almost as if she's in charge.*

“I am, I think, on some things.”

Angie was standing behind him, smoking and staring. Behind her, the rookies were leaving the class with knowing, slightly challenging glances.

Marc glared, showing sharp white teeth and a willingness to fight for her.

The single males hurried on.

“Is this still a problem?”

Marc knew how to handle it now. She wasn't the only one who could use distraction. “Only if you keep digging into my brain, princess. I might have to bail you out of the well.”

Angela snorted, relaxing at his joke. “I won't go so deep that I can't get back out.”

Sparks flared. Marc's body woke. “What if you like it there?” He leaned closer. “Sometimes, I'm a fun guy.”

Angela regarded him in surprise. “Are you flirting with me?”

Marc had her in his arms an instant later. “I think you could say that.”

Angela was aware of his tactics. He hadn't given her time to be scared. “There's only one issue with that, Braveheart.”

“What's that, princess?”

Her eyes flared at the second use of the hated nickname...then narrowed.

Marc braced.

Angela smiled, slowly sliding her arms around his neck.

Marc felt her strength, the muscles flexing under that pale, scarred skin. She was definitely recovering.

“I’m not *satisfied*.”

Heat flared. His grip on her waist tightened. “We can’t have that, baby.” His mouth lowered, hands tangling in her thick hair.

“Angie, to the mess.”

They both jumped at the radio call, then shared a snicker.

Marc groaned as she keyed the mike. “Timing.”

“Copy.”

“Later?” Marc leered at her.

Angela ducked in for a copy of his fast peck and then fled. “You know it.”

Left me with a smile.

Angela reluctantly pulled away from their connection and forced her mind to the schedule making lesson Kenn was set to give her. It wouldn’t be a fun class, but Kenn wasn’t full of hate now. It was easier to handle being around him. He had finally accepted that her gifts would never be under his control. They could make peace at some point, the real kind, she hoped, but there was still a black spot on him that she was leery of.

“You ready?”

Kenn sounded surprisingly amused under his bruises and bandages. She shrugged. “Whenever you are.”

“Just waiting to see how many radios I’m replacing.”

Angela scoffed at his joke about the pulses she sometimes sent. “I’ll try to take it easy on you.”

It was one of the things he used to say right before he hit her. They both winced.

When Angela would have stated the intention behind her words, Kenn swallowed the guilt. “I know you didn’t.”

Angela let out the tense breath she’d drawn in. “Thank you for knowing that.”

Kenn was able to be grateful now. “Thank you for letting me keep my place.”

Angela didn’t deny that it was her choice. She gestured toward the schedules. “Like anyone other than Adrian could teach me this shit.”

Kenn gave a snicker.

The tension in the mess eased. People went back to eating and chatting.

The lesson went by quickly. Things were improving throughout the camp and people were now in tune with the emotions of those leading them. When there was a disruption of the peace, they knew it almost instantly because when it was good, it was really good, and any variation of that was noticeable. The golden bubble of light around the camp was so strong whenever the six of them were near each other that it was almost impenetrable.

“That’s a cute pair,” Kenn commented sarcastically a bit later, referring to Doug and Peggy sitting together again.

Marc frowned. “I think they look happy.”

Angela closed her journal to observe. The lesson was over, plans were set for the trip into Little Rock, and a few of Adrian’s leaders were enjoying Li Sing’s cookies and tea.

“Not in about one minute. Here comes the rest of the family.” Kenn nodded toward the couple entering the mess.

Seth and Becky stepped into the food line, staying close to each other as they tried to ignore the disapproving comments.

The center table tensed as the couple finished in line.

Becky spotted her mom first, freezing. She hadn’t known about Peggy and Doug.

Seth nudged her forward, then spotted the problem. He stopped, expecting Becky to fly off the handle.

“That’s sure different. She hasn’t shown interest in anyone since my dad died when I was five. Let’s go sit with them.”

Seth gaped. Becky had been adamant about making Peggy come to her. *The trip out with Kenn must have gone well.* Seth hadn’t wanted to let her go. He might not have if he’d known it was Kenn in charge, but Samantha and Cynthia being along had helped. He hadn’t known her mother was going too.

“Okay.”

They stopped by the table. Seth was aware of a mess full of witnesses expecting an ugly scene.

Peggy stopped midsentence, picking up Becky’s curiosity, but no anger. She cleared her throat. “Would you like to sit with us?”

“That depends.”

“On?”

Becky looked at Seth pointedly.

Peggy flushed a bit, mouth tightening. “Him too.”

Becky and Seth sat down across from them.

The mess went back to quiet murmurs as they saw a truce being made. It wasn’t spoken, but the moment was clear in the hope that it gave to those observing.

Peggy took in the strawberry hair drawn back in a tight bun, the bags under those pale eyes, sunken cheeks that made the freckles stand out, and realized she *was* needed. Not sure how to help her too thin daughter, or even if it would be welcome, Peggy kept her mouth shut. She didn’t look at Seth.

Around the mess, came thumps and groans of men *and women* learning to defend themselves, to survive. Even the clicking of the cicadas was drowned out by it. The hungry bugs were finally starting to die off, but the other insects were increasing. The ears of all of their livestock were coated in salve, as were those of the working dogs, but it wasn’t enough to keep away the biting flies. Adrian was working with the vet to find a stronger

chemical to use, but so far, they hadn't discovered anything that worked. It was as though the flies didn't notice the fumes and grease anymore. They just chewed through it to reach the blood.

"So, when did you guys become a couple?"

Becky's words made Peggy grin and Doug flush.

"We're not a couple, Lass." Doug missed Peggy's hurt expression. "We're friends."

Becky started to tell him she was just teasing, but Peggy stood up. She marched swiftly away from the mess with stiff shoulders.

Doug was aware that he'd done something wrong, but he didn't know what. He stood up to go after her.

Becky shook her head. "I wouldn't do that."

"Why not? I hurt her somehow. Need to find out what I did."

"You denied the relationship," Seth pointed out. "Women don't like that."

Doug scowled. "Damn it! I didn't know she wanted it made public."

"So there is something going on with you and my mom." Becky waved. "Sit down, Mr. Patrick. We need to discuss this."

Doug snorted and followed Peggy. "Sound just like your mom."

His grumbling made Becky giggle. "That's so sweet! He really likes her."

The mess heard the sound of her amusement and knew it for what it was. Little Becky was

recovering, rejoining life. By now, it was clear that she'd suffered something ugly during the final slaver battle. Many of the senior Eagles thought Seth's days of being treated badly might be over now. It was clear that he'd helped her. Becky leaving camp to go on the run with Kenn had also sent ripples through the camp and forced them to accept that she had earned the right to make her own choices.

“Are you okay with them being together?”

Becky leaned against Seth's arm in happiness that dared anyone to protest the innocent contact. “Yes. I hope they find what we have.”

Seth smiled, leaning down to press a kiss to the top of her head. “Me, too.”

The camp was slowly beginning to understand that Seth had hidden his feelings for Becky, that he'd cared for her long before Rick had come into the picture. Neil and others were casually spreading that information and making their opinions known on it. The time had come to forgive and forget.

3

“I'm sorry.”

“Aye.”

There it was again, that slight revelation that she was his kind. It hit him just as hard as the first time.

Lust wasn't something Peggy could give into. If he wanted her, it had to be the legal way. “I'm not a whore.”

Doug recoiled. "I never thought that!"

"Just so we have it straight," she intoned coolly.

Doug picked up on her meaning. "I don't have anything to do with them. They want Eagles."

Peggy was sympathetic, but only shrugged. "I'm sure one of them would be happy to comfort you. Eagle or not, you're in the chain of command."

Doug didn't know what to say. Should he tell her how the camp women often snubbed him because of his limp, or how he felt so inferior around them that he couldn't form sentences, let alone pickup lines? That he still didn't understand why she was interested in him? His shoulders slumped. "What do you want from me, Ms. Kelly?"

Peggy smothered her disappointment. "Not a damn thing, Douglas. Not a damn thing."

He watched her stomp off, confused and sorry for whatever it was that he hadn't given her.

"Would you care for a word of advice?"

If it had been anyone but the doctor, Doug would have told them to get lost. "I guess I need some."

John looked up at the big man, full of good health and vigor. "Claim her legally and settle down. Shack up in bliss and forget about the past. It's gone."

John left him standing there, speechless. Claim Ms. Peggy? Shack up with her? Was John crazy? She didn't...

Doug replayed their moments and saw what he'd been missing. That was what she'd meant

when she'd said she wasn't a whore. If he wanted her, it had to be legal, in front of everyone.

Can I do that? Is that what I want?

Not sure, Doug went in the opposite direction. Maybe he'd go find Marc and get his nose broken again. That would be easier.

4

Matt struggled, pulling his head out of the toilet, but the two boys shoving him down were stronger. He sucked in a breath as his head went back under.

Timmy yanked him up and shoved the gagging boy down at his feet. "Don't ever rat someone out again!"

Eric laughed as Matt began to throw up. The two bullies left, locking the door.

Glad they hadn't punched him this time, Matt continued to vomit, but the self-pity he usually felt after a moment like this was absent. In its place was a cold knot of hatred that couldn't be untied.

Becky heard the banging as she walked by the port-o-lets that were off limits because they were overfull.

Thud! Thud!

Becky realized someone was inside the last john and quickly unsnapped the lock that had been put on it by the Eagles. She looked around suddenly, wondering why those on duty hadn't noticed the banging.

She spotted Tucker and Anderson snickering in the shadows and understood as the door slowly swung open. They'd let this happen.

Matt's condition was indescribable, and she was downwind. Becky turned and threw up.

Matt walked toward the shower campers with his hands balled into fists. All thoughts of Cynthia, the newspaper and his dad were shoved to the rear by his rage. *They won't get away with it this time.*

Becky waved off Seth's concern as he rushed to her side. "I'm okay... Hang on... Blehhh..."

Seth caught a whiff of what had caused it and saw Matt. He started to ask the guards what had happened, and then understood as he saw who they were.

"They're the ones...letting Dale get hurt too," Becky forced out, needing the distraction to settle her guts. "Scared to get Adrian's fists. Set the rookies up for it instead."

Seth understood more than she thought. Those two were also being watched for the way they were hanging out with the younger girls in camp.

"Adrian should give them a personal lesson." Neil came over from his place on the showers. He'd traced Matt's shit trail to here.

Becky tried to spit out the taste. "Matt's had enough."

They all looked toward the showers, where people were rushing out, half clothed and gagging, as Matt went in.

“I don’t know what he has in mind, but anyone who ever picked on him should be careful.”

“You’re kidding, right?” Neil scoffed lowly. “Matt pay it back?”

Becky wiped her face with the shirt Seth had taken off. “That was just a breaking point for him. Matt’s gonna change now. I think maybe some people are in danger.”

Seth and Neil took those words to heart, instantly flashed to the mass shootings of the old world.

“We’ll watch him.”

Becky tossed the shirt into the fire can that would be lit later. “Good.” She moved toward the medical tent, stomach rockin’ rough.

Seth was staring at her in a thoughtful way that had Neil raising a brow. “Everything okay?”

Seth shook his head, reeling. “No. She’s been lying. To me, the camp, Adrian, to all of us.”

“Who?” Neil frowned. “Becky?”

Seth nodded, watching her hold her stomach as she ducked into the large medical tent. “She’s like them, Neil. And...” Seth’s face flooded with fear. “She didn’t get off with just a rape.”

Neil blanched. “She’s late?”

Seth nodded in misery. “Five weeks since he took her. Not one drop of blood.”

Neil thought quickly. “Only a week over. Life is stressful now.”

Seth’s voice lowered. “This isn’t the first time she’s thrown up.”

Neil frowned. He'd seen her getting sick last week after evening mess but thought the chili hadn't sat well. It sure hadn't with him. The bed farts had been awful.

Neil didn't want to pry, especially since this was the first conversation Seth had held with him in those five weeks. His words of Seth being dead to him hadn't felt right after talking with Kyle. The obsession these men felt toward their younger females was hard to loathe after seeing the results.

“And how long have you two been...?”

Seth's eyes didn't lose their misery. “Three weeks after.”

Neil nodded, thinking the moment he'd seen on the tent wall hadn't been their first time. He was still pissed over it. “Might be yours, then.”

Seth hadn't thought of that. “I...”

Neil moved away as that stunning realization sank in. The odds on it were slim, but at least there was a hope for them. Neil had no doubt about Seth sticking by her and that helped to calm his anger. He didn't like it that Seth had let their relationship become physical so soon after Rick's attack, but it was over and done now. Becky was slowly improving. If that changed, he would know it. After all this guilt and remorse, Neil assumed he would be checking up on her for the rest of his life.

“But I don’t want one right now.” Becky’s face became set in stone. “If ever.”

“I’m sorry, but it’s against my moral code, as well as Adrian’s rules. I won’t do that.” John was horrified to be having this conversation.

“I will.”

John and Becky looked up to see Jennifer in the flap.

Dog glanced around her leg to check the tent and then vanished.

John scowled. Despite seeing Becky nearly every day since her attack, he still hadn’t gotten into her head. He might be able to do so now, while she was so scared.

“She’s scared because she thinks it’s Rick’s. Can you tell her differently?”

John hated Jennifer in that moment. “No, but it doesn’t change anything. We need babies, and there’s a chance that he’s not the father.”

Becky listened to their lowly held argument, stomach settling from the pill John had given her. The positive test was on the tray between them.

“You have no right to deny her an abortion.”

“You have no right to offer her one!”

Becky stood up. “It’s my choice, right?”

“I’d like a say in it, too.”

Becky cringed at Seth’s voice behind Jennifer.

Instantly uncomfortable, Jennifer stepped aside to let Seth go by.

Not angry, Seth gave the pregnant girl a comforting nod. Jennifer and Becky had become

friends. He had no doubt Jennifer would support her keeping the baby if that's what Becky really wanted. Her own impending motherhood was proof of that.

John eased out of the tent to give them privacy.

Jennifer fell in with his angry stride. "I'm not evil, you know."

John stopped and spun around, meaning to say exactly what he thought about that.

Jennifer cringed back in fear.

The doctor froze. "You're scared of me? I couldn't hurt you if I tried."

Jennifer couldn't stop the tear that rolled. "I'm sorry I made you mad."

John watched her waddle away, shocked into understanding that she wasn't nearly as hard as those females had given her credit for.

"I assume you'll make that up to her?"

John nodded at Kyle's curt order. "Yes. I didn't realize she was..."

Kyle supplied the words. "Terrified of men? Of *all* men? She is. I'm working on it, but so far, she doesn't respond much to other people."

John thought of how Jennifer had stepped up to defend Becky's rights, but backed down from Seth's presence. "Adrian can help her."

"After the birth."

John shook his head, ashamed for his assumptions. He'd known Jennifer was like Angela, but as with the camp, he'd thought she was manipulating Kyle. "Set it up now. She'll need the

strength if her twins don't survive."

Kyle blanched. If the doctor and Angela were preparing her for it, then the deaths were set.

6

"That's what you want?"

Becky flushed. "Yes."

Seth understood, even though he didn't agree. "I'll clear it with Adrian."

Becky shook her head. "I don't want him to try to talk me out of it."

Seth saw her fear and had to ask again. "You're sure?"

Becky began crying.

Seth found another box of tissues. Her silence said she wasn't. What did she need? "You know I'd stick by you, his or not?"

"I know. I just don't think I can do it, Seth." She stepped closer, needing him to know what was in her heart. "If I knew for certain it was yours!"

Seth surrounded her with his big arms. There was no way to know that until the birth, and by then, she would be attached. She was afraid of hating her own child. "I'll talk to Adrian." Seth was heartbroken for her. "I'll get him to agree."

A tap on the flap got their attention, but neither of them moved.

Peggy stepped inside with a neutral face. She didn't like Seth, but Becky needed her. John's quick words had made that clear.

“What?!”

Peggy blinked at Seth’s snarl. “I want to talk to her—alone.”

Seth looked down to see Becky shaking her head. “Later, maybe.”

“After you’ve forced her to kill my grandchild?”

Seth growled in angry frustration. “I don’t want her to do it either, but that’s not our choice to make!”

“You haven’t...” Peggy stopped, confused. “You want it?”

“More than you do.” Seth grunted. Mother-in-laws never changed.

“And she doesn’t...”

Seth rubbed Becky’s shaking shoulder. “She doesn’t want to have *Rick’s* baby.”

Peggy had mostly forgotten about the rape in favor of hating Seth and Adrian for keeping her away. “Rick’s?”

“We don’t know.”

Seth’s words were sharp, but the mother heard the concern, the plea for her to help change Becky’s mind. That’s what she’d come here for, but the thought of making Becky have her rapist’s baby was something no mother wanted to do.

Seth motioned toward the chair. “Sit down?”

Peggy went slowly, watching her teenage daughter cling to Seth. *Becky wants to be with him. Seth has been by her side throughout her recovery. He wants the baby even if it isn’t his.* Sinking into the chair, Peggy was forced to accept that she’d

been wrong.

Seth slowly guided Becky to the other seat. “I’m going to send someone to cover my post, and then I’ll be back. Okay?”

Becky slowly let go of him, face red and shiny from her tears.

Seth paused in the flap, looking back. The two females were staring at each other with more true emotions on their faces than he’d ever seen them share. Seth ducked out as Peggy held her arms open and Becky instantly went to her.

Adrian was near the tent. “Whatever she chooses. Anne and Angela will handle it if John won’t.”

Seth was grateful, but his own need was clear too.

Adrian sighed. “Freedom, Eagle. It’s not always as easy as just letting them fight.”

Seth let his boss see his pain, the only one he would share it with. “I long to be a dad again.”

So do I, Adrian thought, eyes going to Angela as she moved into the training tent. He looked back at Seth. “She’ll remember how it felt to carry life, even if only for a little while. You’ll have the opportunity again, and then, there won’t be a ghost to mar it.”

Seth took those words to heart and let them ease some of his fury at the situation. Adrian was right. In time, he would fill Becky with his sons and daughters, and Rick wouldn’t be anywhere in that picture.

Adrian motioned toward the showers, where Matt—naked as the day he was born—had just come out and begun drawing attention. “I want him in the Eagles. Can we do that?”

Distracted with a challenge, Seth grunted. “If he doesn’t snap first.”

“That’s why he needs to be an Eagle, Seth. If he isn’t, that snap might come on this camp. I’ll have Kyle remove him before I let that happen.” Adrian gave the undercover cop a hard look. “You’ve saved Becky, given her a chance at a future that shouldn’t have existed. Do the same for Matt and let the victory fill your heart when she follows through. Becky doesn’t want to be a mom yet. She wants to be one of us so she can kill the next man who tries to hurt her.”

Seth nodded. *I want that too.*

7

“North looks bad. We only paralleled it for a little while. The mutations and smells are unbelievable. I thought I was watching a bad horror flick from the 80s.” Kenn had just gotten his full clearance from John and come to deliver his report in person, despite already sending it in on paper.

Adrian sighed. Oklahoma had been known for a rich, black soil that was perfect for raising food, but not any longer. The deer here were deformed and mutating with every litter. Since the deer were herbivores, that meant the ground was now

contaminated enough to produce poisoned food. Predators would get a strong dose with each meal, and eventually, so would the humans who had to hunt those predators for food. An ugly cycle, it would take a decade for the effects to wind down.

They were camped on the state line. Adrian was glad to be entering another area, but he wasn't expecting better conditions. Now surrounded by empty fields instead of rotting plants, Adrian was sure they would start finding starvation as they traveled.

Adrian had been grateful to find Middle America almost intact, but the eastern sides would be ugly. The death tolls from their battles with nature had leveled off now, but what would happen when they went into Little Rock might start it all up again. It was a shared thought.

“We also saw something you're not gonna like.”

Adrian braced for it. “What?”

“Tenkiller Lake was totally dry, like it hasn't held water in months.”

That boded ill for the springs they hoped to gather water from. The camp was going that way to start collecting it as soon as the mission team returned from Little Rock. If there was no water here, the springs might also be dry.

“Up to fate now.” Adrian sighed. “We're too low on fuel to get to another area.”

Kenn put his notebook away, ready to follow through on the idea he'd had earlier. Tonya deserved what he was about to do. “If not, we'll find

another refinery or treatment plant.”

“Yes. We’re far from beaten. It’s just going to get a little tougher to keep us all alive now.”

Kenn indicated the group around the bonfire. “Harder for some than others.” It was Kenn’s way of asking if it was okay to try.

Adrian clapped him on the shoulder. “I think you’ll be surprised.”

Kenn went that way, motioning to the nervous woman waiting in the shadows. “Come on, rookie. Just don’t throw anything at me.”

Adrian was still surprised to be including Tonya in anything, let alone the Eagles. He watched as the couple approached their two biggest enemies and waited to be judged forgiven or not.

Seth and Kyle exchanged resigned glances as the couple waited, not speaking or forcing anything. A simple head shake would get rid of them.

Kyle gestured at Becky. “There’s room for you, if they slide down.”

Meaning it was up to them.

Becky was aware of Seth’s tension, his need to keep old grudges flying, but her mind was in other places. She put a hand on Seth’s arm to keep him from protesting. “There’s room.”

Seth gave in without an argument. He too, had other things on his mind. “Fine. You can tell us about the look on everyone’s face when the rabbits attacked.”

Kenn guided Tonya to the inside place, where she was surrounded, protected. It was noticed

because the action said he cared about her safety.

Tonya kept her mouth shut, allowing the contentment to linger instead of chasing it out with the next plan or goal. She'd never been around people who could accept her flaws without taking advantage, but some of Kenn's talk was rubbing off. She'd always known about the dream, but until she had let herself view it through his eyes, she hadn't understood. If she had, she might have stood an honest chance as Adrian's legal mate. If she'd just stopped and listened, even once, she would have wanted to be a part of this.

Back in Nevada, Tonya had thought only the top man would work for her, but after all these months, she'd come to think that where she was, was good enough. Maybe it wouldn't have been with any other man in Adrian's army, but Kenn knew how to handle a real woman.

It helped that he was as lusty as she was. They had sex in cars, over motorcycles, in the showers, against walls and trees, and anywhere else the mood hit them. She didn't have time to work on another man or plan. When she wasn't sneaking around with Kenn, she was cooking, cleaning, babysitting, collecting trash for nightly burning, and a hundred other nasty chores Kenn called FND work.

“Room for another?”

Becky stiffened.

Seth looked at her, questioning if her forgiveness extended to someone who'd actually done her harm.

Becky stared at Neil, choosing his fate and her own. She didn't hate him as much anymore, but they would never be friends.

Neil waited, hoping she would give him the chance to atone.

Becky's stomach lurched, reminding her that she wasn't able to cast stones. Neil wasn't the only one who'd made mistakes. Hers, in comparison, now seemed worse. "Sit down."

Becky's choice broke some of the tension.

Neil took a seat by Kyle.

He flashed a grateful smile and watched Becky's face tighten. Her eyes narrowed into that squint he'd been warned about.

Neil broke the contact, not wanting to ruin the gift she'd given by allowing him to be here.

Becky pushed the hate back down, controlling herself like Jennifer had instructed. The things she could do were different than Adrian's other special people. Her gifts were more volatile. When she wanted to see blood, it flowed.

Silence settled over the group. Each of them was lost in their own thoughts about the trials they'd gone through. With the exception of Neil, Seth and Becky, this group was almost content now.

"Damn." Neil remembered to breathe as Marc and Angie came out of their tent, clearly fresh from an intimate moment. They were still holding hands and smiling, exchanging quick kisses. It was enough to make a trooper sick.

Neil got up and left the fire, vanishing into the

darkness. Maybe he'd take one of the camp women up on their offer and at least have a warm heart next to him occasionally. He missed human contact more than he could say.

“Is he okay?”

Kenn's question was met with scowls and shrugs.

“He might be if he gets laid,” Seth answered, staring at his former friend.

The group burst out laughing, amusement breaking the tension.

“Maybe we should help him.”

They all turned to Becky, surprised.

Becky rested against Seth in a direct violation of camp rules. “Rick hurt her too, in other ways. I know that. Maybe Neil can help. Like Seth is helping me.”

They considered the implications. Of them all, the clearest was that little Becky had grown up.

“Hot, steamy showers that last long enough to run out of heat,” Jennifer offered in the silence. They had been talking about what they missed most when Kenn and Tonya joined them. She hadn't wanted to ruin the calm mood by saying her mom.

“Mmm. Me, too.” Tonya moaned, also leaning against her man's big arm. “Except, it was baths. I could spend hours in them.”

Kenn stored that information and answered like a guy. “The Pornhub.”

The group cackled again, males the loudest.

“Saturday morning cartoons.”

The campfire group stared at Seth in surprise.

He flushed, body rigid as he shared his private agony for the first time. “My daughter, Bella. She loved the damn things, and I...I loved her.”

Becky slid her hand over his, marveling at how much their skin looked alike. If only she could count on that! “You lost her in the war?”

Seth’s voice was thick with anguish. “Never found a sign.”

Becky understood that, in a small way, coming to her rescue had been driven by the death of his daughter. Right at that moment, she’d been Bella, needing him. He hadn’t been able to help his daughter but saving Becky had freed him from some of his guilt at surviving when Bella hadn’t.

“That’s why you search the new arrivals?”

“Yes.”

Understanding how hard her choices would be on him, she tried to lend comfort. “I’ll help you look from now on.”

Caught in his own moment of healing, Seth stared at her. “You’re good for me, too. I didn’t expect that.”

“I think the same can be said of everyone around this fire.” Kenn was a bit stunned. They’d each had their trials and survived because they’d had someone to help them. It was a part of the human spirit that nature, or any other enemy, would never understand. Together, they were stronger.

When Matt stepped under the mess canopy, there was a loud round of snickering and laughter that turned his cheeks bright red. He hadn't spoken a single word after the attack, just entered his tent and got dressed. After that, he'd gone to do his usual chores, but on the inside...

Matt's hands were in his pockets, drawing attention from those who knew he was on the edge.

Jennifer and Charlie stood up at the same time, but Matt had counted on them. He was ready. Moving without his usual clumsiness, Matt pulled the tightly filled balloon from his pocket. "You all think it's funny? Try laughing now!"

The stink bomb exploded, sending the deep reek of fresh feces across the eating crowd. Seth and Kyle were smart enough to grab their females and get them out of the zone, but most of the camp wasn't as lucky. The sounds of gagging and vomiting echoed through the night.

Matt didn't run from the Eagles as they rushed his way. He wasn't done yet.

The second balloon bomb was ammonia. The harsh fumes dropped all of the males crushing each other in their attempts to get to him.

"Clear the area!" Adrian motioned for the canopy to be taken down.

Matt inhaled deeply. *I hope death doesn't hurt.*

Adrian tackled the teenager and sent them both rolling through the dirt outside the mess. Adrian started to shake the boy until his teeth rattled and

then he realized Matt wasn't breathing.

"Medic!"

9

"You want me to do what?"

"Put Kevin on hold and spend that time on Matt," Angela repeated evenly.

"One is a good man, and the other is a kid who just tried to kill half the camp!" Cynthia tried not to yell. "Are you nuts?"

"Matt needs a hope for the future, or we'll leave his body on the side of the road in the morning."

Angela grunted. "Is that what you want?"

No. Cynthia liked Matt. She had thought she was making progress with him.

"You are. He was pushed today." Angie filled Cynthia in on the port-o-let incident and was satisfied by the anger she saw there. "When Kevin asks why, you say FND work. He'll wait."

Cynthia's eyes snapped to hers.

Angela smiled, one of those hard, female exchanges that allowed no disobedience. "Get close to the boy, show him there's another world, and I'll take you with me for the next three runs into any city after Arkansas. As my XO."

Cynthia's greedy heart made her agree. "What exactly do you want me to do?"

"Help him, like Seth and Kyle have done with their abused charges." Angela's voice lowered. "Love him. It's what he needs the most. No one ever

has.”

Cynthia didn't respond, instead moving for the flap. She had to think about this one. It went against her beliefs, but more than that, it might make her an outcast with the camp again and she'd just gotten in. It would only be temporary, until Matt was strong enough to stand on his own, but...

Cynthia felt Kevin staring at her from his place on duty over the supply trucks. *I was looking forward to that date!*

10

Matt opened his eyes to find himself still alive. It was the last thing he expected. Tears began to stream down his cheeks. *I don't want to be here anymore!*

“Matt?”

Cynthia's voice made him stiffen in fury. “Get out!” Matt blinked at his barely audible croak.

“It's the ammonia. Should wear off.” Cynthia took the chair next to his bed, ignoring the scowling Eagle in the corner who was Matt's guard. “If you had used bleach with it, we'd all be dead now.”

Matt was too wrapped up in his own mind to care. “I couldn't find any.”

Cynthia and the guard stored that. Matt really had tried to kill everyone. The camp thought it was an awful prank.

“Why are you here?”

Cynthia took his hand. “I'm your friend. Where

else should I be?"

Matt recoiled. "I don't have any friends!"

"Sure you do." Cynthia leaned closer. She used her feminine powers of persuasion. "And I care."

Matt wasn't sure how she meant it and didn't ask. There was nothing she could offer that would bring him back from the dark side.

"Matt?"

He looked up, still worshiping her, still wanting what his slowly maturing body was whispering of. "Why are you here?"

At his repeated question, Cynthia let her fingers rub his, not grimacing at the feel of his rough skin. "To offer you an arrangement."

The Eagle in the corner tensed, sensing what was coming. That someone higher up than the reporter had arranged this, Billy had no doubt.

"A what?"

"An arrangement." Cynthia let go of Matt's hand and slowly stroked a soft finger down his pale wrist.

Matt's skin flushed under her attention.

Cynthia pushed harder, cringing at the thought of this story flying through the camp. "For the next month, you'll live with me."

Matt couldn't speak, but his mind was working perfectly. He was getting his heart's fondest wish instead of Kyle's bullet. "Why?"

"We'll atone together."

"You're lying!" Matt accused hoarsely. "It's FND!" The boy shoved her hand away. "I don't

want your pity, bitch!”

Cynthia delivered a light slap to Matt’s mouth.
“*Ms. bitch.*”

Matt’s hand came up to his mouth, eyes filling with fury. “I won’t take...”

Slap!

Matt’s arm came up to hit her back.

Cynthia nodded. “I’ll let you get one in, and then I’m beating your ass like your dad does.”

Matt hesitated.

Cynthia watched his arm go down. “Wise choice.” She handed him a paper from the front pocket of her shirt. “The boy who gave me that said art was his only dream. Is that still true?”

Matt slowly shook his head.

“Good, ‘cause I have needs to be serviced, and I’m asking you to see to them.”

Matt was floored by the adult conversation, by the smell of her and the concern in her eyes. “You want me?”

Cynthia gave him a soft smile and avoided the question. “Is that a yes?”

Matt nodded quickly. He would live with Cynthia!

“Good. I’ll arrange it with Adrian. When John releases you, you’ll come straight to me. Understand?”

“Yes.” Matt didn’t know how to express his emotions. Tears welled again.

Cynthia gave him a sharp pinch on the wrist that snapped his attention back. “No more tears, Matt,

unless you just can't keep from it. Okay?"

"Okay." He quickly wiped them away. He would have a new life now, one where crying wasn't needed.

Cynthia slowly opened her arms to him and let the teenager curl into her protective embrace. She'd done what Angela wanted and claimed Matt. *What the fuck did I just do?*

Billy listened, not surprised. He would have been shocked if Adrian hadn't tried to save the boy. These methods would seem extreme to the camp, who wanted Matt and Mitch banished now, but Billy thought this could turn out well. In time, Cynthia might come to care for Matt. It would leave Kevin on the outs, but it was a needed sacrifice for the dream. Banishing Mitch and Matt would hurt Adrian and that man was suffering enough. He didn't need another weight on his shoulders. Watching Marc love Angie was more than enough to bring things down. They didn't need any more help.

Chapter Twenty

This Is Safe Haven

[Route of Travel](#)

1

“**A**re you sure?” Kenn hated to question Adrian’s choices, but his nuts had drawn up and his gut was churning. They’d just caught sight of their target.

Adrian stared at the devastated city with a fierce determination that caused the Eagles on duty to take repeated glances at his face. “Yes. More of our people are down there. We’re going to get them.”

Kenn didn’t doubt that. He was just leery of the chore. Going into a city that hadn’t been leveled was dangerous. Going into one that had been toppled over like dominoes might be suicide. They didn’t know where in all those miles of collapsed buildings they needed to search, though Kenn was sure Angela would help.

Kenn was also certain he’d get to go this time. He was eager to leave Samantha, John, and Marc with the responsibility of leadership. He wasn’t as fond of it as he had been before Adrian’s hiatus with the slavers, but this run already seemed like a no-win and it hadn’t even started yet.

“Do a long lunch out of sight. Double the guard,

with Marc and John as first and second in command while we're clearing but tell Samantha they might need help."

Kenn wrote it in his notebook, the sixth one Adrian had given him. He wasn't upset that Marc would be in charge. Most of their fighting was over, had been since he'd realized Marc could have taken his place all along. *Besides, Marc will only be in charge for a day and he won't have an easy time of it. Safe Haven is hard to handle when the boss isn't there.*

Adrian jumped down from the idling semi before Kenn could ask any of the dozen questions that came to mind, slamming the door.

Kenn picked up the mike and got to work.

Seconds later, the lines of jeeps, cars, trucks, and vans began to come around, using the smooth technique they'd been taught. All it took was patience, but sometimes that was the hardest thing to come by.

The last vehicle in line, full of level seven Eagles, backed up in a wide circle and pulled around, freeing up space for the vehicles in front of them to do the same.

A lone Blazer broke the chain.

People stared as Angela pulled onto the shoulder.

The simple ballet continued, but with even one car missing, the magic was broken.

Angela parked next to the rig and got out, giving Kenn a casual glance as she went by. She could feel

his jealousy, the small flashes of the past he was still battling. His greedy, resentful thoughts bounced off the cab walls.

She tuned him out. Everyone was having a rough morning, but it was mostly the same with Kenn whenever she checked. Marc was at the top of his shit list. She was right after that, with Neil in third.

Adrian took a small recorder from his pocket. “Mitch got this two nights ago. It’s broadcasting over a lot of waves.” He hit play.

“Say again.”

Thick static came in response.

Mitch tried again. “We are an American Red Cross convoy. Who’s calling?”

Static came again, and then a young voice floated out of the tape player, horrifying Angela as she registered the fear and helplessness behind it.

“The grownups left us! We need help!”

It was whispered but clear, even though odd noises in the background should have drowned it out.

“Where are you, honey?” Mitch asked, not as steady now.

Angela flinched at an awful cry in the background. The child waited for it to stop. It did, in a long, unbroken howl of agony that finally ran out of breath.

“Little Rock. Hurry! They’re closer!”

“Where exactly? We’ll come and get you!”

Mitch's tenor was full of outrage and worry as he tried to find out exactly where the abandoned kids were.

Static garbled the transmission.

"You're breaking up! Say again!"

There was only more fuzz. Adrian switched the recording off. "He tried them for the next two hours and got nothing. We heard it on another channel yesterday. Same message, different kid. We won't be the only ones hunting them."

Angela closed her eyes. "Play it again."

He did. They both winced at the loud moan when it came.

Angela pushed, stretched, listened. When Adrian cut it off, her eyes snapped open. "Trapped on the east side, near the flooding."

He ignored the sound of the dead coming from her lips. "I want to go in and get them."

"If it's a trap, if we're ambushed?"

"We go in assuming it is."

Angela concentrated on the unrecognizable city below them. *They're down there. I feel them waiting to be captured and killed, or rescued, and I can't even find a way in.* It was all pile after pile of rancid debris.

"Let me worry about that." Adrian blew out a tired breath, staring at his people as they began to make camp with Marc in charge for the first time. "We've observed armed men. They act like soldiers. I need to know if they are." Adrian waited

as patiently as he could while she searched.

“They’re not all from the same branch. Bounty hunters, I think. There’s a small group on duty inside that mobile home.” She shivered. “They’re waiting for us. Word has spread about what we’ve done.”

Adrian was now the one frowning. Eliminating the slavers was only a small part of the death his army would end up dealing. “Mercs are as bad as slavers.” He was unsure how to bring it up to her. Neither of them had fully recovered from the last massacre. “If they follow us in—”

“They won’t come out.” Angela cut him off.

He gave her a stern glance, skipping the lecture she obviously didn’t need. “Stay close to me once we’re in.”

Angela frowned suddenly. “You should watch your six on this run...”

Adrian tensed. “You know something?”

Her daze cleared slowly. “A bad decision goes wrong? I’m not sure.”

“We make those every day.”

They laughed halfheartedly, but Adrian took her words to heart. “I’ll keep you out of the ugliness as much as I can.”

Angela knew that. “I need a map.”

Adrian pulled one from his pocket, putting the tape player away. “We’ll go down after dark. Be in the mess in half an hour.” He turned from her many questions, like what would happen if she couldn’t convince the kids to come out and talk.

Angela walked slowly to her Blazer, searching what used to be Little Rock, Arkansas. There were no landmarks to use. The entire city was crumbled on top of itself like broken Lego blocks, making it almost impossible to tell where a building started or ended. The only thing to navigate by was the Arkansas River, which was now surrounding Little Rock on three sides due to postwar flooding. That mass of scummy liquid would be a nightmare for Safe Haven to cross after they were finished here.

Adrian lingered a few feet from the truck. He knew Kenn was impatient to get started, but it was quiet here and he could think. It was foolish to risk their lives again so soon for what would probably be so few, but his heart demanded he do it anyway. His blood was down there in that hell, alive and waiting for him to fulfill his promise, and he would.

Adrian gave the death trap below one last lingering glance and then joined Kenn.

Kenn had his pen ready when Adrian opened the semi door. The boss man began speaking as he shifted the big rig into gear. Kenn copied it exactly with a lightly trembling hand.

It's just excitement, Kenn told himself. I'm not afraid. We're about to go into battle again, and this time, I'm second in command for the run.

Fate snickered. *Keep telling yourself that, foolish mortal. Fear is the only thing keeping you all alive.*

“Are you happy?”

Charlie wasn't expecting the question. He hesitated. “Most of the time.” He looked over at his mom. “What about you?”

Angela recognized the distraction technique with a smile. “I'm content.”

Neither of them was satisfied with those answers. They each wanted happiness for the other.

Maybe I can help, Charlie thought.

What else can I give him? Angela wondered.

Their thoughts crossed. They both chuckled even as they brought up mental walls and continued with plans.

“Yeah, you're mine.” Angela hugged him. She missed moments like this.

Charlie hugged her back loosely, afraid to scare her away by saying the truth. *Now, I'm happy.*

Angela held Charlie as long as she thought he would allow, scared of ruining the moment. She didn't want to ask for more than he could give. Being a teenager wasn't easy.

Worried he was clinging, Charlie slowly backed away.

Angela turned around to wipe at the light tears. He would have a great future. She wouldn't rest until he could live in safety. “Here they come.”

Angela lingered with Kyle and Cynthia as Charlie got their charges settled inside the training tent. Seth and Becky were reluctantly here, as well.

Charlie motioned to the girl. “This way.”

Becky wasn’t sure why she’d been put in this class or even what teenage recovery lessons were. She suspected it was Adrian’s version of reform school.

“Not at all, though the camp probably will think that.” Angela was watching Becky. “And you don’t have to come back after today. It’s not therapy.”

“Liar,” Becky accused without malice. “He wouldn’t have us all here if it wasn’t going to help.”

Angela didn’t respond.

Becky went toward the tent, sending curious glances over her tense shoulder.

Angela waited until they were all inside and then spent a minute with the adults. “They’ll come back wound up and eager to practice if this goes well. If not, they’ll need a release at the defense ring.”

Angela blocked the various concerns and images, only giving as much as she needed to. “Each of those teenagers is special. It’s time it was put to use for the greater good.”

The guardians would have given tips and specific instructions, but Angela didn’t want that. “Be back in two hours, ready to handle them.”

Angela left them exchanging concerned looks—three adults bonded by the trials of youth.

Seth let go first, turning for the parking area, where Kenn and Marc were modifying their chosen mission vehicles. *They might need some help.*

Kyle and Cynthia lingered as Angela ushered

the kids into seats. The mobster's fears were obvious, but the reporter's concerns were also clear. With Matt and Jennifer out of control, anything could happen.

Eased a bit to see rookie Eagles move into a tight perimeter around the canvas, Cynthia relaxed. *Angela has it covered.*

She didn't tell Kyle that, but it wouldn't matter to him. He loathed being away from Jennifer and with his team set to go into the city, this was taking time that he'd hoped to have with her. It didn't help that she was just six weeks away from hitting the date when John might be able to save the babies. Kyle didn't want her doing anything to jeopardize it.

"I haven't had a second kai lesson yet." Cynthia glanced at Kyle, meeting his eyes. "Neil's list is long...and I don't really get on with Jeff."

Kyle grunted, suddenly realizing he was okay with Cynthia—more than he'd ever thought he would be. "Okay. Now?"

Cynthia shook her head in amusement. "No one can say you don't serve him."

"Nope." Kyle led the way, not correcting the assumption. Angela didn't want the babies as much as he and Jennifer did, but Adrian did and what Adrian wanted, he got. Angela would keep that in mind.

"I can't keep you safe."

The four teens understood there was a problem

at roughly the same time and began looking around in concern.

Angela let them stew for a minute. If this was going to work, they had to be clear on the danger.

“Each of you can do things to help these people, but when they find out, you’ll be in danger. Someone tell me why. No cheating, and don’t think I won’t know if you try.” Angela had a link into all four of them.

“They’ll want us to do things.” Jennifer was already sure what was going on. “The magic they can’t do.”

“Yes.” Angela leaned against the wide desk she’d helped bring in late last night. “I won’t always be here to cover things. Safe Haven needs defenders, the kind who can perform the miracles Adrian’s Eagles can’t.”

“Then why am I here?” Matt popped up, stutter mostly gone now that he’d snapped. It was as if multiple switches had been flipped at one time. The result was a mess he had to sort out. “And why’s Becky here?”

“Don’t call me that!” Becky waved her fist, face getting hot. “It’s Rebecca, you retard! Remember it!”

“Shut up!” Matt quipped back. “Shouldn’t you be crying or screwing?”

“Hey!” Jennifer frowned at him. “That’s rough, Matthew.”

“Don’t call me that!” Matt growled.

Becky began gloating. “Matthew! Matthew!”

“Come on, guys.” Charlie could feel his mom’s anger growing. “Leave him alone.”

“Oh, it’s us, huh?” Becky crossed her arms over her chest. “He started it.”

“Get. Out.” Angela’s fury washed over them, stinging and burning. “Go on.” Angela moved around the desk and dropped into the chair. “Older people here are waiting for this opportunity. I’ll give these positions to them.” Angela began to write on a blank paper, scribbling to make it look good. She didn’t react when the teenagers stayed sitting and began whispering to each other.

“Tell her we’re sorry.” Jennifer gestured at Charlie.

“Why me?”

Becky pointed. “It’s your mom!”

“You guys all caused it.” Charlie ignored their anger and disappointment. “You can all fix it.”

“How?” Matt was having fun just being around kids his own age, even if they were fighting. He didn’t want it to be over yet.

Charlie shrugged. “How do I know?”

“But you do though.” Jennifer was sure. “Don’t you?”

“Yes.” Charlie sighed. “She wants me to take charge of you guys.”

As the other kids frowned, Charlie hurried to explain his side of it. “I told her I don’t want that. I like having friends.”

“Take charge for what?” Becky was intrigued.

Charlie looked to Angela, not sure if he was

supposed to trust them with these secrets.

Angela kept scribbling. “Go on.”

“She wants...”

“Safe Haven needs...” Angela led, staying busy with her imaginary note making.

“Safe Haven *needs* a team of defenders that no one would suspect.” Charlie smiled. “She wants us to be like, well, spy kids, I guess.”

The tent erupted with excited promises and apologies that allowed Angela to put the pen down and take back over.

“The first rule, the only one that is to never be crossed for any reason...” Angela paused to be certain they were listening. “is loyalty to the group. We are a team. The four of you, myself and Adrian, and in time, a few others.”

“Will we do things?” Charlie didn’t try to hide the eagerness. “With you and Adrian?”

“Yes. We’ll meet at least once a week as a complete team. There will be endless lessons, drills, tests.” Angela looked at Matt. “Repeat your question.”

Matt swallowed nervously and then let himself grow. “You answered it, I think.”

Angela nodded. “Good. Share your discovery with the team.”

Matt reddened a bit. “I’m dangerous.” He looked across the student desks. “Rebecca’s here because she’s a killer. She doesn’t wound. She goes for your weak spot and squeezes.”

It was a level of intelligence that none of them,

Charlie included, had thought Matt capable of.

“Yes.” Angela finished the point. “Show them what you and Matt will contribute in the future.”

Becky concentrated.

“I saw that!” Jennifer didn’t feel threatened by other descendants her own age. It made her feel almost normal.

“So did I.” Charlie was glad they were getting along now.

“Me too.” Silence fell as Matt looked at Angela. “How is that possible?”

Angela’s eyes glowed crimson. “*Power rubs off in many ways,*” she and the witch stated in eerie tandem. “*It can also be shared.*” Angela concentrated. “For exactly 10 seconds, each of you will join for a moment. Try to relax.”

Finding and then linking into so many minds was demanding work. Angela drew harder from the rookies outside the tent.

“*What was that?*”

“*Don’t know. Record it and shake it off.*”

Angela tuned the outside voices to a lower setting and shoved the doors open all at once. “Ten seconds. Get to know each other.”

All four teens tensed, gripping desks and muttering as they struggled to close off their secrets.

Angela made them hold out for the full count.

“Ten.” She broke the line.

The rookies outside reacted first.

“*We’ll have Li Sing check the stock dates.*”

“*Maybe the mylar bags aren’t keeping things*

out. We'll do it when we're done."

Angela stifled a yawn. "For 10 seconds you were vulnerable, unprotected except for your minds. Imagine what I could do if I were evil, or if someone else like me comes here who is evil."

She had their attention now.

"Our mission is to protect these people and that means guarding what they need. I mean the supplies and camp itself, of course, but also the chain of command." Angela pulled them into the dream. "Your attitudes, your flaws and anger—all of it. Put them together and keep us alive, so we can do the same for our country. We're all walking targets. We need you."

3

Kyle, Cynthia, and Seth were waiting nearby as Angela stepped out of the tent.

She ignored them to wave the rookies over. "You guys feel anything strange while we were in there?"

All but three of them nodded or said yes. Angela smiled. "Thought it was just me. Everyone who did, go see John and get a quick check. If you didn't, stay on duty."

Kyle watched her thin the rookie herd in admiration. The three men who hadn't spoken up were exchanging satisfied looks that Angela encouraged with her low words when the others were gone. "After your shift, have a good meal and

some extra water. Add another hour of sleep so you can build up a tolerance.”

Kyle grinned as she joined them. “You just made their day.”

Angela lit a smoke. “It was a good two hours. The kids have chosen to spend a few minutes alone, practicing. You three are welcome to go in, but please remember to watch only. They know what they’re doing, or I wouldn’t have them doing it yet.”

Angela, exhausted, headed for the tent across from them. She slid inside and stopped. She’d hoped to find Marc or even Zack here, but Adrian was running the workout canvas tonight. She hesitated.

Adrian didn’t look up from his clipboard. “Brace for a pulse, gentlemen.”

Angela needed the refill. Directing the weak, wild teenagers had drained her. She inhaled greedily, openly.

The teams stiffened at the draw.

Adrian blocked the stream, not sending any of his light.

Angela was grateful.

She was also disappointed.

Kyle led Seth and Cynthia into the teen tent, not sure what to expect. It wasn’t four quietly working kids.

“Too hard,” Charlie muttered, wincing. “Don’t get my fingers.”

“Too bright!” Jennifer protested. “Ease off

some.”

Matt put his head on the desk. “Stop thinking about that.”

Becky giggled. “I smell him. Sorry.”

Matt moaned. “That’s disgusting.”

Now Jennifer laughed and Charlie groaned. “No more, please. We give. Right, Matt?”

“Yes,” Matt surrendered. “We’ll take the first shift.”

Jennifer laughed again, making Kyle’s heart clench. It was a beautiful sound.

“Nice job,” Jennifer smiled at her friends.

“I agree,” Becky affirmed. “We make a good team.”

“I think I know what else me and Bec...Rebecca were supposed to understand.” Matt stood up, feeling better than he had in a while. “You guys need us for energy, but for strength too. You couldn’t have kept the doors open without our concentration.”

Their first exercise had been boys vs girls—one trying to open the line, while the other tried to close it.

Kyle and Seth were surprised at the cooperation, but Cynthia was shocked. Matt was laughing, getting along, fitting in. It was amazing. “We owe him.” Cynthia kept her voice low. “He’s a genius.”

Kyle eased Cynthia out of the tent. “Not him, her. This is Angela’s project.”

“She’s the genius this time,” Seth reinforced. “And you’re on her team.”

Cynthia got the point. “I’ll make sure she knows how much we appreciate it.”

Kyle felt Jennifer come to the flap. “Tell her our gratitude will extend to Marc, as well.”

Seth added another layer, watching Becky and Jennifer joke as if they’d been friends for a lot longer. “We’d also like to know some personal things, like her favorite color, scent, and book so we can deliver them with chocolate and wine.”

Cynthia laughed as the two men grinned at her. Each of them had an antisocial teenager to care for, but now, they also had a support group. The kids, and the adults.

“I need to practice. Will you help me?”

Becky’s question to Seth was repeated by the two other eager teens.

Cynthia spoke up. “We could go to my tent and make campfire pizza afterward. I have a few boxes of mix stashed.”

“Yeah!”

“Sure.”

The group moved away together, leaving Charlie standing by himself. Instead of feeling forgotten, he was full of pride and eager nervousness. They’d voted him team leader. His mom had given him one of his secret wishes. Team leader and Tracy went hand-in-hand. He wouldn’t get one without the other.

Charlie looked over his shoulder to see his mom now leaning against the outside of the training tent. Before he could thank her, she directed his attention

to the lone female stepping into the back of the mess supply truck.

Charlie's heart thudded painfully as Adrian entered the truck a few seconds later.

"Stiff competition." Angela joined him, aware that they were feeling the same pain.

Charlie didn't want to sympathize with her on this one, but with his own emotions boiling, it was hard not to.

Angela left the mental doors open, needing him to see that she didn't want to feel like this either. "You fight it, or you give in. I love your dad. There's never been any other choice for me."

"I want her in the same way I feel between you and dad, but I don't understand love." Charlie's tone hardened. "And I'm not sure I want to."

"You're scared of it." Angela turned her back as the truck rocked sharply. "Want and need are always there—sometimes even with people you hate. With love, you'd die to be near them."

Charlie followed her slow retreat. "But you care for him so much! It's like you lo—"

"Stop." Angela couldn't stand to hear it, not from her mouth or his. "Human hearts are not confined by man's laws, Charlie. You can't set a limit on how many people you care for. If fate says to...love someone, you do." Angela held the flap up on her tent. "The only thing that matters is reaction. I have a commitment, willingly made, and I would never break it."

Angela got him settled with a bottle of water and

a bag of apple chips. “You don’t have any limits. The female you’re looking at isn’t claimed or bound to someone. She’s fair game, with no challenge or dishonor.”

Charlie was relieved that his mom knew his secret and wasn’t flipping out. He hadn’t been sure if she would forbid it. “What does she want?”

Angela leaned back in her seat. “Funny you should ask. I picked up some things a few nights back.”

Angela didn’t feel guilty about the weaknesses she was set to reveal. The realization that her son was in love had brought a lot of thoughts out, but the most important was how to help him get what he needed. Today had reminded her of that goal and provided a perfect opportunity to deliver it. “She wants to be needed all the time, not just when a man wants to play with her.”

Another parent might have shut it down already. Angela thought she would have gone that way too, if not for a conversation she’d overheard. “I was on duty outside the showers. My girls haven’t accounted for female Eagles on duty being allowed to get closer. I took advantage.”

“And what you heard helped?”

“It swung me in her favor.” Angela connected them and let him hear the words for himself.

“He put a flower in your tent again.”

Tracy sighed wistfully over the running water.

“That little man needs to grow up faster.”

Leslie understood what that meant and gasped. "No way Angie goes for it! Get it out of your mind now."

"I don't think he plans to tell her," Tracy confided lowly.

"You're encouraging him?" Leslie was surprised. "You better stop it now. He's getting serious."

Tracy's miserable sigh echoed. "I know. He's too young until October."

"Young, hell. He's going to be a leader here, Tracy. He can't have a whore for his mate"

Silence fell for a moment where Angela was forced to consider her bias.

"I'll let him down soon," Tracy confirmed unhappily. "And that's the only reason why. I won't hurt the dream."

Leslie didn't understand. "You have Adrian, among others. Why would you want little Charlie?"

Angela stiffened at the confirmation, breath held as she waited for the answer.

"They don't really need me, not like Charlie. He already craves time with me, and it's never been sexual. When we... If we ever got that close, I might..."

"What?" Leslie pushed. "Fall in love with him?"

"How could anyone not love that sweetheart?" Tracy thought of the trinkets and poems she'd found on her pillow over the last month. They meant nothing compared to the way he looked at her. "It's

more of a satisfaction issue. He'll please me, instead of the other way around. And I don't just mean sex."

Leslie was shocked. "You can't pick Charlie in any way, and then go service Adrian. It would break Charlie's heart."

Tracy stunned them all with her answer.

"Maybe, if I had him, I wouldn't want to do that for these men anymore. I'd want to change."

Angela had finished the shift in deep contemplation. When it was over, she'd found herself looking for the right way to give them both what they wanted.

Angela regarded him tenderly. "You're a good son. I couldn't be prouder of you. If she's what you want, you have my blessing to try."

Charlie was elated to discover he'd been making progress. "Thank you."

"Need her for more than fun, and you'll have a bond that will last forever." As she said it, Angela reluctantly accepted that she shared the same connection with Adrian. And after only months, it was unbreakable.

4

Samantha concentrated, falling into that beautiful place where only she and nature existed. Called the zone or a groove, she sometimes wished she could stay there forever.

The buzzing got louder.

Samantha steeled herself. What she was doing would probably get her stung, but she was curious as to how the shield would react. They could make it go up with enough worry and keep it from going up if one of them was out of the perimeter, but how did it pick those boundaries? Did it recognize the caution tape? That was today's question to be answered.

Samantha had brought two female rookies with her. She'd had them adjust the caution tape to include the tree she was standing under and then made them back up so they wouldn't be hurt. On one of the low branches of the tree, an enormous beehive was alive with violently protected activity.

When she tapped the hive, the mental concern from her and her witnesses should trigger the shield. They'd been instructed to observe, one each, the tape and the perimeter line, to discover where the shield came up.

Am I ready? Samantha was strangely ecstatic to be doing such a stupid thing. "Born that way."

She sent out her senses, searching, reading what nature had to say. It was easy to pick up the unease of the bees as she stood below them. Samantha quickly jumped up and punched the branch, not crazy enough to hit the hive directly.

As she touched the ground, bees exploded from the hive.

Samantha found herself being jerked away and pushed into the creek that she'd planned to jump

into if chased by the bees.

Jeremy dove in after her, grabbing her arm and pulling her body tightly up against his. As the bees flew over, he hit the button on his air horn.

The blast sent the bees away.

Jeremy lumbered to his feet, dragging Samantha up. He pulled them onto the bank, ready to defend them against the things that sometimes came out of the water.

Sam gasped air into her lungs, coughing. She'd hit the water with her mouth open in surprise.

Jeremy waved the rookie females back as they came to the bank. "Keep the camp away. Tell them someone fell in the creek and we fished them out. No danger."

The two women left with slightly envious glances.

Jeremy gave Samantha a rough shake. "Stop being crazy and do it right now!"

Samantha, who thought she'd had things under control until he interfered, surprised them both by laughing.

Jeremy was instantly offended. It broke through the cool reserve he'd been treating her with. He jerked her forward and kissed her.

Samantha had chosen Neil by the lines that he and Adrian had noticed, but the deciding factor had been one they hadn't known to use because they were men. Pleasure was easy for them, but in her life, few men had roused true passion in Samantha. Rick, her shame, and Neil, her light, were two of

only four men she'd ever felt lust for. At this moment, with Jeremy breaking the rules and tasting her as if she was the best dessert he'd ever had (His small groans were enough to tighten her chest and send heat into her stomach.) he became the fifth. She'd sensed it all along, that they were more than a match physically.

Samantha curled her arms around his neck and caught a fiery gasp with her mouth. When she kissed him back, he shuddered against her hip and sealed her decision. *I'm going to have them both. God help us all.*

Jeremy drew back, expression wild. "What do you want from me?!"

Samantha swallowed the pity. In this new world, *she* made the future. "Friendship." She wrapped her arms tighter around him, letting him feel that impossible-to-fight lure of a woman determined to have her way. "And relief."

It was a line he'd recently used, successfully, on a camp groupie, but hadn't followed through.

Samantha waited, letting the temptation of her being in his arms do the heavy work.

Jeremy fought...for seconds, and then he caved. He wanted her too much to refuse whatever she would give. He'd never been so lonely. "How does this work? He and I alternate nights, start fighting again?"

Samantha let her hair brush against his cheek and saw his jaw tighten. "How does it usually work when two Eagles pick the same female friend?"

Jeremy didn't want to answer.

Samantha did it for him. "It's my choice as to who or when. It always has been."

Jeremy was layered in the humiliation of cheap use. *Like the camp females must feel*, he realized with shame that he hadn't known he should be carrying. He would never treat them the same way again. "Has *he* agreed?"

"About as much as you have." Samantha grunted, not moving out of his arms even though she knew the two males were now locked in eye combat over her shoulder. Neil was the senior guard on this area. It was one of the reasons she'd chosen to do the experiment today. She'd felt safer, knowing Neil would be here.

She heard Neil leave them in peace and was flooded with shame and elation in equal measures. She finished the scene as gently as she could. "I'm greedy, Jeremy, and it's so wrong for me to ask this of you. If you can't handle it, I understand, and I'd never hold it—"

Jeremy kissed her again, unable to take the rest of the speech each of the Eagles had given to their chosen relief source at one time or another. It was humiliating. ...and he couldn't wait to be called to serve. Jeremy drew back. "What were you doing?"

Samantha sighed, resting her head on his shoulder instead of letting him put space between them. "Shield range test."

Jeremy chuckled, arms tightening. "It follows our perimeter, meaning the Eagles, not the tape.

Next time, just ask. Adrian and Angela have been running tests on the shield since it appeared.”

Samantha groaned. “I should have known!”

“Yes, you should have,” Jeremy agreed jokingly. “But rookies take time to adjust, to understand.”

“To understand what?”

Jeremy placed a kiss on her head. “That Adrian has it covered. If it could help or hurt these people, he and Angela have considered it.”

Samantha tested his line a bit. “Makes it seem like they’re gods and they don’t need help from the camp or the Eagles.”

“Actually, it means they need us more than if they were powerless.” Jeremy’s tone implied a double meaning. “*You* need us.”

“How do you figure?” Samantha still didn’t move from his strong arms.

“Because it’s never safe. As long as you guys have power, someone will always want it. Without protection, you’d spend all your time just trying to survive and we wouldn’t get these amazing results.”

Samantha hadn’t thought of it that way. She nuzzled Jeremy’s jaw, loving the openness of their embrace. “Thank you.”

Jeremy let her happiness do battle with his unease over the situation and was pleased when she won. He kissed her cheek and then her lips. It was official now. Jeremy had no plans to hold himself back any longer. “You’re welcome, baby.”

Samantha melted. *Now I can fill this gaping*

*wound in my heart and remember how to love
again.*

Part Three

Provocation: *an action or words likely to cause physical retaliation.*

Chapter Twenty-One
Required Blood
5 miles West of Little Rock
June 27th

1

“**S**he fits all of my requirements.” Angela stared back at seven furious, stunned, confused female faces without sympathy.

Her team list had come out an hour ago and they’d all come to express their displeasure. She had indicated they should sit and wait. Now that her new XO had just entered the small tent, Angela stood up. “I chose it based on the things I need— organization, communication, a willingness to follow *my* moral lines, and devotion to whatever job I assign, no matter how hard or ugly.”

Many of the females protested, but Angela ignored them. “To some degree, all of you have those, which is why you made the cut in the first place. To be honored with my right, however, you have to be overflowing with that last one. And frankly, you ladies can’t give me that.”

“What makes you think she can?” Leslie was used to fighting dirty to get what she wanted. “Hell, she might die squeezing out those Mexican puppies!”

Angela spun around.

Thud!

Leslie fell backwards and landed on the canvas floor, holding her bloody nose. "Oww!"

"Three strikes and you're gone. That's one." Angela didn't think any of them would need a demonstration like this again, but if they did, she could handle it now. "The same goes for everyone. If I have to hit you that many times, you're too dumb to be on my team."

She had their attention now, over personal concerns.

The Eagles outside the flap grinned and crowded each other for listening room.

Angela walked to the front of the tent, wiping her bloody hand down her jeans. "Tell them why Cesar's former slaves hate you."

Kyle started to protest. He already knew the answer and could still barely cope with it. He wasn't at all happy. When Jennifer had mentioned joining the Eagles, Kyle hadn't known she and Angela had already settled her place.

Jennifer put a hand on his arm. "I want this."

Beaten before the fight started, Kyle stormed from the tent, scattering the crowd of men outside.

"Tell them," Angela repeated.

Jennifer used the steel she'd found while facing Cesar. "I was the one they came to when they got pregnant. They couldn't do it themselves."

"Do what?" Samantha asked reluctantly, a horrible idea forming. There was no way this girl

had had the strength to do that to others and then still keep her own. No way.

“I made them miscarry,” Jennifer confirmed.

“How?” Cynthia refused to believe she’d lost to a pregnant 14-year-old girl.

“The only way I could.” Jennifer lifted her chin. “Cesar saw the bruises and assumed one of his men was responsible. I gave him names. Then he would slaughter the men. I killed two birds with every baby.”

The tent was full of a thick, revolted tension that Angela fed with her next prompt. “And the ones who attacked you when you first joined Safe Haven?”

Jennifer looked around in defensive anger. “I cut them, the ones who didn’t ever want to have enslaved kids! They came to me, begging, because I managed to keep my hope when they didn’t! And even when I told them I wasn’t doing it to mine, they still came to me.”

Crista tried not to judge and failed. “You could have refused.”

“No, I couldn’t.” Jennifer’s face tightened. “Those women had no power in Cesar’s camp. Their kids would have been unprotected. They were better off never being born.”

“And why do yours deserve to live?” Cynthia now disliked Jennifer, but she still didn’t believe the story.

Jennifer’s voice went up. “I never said those babies deserved it! I said they were better off.”

“Tell them why.” Angela hadn’t coached Jennifer on this moment, but their abilities were off limits. If the teenager made a mistake on that, she would be replaced.

Jennifer had already spent six months walking that line. “I wasn’t hurt by anyone but Cesar and the other slaves. His men thought I was crazy. They said I was the reason he couldn’t be killed. Our children would have been exempt as long as I kept them believing it.”

Now, there was complete confusion.

“How did you do that?”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“You have to be lying. The other slaves have never mentioned that.”

“Yes, they have,” Angela interrupted the angry females. “It’s in their glances every time they walk by her, in their words when they run into her at meals and showers. They’re envious and scared that she’ll tell everyone what they asked her to do.”

“I was a target with the women, but my children would have been left alone—at least until they were older.”

“And by then?” Samantha was sure she knew this time. “You hoped he’d be dead, right?”

Jennifer’s expression stretched into a hatred each of them recognized as lethal.

“I was waiting to feed him the poison until after the birth, so I survived the fight for control. I would have become the woman of whoever won. My place, and that of my kids, was set until I could get

strong enough to find a way out. Or maybe I would have killed them all somehow. That's why the women hate me. I'm smarter. I always play for the future."

Angela leaned back as the other females eyed Jennifer warily, expressions full of dislike, but there was also respect now.

Samantha turned to Angela. "You put a killer on your right!"

Angela was satisfied. That was what she needed them to understand. "Yes, and a pair of hard-asses behind her." Angela glanced at Cynthia's shocked face. "If you guys can take the order."

Angela strode back to Leslie, locking gazes. Her tone was rough. "I've never liked you, but Jeremy thinks you're a hard-ass too, and that it will swing the other *sisters* into Adrian's light."

Finding out that Jeremy had spoken up for her went a long way in soothing the woman's ruffled feathers over her bloody nose. It also created an instant rivalry with Samantha.

"I've started to do it." Leslie gestured. "Samantha knows."

Angela held out a hand. "Good. There will be more female teams to be filled in the future. The leaders of those teams could come from this tent."

Leslie accepted the hand up as the others murmured in surprise.

"You have to make a choice, ladies. You've been rookies long enough to feel the magic. When I tell you that is nothing compared to being on the

inside, take it to heart. If I absolutely had to pick between being an Eagle, and being Marc's woman, I'd arrange for one of the whores to console him."

Angela didn't glance at Tracy. She didn't want to even consider that match. Tracy was one of the few women in Safe Haven who actually stood a chance with Marc.

Now there was complete silence in the tent.

Angela went on with the half-truths, hoping Marc wasn't close enough to hear. She honestly wasn't sure which way she would go. Both meant the world to her. The only thing more important than either of those was her son. "Until Jennifer is ready, Samantha will cover that place. Keep in mind that I won't ever tell you all of my reasons for putting Jennifer there, or for anything else that I do. You have to be able to accept my choices."

Those who knew Angie's secret felt some of their anger fade. If Jennifer was as strong as Angela was, she belonged on the right—where she would be useful.

"Though the camp needs to think it for a while, I did not just pick you for my team." Her words rang through the tent, capturing them. "I've chosen you all to lead your own."

Angela looked at Jennifer as the others muttered in surprise. She was careful with her wording. "Will you serve, even though it will take you away from your family?"

Jennifer was honored. "You know it."

"And the rest of you?" Angela was certain of the

answers. “Anyone want out now?”

Silence.

Angela smirked—a hard, cold expression each of them would get used to seeing right before she had them do something important for the camp. “While I’m in Little Rock, think and be sure. I’ll expect everything from you, and then demand more.”

“Who are you taking in...to watch your six?” Becky hesitated to volunteer, not sure if she had the sand yet.

Angela didn’t pause in her answer or her exit from the tent. “Adrian.”

2

“You can go in tonight with the clearing crew.”

Silence fell over the center table at Adrian’s words.

The clearing crew had been to Little Rock for the last three nights, making a road where one hadn’t existed since the war, but it was far from safe.

Angela kept her tone even. “*We’ll* be ready.”

When Adrian didn’t deny the request, Marc relaxed a bit. The females who had emerged from the tent earlier on Angela’s heels were still wearing determined expressions that usually only Adrian could inspire. She had them in line now.

Kenn glanced up. The sky hung closer, clearly about to dump something on them. “Smells like rain.”

Angela played along. “About time. It’s been...” She glanced over at Adrian. “Months!”

“Not since the rest stop,” Adrian replied. “We’ve had a couple chilly days and a few warm ones, but we’ve mostly hovered in the 60s for the last two months.”

Angela felt his concern. It made her consider the deeper implications. What she came up with scared her. “We’re about to take a drop.”

“Nature’s finally running out of things to throw at us, maybe.” Kenn didn’t want any more struggles for survival that involved the camp.

“She’s only used her energy store.” Adrian corrected the impression that nature had a limited arsenal. “This is the growing season. She’ll rest through the fall. And come winter...”

Nearly everyone began working on it mentally.

Angela leaned toward Marc, smiling.

Marc knew what she was doing and let her. He was no longer above using her manipulations to get what he wanted. *In fact...* Marc flashed a wild leer. “I’ll be up.”

Angela flushed furiously, head dropping to hide her pleasure. *I really do need to thank Adrian for releasing that tiger.*

Adrian studied the small line outside the hair cutting canvas, spotting Lee on duty over the smelly tent. Adrian gave that tired man a hard look. It was obvious that Lee still wanted Candy. Why hadn’t he pulled her in yet?

He’s making it clear where his loyalties are,

Angela sent. *When he thinks she understands that, he will.*

Satisfied, Adrian stood up. “Be ready an hour after mess.”

Angela didn’t waste the time. She pressed a fast kiss to Marc’s cheek and went to their tent to gather her gear. After that, she would pick her girls and they would spend an hour or two working out before the run. Rookie nerves were not to be taken lightly.

Before she made it to the couples’ area, Angela had a surprising pair of footsteps on her heels. She paused outside the flap, studying them.

Jennifer didn’t bother to stand up straighter the way Leslie was doing, but she did make sure to keep eye contact. The chances of her being allowed to go were slim, but she wanted Angela to know she was capable of some duties now.

“Consider it noted. And no. After.”

Jennifer left without the disappointment the others would have felt. Unlike most of them, she knew she wasn’t ready.

Angela studied Leslie and her fat lip for a long moment, still not liking her. “Can you be trusted?”

Leslie frowned. “With which secret?”

Angela snorted. *No denying that.* “All of them.”

Leslie hesitated, thinking her own skin didn’t have the same glow as Angela, but at least she wasn’t showing any gray yet. “I assume that’s part of the job.”

Angela couldn’t bring herself to accept the answer. “Next time, maybe.”

Leslie's shoulders drooped. "I'm not sure what I'm doing wrong with you."

"That makes two of us," Angela admitted. "We'll both work on it."

Leslie nodded, moving away.

Angela ducked into the tent before anyone else could spot her. She required a minute to decide who she *needed* to take. The rescue team was set to go into the city tomorrow, but she wanted the most serious of her team tonight—the ones who were already capable of killing. There was only darkness when she searched. More trouble was coming, and Adrian already knew what it was.

3

"You got all that covered?"

Marc slid the envelope into his coat pocket. "The Eagles will help me through it."

Adrian leaned back, mental shield at full strength. Marc was in no mood for accidentally discovering anything.

"Home by dawn?" Marc queried curtly.

Adrian didn't answer, mentally adjusting. When it came to Angela, the man was sharp.

Marc pushed the chair back and stood. He didn't shout or accuse, or even speak at all. He only glowered in hatred.

Adrian let out a harsh sigh. "I should have known better than to keep you out of the loop."

Marc folded his arms over his chest instead of

lunging. “Tell me.”

“The number of people watching has increased each night. They’re building up numbers in plain sight while we clear the road to the kids. They’re ready to attack. I plan to use the chaos to slip underground and find my son. I need her along for that.”

“Your what?!”

Adrian waited, letting it sink in. Marc was incredibly smart. He’d likely get it all.

Marc dropped heavily back into the chair as the pieces began to fall in place. *So many lies!* And none of that mattered to him now. Marc locked eyes with their leader. “What if you can only save *one* of them?”

Adrian let the lie spill with no guilt. “I’ve already left him for dead. He’ll expect it.” And the truth? He loved them both, though it was something Marc would never be strong enough to hear. Adrian wouldn’t abandon one or the other, but he would trade his life for either. “She’s alone in Kyle’s tent. I have her doing make-work to settle her nerves. She needs to be fed before we go.”

Marc’s pulse leapt eagerly, but his anger didn’t fade.

Adrian dropped his jealous gaze back to the notebook. “She needs as much as you can shove in there. When we get to the kids, she’ll drain herself to ease their misery.”

Marc headed for the flap. That was Angie—give it all away and keep nothing for herself. And, as

usual, that would put her in danger. “You’ll stand watch?” Marc asked, not turning around and throat punching Adrian like that inner voice suggested.

“Yes.” Adrian stood as the flap closed, gut burning. He was hours away from the end of a six-month leadership that couldn’t compare to anything else he’d done in his life. A few hundred minutes from losing it all.

Adrian was fighting panic laced depression. Marc needed to be careful with personal challenges, even ones only made with his eyes. Adrian now understood how Kyle felt about Jennifer. *If I’m damned anyway...*

4

Marc ducked into the next tent, watching Jennifer take a place on guard duty with Kyle. Charlie’s words came to him, but after letting it go so long, Marc wasn’t sure Kyle would welcome a gesture of friendship.

Marc sat down, always a little amazed at the things Angela could do—and this time, he was a touch bitter, as well. If not for her gifts, he might be going with Adrian and coming home to her.

His scent floated to Angela, that deep musk she craved. Her eyes flew open.

“Sorry. Didn’t mean to startle you.”

“You didn’t.” She locked gazes with Adrian over his shoulder as the blond took up a post just inside the noisy flap. Was that jealousy? *His relief*

source must not be that good.

“He sent me to *feed* you.”

Everything flooded in a guilty mess. Angela stiffened, embarrassed. “I’m fine on my own.”

They both heard Adrian’s snort.

Marc rested his arms on the wooden table. “Take what you need and use it to keep a shield around yourself. I know that you can.”

“All right, Marc.” She gave in without more arguing, understanding how hard it was for him to let her go at all. Angela slid her hand into his, ignoring his intake of breath and her own racing pulse. “Close your eyes.”

Marc leered. “Not on your life!”

Angela rolled her own before closing them.

Marc’s fingers wanted to caress her skin, but he kept still as the wind picked up, blowing her dark hair around. The world shifted suddenly, and he was forced to close his eyes as a drowning sensation washed over him.

The force increased. She tightened her grip, drawing harder. Neither of them saw the bright blue sparks around their hands.

Adrian did. His expression was layered in mental agony. He hadn’t thought Marc was like them, but that bonding blue said otherwise. *Damn. What else did I miss about Angela’s boy scout?*

Angela pulled her hand free. It had become a caress on her part. When she opened her eyes, Marc was staring at her with concern.

“It’s enough?”

His energy was coursing through her body like lightning as she grinned. “I’m full up.” She glanced over his shoulder at Adrian, who still stood in the doorway, and back. “Did he ask you to keep an eye on Jennifer?”

“No.”

“He’s worried about her giving birth while Kyle’s gone.”

“I’ll take care of it.”

Marc’s concern for her flared hotly. Angela gave him what he needed. “I’m coming back, Marc. On my own feet this time.”

“You’ve seen it?”

“Yes.” Angela was glad she didn’t have to lie. “Two days, maybe a little longer, and I’ll be home.”

Marc let himself breathe, leaning forward to press his mouth to hers. They’d shared a much more private goodbye this morning in their new tent.

“Miss you already,” he whispered against her lips.

Angela smirked. “You still smell like me.”

Marc groaned in desire, but he knew not to follow it with a crude remark. Having her spread open before him like a buffet had been amazing. And frustrating.

Angela laughed. “Go get our boy, will ya? I want a few minutes with him before I leave.”

“He’ll find you after his shift at the mess. He’s helping Li Sing.”

“Okay.”

Marc waited for Adrian to move out of his way

before getting close. “You’ll look after her?”

Adrian locked down on everything. “If she needs it.”

Marc forced himself to walk away, going to the next tent. *I need a workout.*

“Who goes?” Adrian stayed back from her as she came to the flap. He knew what it was like to be full of energy and have nothing to do but wait for it to be needed.

“None of them. They’re not ready.”

Adrian approved the choice. It was the one he would have made, but he wouldn’t have overruled her. Team leaders had to be given support, even when they made the wrong decision. If she’d chosen to bring them along, he would have let them do a half shift and had them escorted back.

Angela was high on Marc. She hadn’t had so much of his energy since they’d made Charlie and need smoldered. She kept her head down until Adrian was gone and then went to the training tent where Marc had just started to work out. She didn’t say anything. She didn’t need to.

Marc took it in, grinning in surprised happiness. Her face was full of flaming need. “Now?”

“I’ve got half an hour.”

Marc started to grab a towel and follow her to their tent, but she slipped into the small hay room, waving her shadows to stand watch.

For just an instant, Marc lost the mood and gained a flash of Adrian that chilled him. She’d chosen a relief source.

That's you, jackass, the inner man reminded bluntly. *Get in there!*

Marc had also chosen his. He'd eased it into need and desire with a gentle touch, and his reward was almost at hand. In a half hour, they would both be pleased. When she came back from Little Rock, he intended to be satisfied.

The mood flared back, bright enough to burn. Marc dropped his coat in the doorway to let people know it was occupied. "Close those beautiful eyes, baby, and lean against the wall."

Adrian continued on his rounds, pushing back the bitterness. *She* was happy. That was what mattered.

Adrian neared the vet setup, approving of the new animals. With constant additions, the area now resembled a small zoo. Pens and crates sat in carefully thought-out correlation to form a winding circle, with Chris's tent and metal table in the center.

Across the deserted two-lane street and through the moldy, but surviving fields of wheat, the only building in sight was a weather-beaten nursing home. Adrian had sent a team to explore it as soon as they'd arrived. With the care facility sporting that kicked-in door they all now took as a clear sign of the draft, he had expected only a few boxes of supplies. Instead, he now had a new group of refugees. The entire third floor of the brick nursing home had survived, adding 28 more hungry souls

who were instantly bonded to Safe Haven's leader.

They hadn't planned to come out of their barricaded level until all the food was gone. That was how they'd survived the looting after the war. When the Eagles had come through, thinking it was abandoned, the residents had tried to fight for their remaining rations. They'd quickly been persuaded to come along, but not before Kevin had earned a nasty cane mark across his arm and a new respect for the elderly.

"Oh, Marc!"

Angela's passion-laced voice echoed through the trees.

Adrian's stomach tightened, fists clenching. *I almost hope I don't come back. If I survive, a choice has to be made. I can't keep feeling this.*

5

At dusk, the mission team rolled out.

Angela had been thrilled to be cleared for the run, but the sight of where they were going took that feeling away. In fact, there was a complete sense of doom riding the thick air over the Little Rock skyline. The clouds hung in an ugly gray that was the shade of old concrete, perfectly matching the color of the rubble below.

Adrian picked up the mike. "Radio silence, by 9."

Angela automatically switched to channel 18.

Adrian started the engine, slid his sunglasses on,

and got them moving.

As the mission team cleared the trees, Angela studied the destruction with powerful binoculars that Adrian kept behind his seat. She could still hear that awful moan from the recording in her mind.

Their private radio crackled with Kenn's stony voice. "We have movement behind the brown trailer."

Adrian keyed the mike once to show he'd heard but said nothing. He switched on the second CB system and put it on the channel where they'd first heard the kids.

As they neared the crumbled city, the mission team was reminded of how these gory scenes always appeared so unrealistic in films. Except, with the windows down, they could smell the bodies. Most were only skeletons, flesh long gone to predators, but the team could hear the hordes of flies that circled and stopped, circled and stopped. This was no movie set.

The grass was dead too, replaced with thick mud from the water rising through and over the land. It should have drained, but a cluster of ships had been washed upriver by Hurricane Amanda, forming a thick blockade with the wreckage. As a result, the river had been backing up into nearly every city and town along the banks. It probably would only have taken a few hours and a little dynamite to clear it, but no one knew about it and few would have been able to do the job now. The war had changed everything.

“They think they’re ready.” Angela started reading their enemy. “They only expect to take one person from this city. The others they’re hunting are for fun or bait.”

“Who?”

“You.” Angela’s fog lifted and left worry. “Everyone in this dead city is on the watch for Adrian Mitchel. All sightings will be reported. They’ve been well paid.”

“Who gave the order?”

“A Major, but I don’t have a name yet.”

“Garret.” Adrian slapped the wheel. “We’ll end it this time.”

Angela didn’t ask what the sneering man in Adrian’s mind had done, instead concentrating on finding a weakness.

“He doesn’t have many,” Adrian shared reluctantly. “The only one I was able to use was how he’ll sometimes underestimate his prey. He’ll have the bases covered, and he’ll act fast. Don’t hesitate if you get the chance.”

Angela didn’t say anything, but inside, she was eager. *I joined the Eagles for many reasons. One of those is being ordered to kill. At a moment like this, there’s no hiding that fact.*

Adrian delivered a quick, pointed look. “We’re out of camp, Angie. There’s no need for you to hide anything.”

Angela took that freedom to heart.

Three hours later, they had gotten 140 feet into the city and reached the cleared street Adrian had known was there. This had been done after the war. The piles were too orderly to be random, but it wasn't encouraging that there were no other signs of rebuilding. Likely, it had been someone trying to flee, or someone determined to get in and find family.

"Gentlemen, start your engines!" Adrian encouraged them cheerfully, as if announcing the start of a race.

It drew tired snickers from the team who understood they would be crawling along. There were cars in the way, along with buses, parts of buildings, and they could already make out the first place where they would have to get the Cats out to clear. Part of a school was lying across most of the street ahead.

"Something up?" Adrian didn't like how quiet she'd been for the last three hours.

"I can't get just one thought from the blur," Angela complained. "There are more people here than we thought, a lot more."

"Can you get them to come out?"

Her uneasy glance made his stomach shift.

"Even if I could get one, I'm not sure how to convince them they'll be safe."

"Yes, you are," Adrian intoned. "Say it."

Angela scowled deeply at not being allowed to lie. "We have to do it again. We have to eliminate

the evil.”

“Yes.” He waited for her to protest.

She didn’t.

Adrian was proud of her and quickly running out of things to teach her. This would probably be the last time a mission would have only male teams. Within the next month, Adrian expected to have the rest of Angela’s rookies, minus Jennifer, out toiling for the dream. Angela wasn’t a level four yet, but she would still lead them to glory. Of that, Adrian had no doubt. His private lessons with her, combined with the attention she was receiving from Marc and nearly every senior Eagle, would take care of that.

Adrian thought of the special training he’d been doing with her, the leadership lessons she’d soaked up like a sponge. The mental warning that he had to have a successor was one that had driven him to put things in place so soon, and only for her, where he hadn’t for any of the others. She wasn’t as experienced, but she valued life more than his men. He couldn’t duplicate that or train it into his men. He’d created an army of killers to protect his camp. Now, he’d chosen a pure soul to lead them. It was the perfect setup. All that was missing was his death to clear the way for it to happen.

7

By 10 pm, they had made it more than a mile in. Adrian led them through the destruction that was

unlike anywhere else they'd been. Not a single building stood. Most appeared as if the ground had been lifted up to spill them violently off their foundations. Mile after mile of heartbreaking sights littered their view in every direction, every dark intersection they came to. Those were only identifiable by the lack of concrete cinders.

Even with the medical salve under their noses, the stench was awful. The worst of it was around the corner from the grocery store they'd cleared. A truck full of Christmas fruitcakes was rotting. The sickly-sweet mildew gave many Eagles a flash of the carnage at the rest stop.

They also had to drive over cracks, sometimes putting metal plates down to drive across. Adrian didn't hesitate, never asking her or the Eagles which way. He took them straight to the park.

The team stared in surprise at a clear, undamaged city block, at the businesses and homes on either side of the street that still had parking meters and telephone poles. It was dusty, neglected, intact. The convoy crossed into the area with expressions of surprise and longing.

The small city park had green trees around the edges, fading playground equipment, and weather-beaten picnic tables with little, ashy grills. Adrian's mind went to his childhood. He and his mother had spent a lot of time here, long afternoons spent waiting for a fancy black car to pick him up. He keyed his mike. "Team two has perimeter. Team

one, take point.”

Angela missed being with Kyle’s crew, but that wasn’t her job tonight. When Adrian lit a smoke and pulled his hood up before stepping out into the dank, chilly night air, she sent her mind back to the search. She had an idea of how many targets now, and she was getting their hatred clearly, but she didn’t have the location yet. She pushed harder, forcing her mind through the levels of darkness, and was rewarded with a light in the shadowy distance as a door swung open. One of their enemies was dreaming. *That’s my line in.*

She didn’t see Adrian wave men over to guard each door of the truck she was in, but Angela felt it. Adrian was worried about her getting hurt. *He needs to worry about himself this time.*

8

Surrounded by molding trees that blocked the view of Little Rock’s dark skyline, the pristine park gave off an unreliable feeling of seclusion and safety. Adrian’s mind took him to one of the most vivid memories of his mother.

“The car’s coming. Be good now, Adrian.”

“Yes, mother.”

Her arms were long and smooth, hard enough to hurt when she squeezed.

“Ouch, Mommy!”

Her chuckle floated down. “We’ll have to

toughen you up, now that they've let you out."

A long black car pulled up in front of them. The hated driver rushed to open the passenger door. "Mr. Milton sends his regards."

His mother blushed furiously and guided him into the car.

"Mind your manners, now. They don't take just any student into this school."

"Yes, mother." He slid into the cool car, noting the man on the opposite bench and the shining gun he wore.

Adrian politely acknowledged his father's personal guard as his mother leaned down to buckle him in.

"You're only five Adrian, but you're not like other kids. You know that, don't you?"

"Yes, mother." He took it in with that intent, nothing-else-allowed mindset that the scientists had found so fascinating. He absorbed one thing at a time, fully, until his understanding of it was exhausted.

"And do you know why?"

Adrian glanced over at his father's man, noticing the interest in not only the conversation, but also in his mother. "No."

Satisfied, she kissed his cheek. Her silken blonde hair brushed his hand. "Keep it that way. Such information is not for the likes of you."

"Yes, mother."

I've been chasing it ever since, Adrian thought,

coming back from the past in a quick snap. She'd intentionally triggered his need to challenge the destiny that had been set, to discover why he was odd. The classes and forms of training he'd received as a child had created the man, but the mind that drove him had been given by his mother. Once she'd gotten him back from the lab, nothing had come between them. She'd made certain he had everything he needed for this very place in time. Until her murder, they'd been inseparable.

"Will you tell me a bit more?" Angela yawned as she joined him, estimating it had to be around 2am. Even with the extra lights that Kevin's team had brought, it was shadowy. The full moon gave them a baleful glow, covered in layers of an unnatural orange fog that made Angela think of nuclear tests and stories where monsters came out of the mist.

"If you tell me something."

Adrian's answer was spoken lowly enough to make her come closer.

Angela stopped within a foot of him, rubbing her chilly shoulders. "What do you want to know?"

Adrian's hands slid into his pockets. "When she died, I was sent to a school in Arizona. I escaped."

"Escaped?"

Adrian thought of the high towered walls and the guards, and the hundreds of other children like him. "They were gathering us. It was killing me not to know why. If she hadn't triggered that, I would have stayed."

“Because you were with others like yourself?”

“Yes. It hurts to leave them behind.”

Angela waited, hoping she wouldn't have to ask again, that he trusted her enough to share a few more of his own ghosts. He was good at healing others and bad at doing it for himself.

“I was given a clue during a visit from my father. He explained that he was a descendant of powerful old blood, that he and his line were destined to lead.”

“What was it you were being brought together to do?”

“We were trained as weapons to keep his...my bloodline in power. They kept a stock of us.”

“What did they have you do?”

Adrian's response revealed a layer of his personal torment. “Can't you guess? Children make perfect assassins. No one ever suspects the 11-year-old standing out in plain sight, or the 12-year-old in the shade of a brick alleyway. Or the 15-year-old in the hotel kitchen.”

“I thought you escaped!” She was almost brought to tears at the images of the things he'd been forced to do.

“Which time?” Adrian spun into the darkness, clearly done.

He was almost out of view before she remembered their deal. “What was it that you wanted me to tell you?”

Adrian stopped. He needed to know. “Would you trade my Eagles for another child?”

“Yes,” she gasped immediately, thrown back into her nightmare. The death of her baby was something she didn’t think she’d ever fully recover from.

“Marc will give that to you.”

“Yes.”

When she didn’t add more, just stood there staring back with that tempting blush, Adrian couldn’t stop himself. “Are you working on it? That’s a long time for your team to be without a leader.”

Angela was both embarrassed and angry at the personal question. “I haven’t asked for it.”

It was amazing how quickly he felt better knowing that. The noises and shadows were Marc slowly working his way up to the finale. Adrian applauded the brilliant strategy even as he loathed it.

Adrian went to his truck. Once inside the cold interior, he flipped on the CB. Marc knew better than to break radio silence, but Adrian could at least let them know everything was okay. He had no doubt some of the camp would be listening by now, worried and giving the wolfman shit because he wasn’t their true guardian. “This is Eagle. We’re still clearing. Everything is 5-by.”

Adrian adjusted the second set to a less used frequency. It was a shipping channel he’d taught a special boy to use a long time ago. “This is Eagle. We are in the city. Hang on. We’re coming.”

He didn’t hang up the mike, instinctively

knowing there would be a response.

“You have to hurry!”

It was a low whisper.

Adrian keyed the mike, not recognizing the voice. “Be ready. It will happen fast.”

“But you don’t even know where we are!”

“Be ready,” Adrian insisted. “We’re close and we make a lot of noise.”

There was no reply.

He switched the radio off. Other people were likely monitoring the channels. If the hunters got to the kids first, there was no way it would end well.

9

The very thin boy stared at the large group with longing and fury. His dad was finally here.

Conner pulled his ragged clothes closer, ignoring the cold and the nasty muck soaking into his duct taped shoes. His intent stare never left the large group of people.

Even if Conner hadn’t recognized the man from pictures, he could have picked out the leader by the way he cared for his people and by the respect he was given. It was almost a dream for the teenager, seeing that walk and the blue eyes that perfectly matched his own.

Conner swayed lightly on his feet, almost unable to believe Adrian had come. The men with him convinced the boy he wasn’t hallucinating. There was no mistaking that style of protection.

Instead of the relief he could now allow himself to feel, or even anger at how long it had taken, there was only fear in Conner's mind. He was terrified of making the wrong choice and getting his kids killed, but his heart was already yearning to be a protected member of his father's herd instead of leading his own.

10

"Is it working?"

"Yes."

Embry came to glance over his team leader's shoulder, as if he didn't believe him.

Hudson didn't get offended. They were all wired that way. The Major's men liked knowing things for themselves.

They watched the new people on the screen that was static layered but working. It was one of a dozen tracking devices they were using to monitor those living here. There wasn't a lot of technology left that worked, but the Major was great at ferreting out what did.

They'd known where Conner and the kids were since almost the beginning of this run, but the Major didn't need that gifted, marked child for anything but bait. The government reward was for his father.

The younger and dumber of the two bounty hunters stood. "Come on. Let's go."

Hudson sneered at Embry's eagerness. "The Major said not to go without him."

“But now is the perfect time!” Embry whined. “They’re settling down. We’ll catch them off guard.”

Hudson, so named because of his birth near the infamous waterway, offered one more warning. “The Major has a plan, Embry. I’d be careful about stepping on his toes.”

The younger guard scratched at his head. “I want to go in now.”

Like all of the Major’s crew, he and Embry were bald under the black bandanas. Their skin tones were burnt to the same shade from the harsh environment they toiled in. They could have been brothers but for the hatred that existed between them.

Hudson gave him a curt glare. “Go on, then. I’ve wanted Lenore for a while. With you dead, I’m next for her.”

Embry’s expression darkened, mouth opening for a brief second before snapping shut.

Hudson laughed at him, but the sound was deep with loathing in place of amusement. “What you’ll do is report to the Major and see what he wants us to do.”

Embry paled. “Me?”

“Yes, you. You’re the one who wants to move in ahead of schedule. Get lost.”

Embry gave a stiff salute, hoping the Major wouldn’t kill him when he suggested attacking now. Embry turned back suddenly, wary. “You really want my woman?”

Hudson's expression was cold, devoid of empathy. "Yes."

Embry spun toward the hill.

Hudson went back to watching the green dots on the screen. He was already sure the Major wouldn't kill Embry unless he got out of line. They needed all the men they could get for this hit. "We're ready."

As the world fell apart, Hudson and the rest of the Major's team had been sent out to collect Adrian Mitchel. And the Major never went back without his man. They would have this bounty wrapped up in the next few days, maybe even in hours. From there, they were under orders to take the Mitchels to the big bunker.

But instead of going to the last government holdout, Hudson thought Garret would keep the gifted pair for a while. He might hand them over after he'd taken his pound of flesh if they survived. Hudson wasn't sure the standing reward would be enough to keep either of them alive.

Adrian was at the top of the Major's most hated list, and rightly so. When shit went down years ago, Mitchel had struck back twice as hard and taken the Major's wife. He'd returned her, pregnant, six months later. That kind of hatred was impossible to ease with gold, promotions, or even extra food and water rations. It required blood.

Chapter Twenty-Two
Those Late Nights

1

“It’s FND.”

Kevin stared in shock, unable to believe the jealousy spiraling through him. He knew who this choice had come from and he even understood why. The how was choking him.

Sitting at a dim picnic table near the couples’ tents, Cynthia kept her head down. “I was offered a cruel deal. If that matters to you.”

Kevin didn’t think so upon first hearing, but after a few seconds of asking himself what he might have dumped *her* for. “What was it?”

Cynthia looked up with shame and defensive determination. “I get to be her XO for the next three runs. Among other things.”

Kevin blinked. *Yes*. He would have ditched her for that too. It was the equivalent of being handed second place on Kyle’s infamous team. It didn’t stop the want or the frustration, but it did lessen the sting.

“She said...” Cynthia slammed her mouth shut. *What if Angela was wrong?*

Kevin was slowly recovering. He’d only stopped by to confirm their date was still on before

he left to catch up with the clearing crew. “What?”

Cynthia was now sure of a rejection either way, so she didn’t answer. Was all the power really worth hurting him this way? Was it enough to quiet the new loneliness that came with dusk each night?

Kevin studied the reporter, seeing she wasn’t happy, but she planned to follow through. She was an Eagle—a real one now—and he had no right to stand in the way of that. Could he wait until she’d served her duty with Matt? Could he stand watching a romance develop? Kevin wasn’t blind to the changes taking place in Safe Haven. Many of the couples that were forming here were lasting pairs. Their sparks, their compatibility, was too rare to miss. “I’d like to know what she said.”

Cynthia had expected him to tell her off and storm away. It gave her the courage to answer. “She said you’d wait for me.”

Kevin stared at her teary, hopeful eyes, and was pulled into the drama of camp life against his will. If Angela said it, he could trust that, right? “I might.”

Cynthia smiled in surprise. “Really?”

Kevin caught sight of Matt coming from the showers, his second today, and frowned. “I need guidelines, Cynthia. Soon.”

He left without saying anything else.

She watched until he faded into the shadows around the parking area. The rest of the clearing crew was heading out again. She would miss him being around and that said it was going to be hard

to honor her new duty.

Matt dropped heavily onto the seat next to her, sliding close.

Cynthia sighed at the frowns of those who saw. Then she put on her training face and turned to him with a welcoming smile. “You smell good.”

Matt blushed and stared at her in worshipful happiness. He would sleep in Cynthia’s tent tonight, instead of with the livestock.

The teenager’s dreamy gaze went to the vehicles disappearing into the darkness. He dropped his head before anyone could see his other face. On that clear, furious facade was glee that Kevin was leaving and an endless hope that the man wouldn’t return.

2

Late night fell over Arkansas like a cloud, smothering the dim light and replacing it with the unknown. For most of Safe Haven, that wasn’t something to be feared, but for the Eagles, it meant limited visibility and depending on the dogs to do their job. Thanks to the wolf, their three dozen canine workers were constantly roaming the perimeter, becoming more and more aware with each step.

Did these animals understand they would be the first to die? That they were the sacrificial lambs between the light and darkness?

Dog would have said no, that their brains didn’t

equate fear to rebellion.

Dog was biased and he missed the signs. It was understandable. The grass didn't whisper when the wolf came by on rounds, nor did the wind have advice to give, showing no sympathy to his plight. When the wolf came by, there was silence. Since Dog believed the mutts to be inferior, he didn't consider that the quiet meant they were hiding anything.

Until Adrian rolled away from Safe Haven.

Dog padded around the metal cleaners, tired but proud for his human. Marc was in charge of the herd. How far they had—

Join us or die!

Five of the working dogs, without their red collars, padded out of the shadows to surround him. Their eyes glowed with rage, the kind that always drew blood.

It only took the wolf a second to understand the grave error he'd made, but his reaction didn't change. *Traitors! I'll kill you!* Dog lunged for the throat that had given the ultimatum.

“Point man to the showers!”

“Copy.” Marc was already on his way there as fast as he could go without panicking the camp. Dog's yelps were awful.

Guards pointed the way, guns in hand.

Now out of sight of the herd, Marc ran through the trees.

His shadow followed.

Those guarding that area were trying to keep a tight circle around the snarling, rolling mass that had grown to include over half of their working animals.

“Get off him!”

Instead of ignoring or even flinching, their working animals lunged his way.

Marc fired, taking down two of the red-eyed dogs as three more attacked. Marc was sent back to Nebraska, to killing the wolves.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

The Eagles began firing, picking off dogs that slid from the fighting ball and ran at them.

Marc kicked his steel toed boot through the teeth of their biggest working dog and then shot it in the head.

Grrr!

Marc spun but wasn't fast enough to avoid the jaws that clamped down on his wrist.

“Uggg!” Marc brought his other hand up and blew a hole through the dog's throat.

“Betray us!” He slung the gore aside and stormed into the violently churning pack of enraged animals. He pulled the triggers on both Colts. “This is what you get!”

Bang! Bang! Bang!

Marc wasn't taking any prisoners. Two adrenaline-fueled reloads had the dog pile apart, and the few survivors running off with enraged howls.

Dog was curled into a tight, bloody ball that didn't crawl from under the corpses of those he had

managed to kill. The other bodies were spread around the wolf in a beautiful, awful circle of skill.

Marc yanked and kicked them off, digging his way down to Dog. The wolf didn't move.

Marc picked him up. His shadows stayed close, watching for more animals as Marc took his friend toward the vet's tent.

The walk to Chris only took a minute, but Marc couldn't tell if Dog was alive. Blood from both of them dripped steadily down his arm as he walked and the smell of urine was overwhelming. The other dogs had pissed on him during the fight. *What the hell happened?*

Chris jerked as Marc slid into his tent, dropping the dart gun through shaking hands.

"He needs help. Now!"

Chris didn't bother answering. His knobby, hairy legs flew around the boxes.

Marc started to put Dog on the floor.

Chris jerked a hand toward the bed. "I'll get a new one. Make him comfortable if you can."

"I'm not sure if he's—"

"Don't say that!" Chris didn't like the wolf, but he loved animals. "Make yourself useful. Get out." Chris knelt by his bed, frowning deeply. "Don't move, Dog. This will stop the pain, and then I'll sew you up."

There was no response from the bloody wolf, but the vet didn't require one. He was sliding into the zone where words were just a part of the entry ritual.

Marc left, pulled back into protecting the camp. He was starting to get a small idea of why Adrian always seemed so stressed.

Marc joined the guards, aware of camp members streaming from tents. He keyed the mike. “A flock or herd of something going by triggered the dogs into a fight. It’s all over. As you were.”

Marc’s leadership style was different than Adrian’s, but still effective. If he had tried to act like the blond, it wouldn’t have worked. There was only one Adrian, and everyone knew it.

John appeared at his side. “Hold that hand up.”

Marc didn’t argue. He needed both of them for this job.

The Eagles waited for Marc to tell them what to do now that they had a cover story.

“Get rid of the bodies. Make a fire pit, but don’t light it yet. Use some of that dead brush.” Marc grimaced as John stuck a needle into his arm.

He ran through the possible scenarios.

Adrian was quicker, but he had been in charge of the camp for months. Marc’s next words eased any lingering doubt about him being in charge.

“I want balloons and the boric acid we found in Hutchinson.” Marc waved more men to him with his good hand. “Fill the balloons and bring them in crates and buckets to the perimeter. We’ll pop those buckets and crates with shotguns if we have uninvited guests.”

The image of a poison cloud greeting the surviving dogs was enough to make Eagles fall

eagerly into the chore.

“Keep reminding the teams to sweep low and high and have someone check in with the clearing crew. Make sure they’re alert.” Marc handed out the final details with relief.

Samantha came to Marc’s side with damp hair. She’d been in the shower and hadn’t heard anything over the water. She also hadn’t sensed it. Her mind had been full of the thoughts she only allowed free when she needed a quick release. That had been interrupted by Peggy bringing in one of the kids who’d soiled herself. “What can I do?”

Marc thought he had it covered, as much as he could, and forgot to soften his words. “Whatever you were before.”

Stung, Samantha turned for the mess. *Maybe I’ll have that drink now.*

Marc felt the error but didn’t call her back. He would stop by her tent on rounds and explain that he hadn’t meant it the way she’d clearly taken it. Right now, if there was nothing else... Marc ran through it all one more time and then let himself go to Chris.

The vet was standing outside the tent, eyeing the cages around him in concern.

Marc saw the glaze of hatred, the promises of blood in beady eyes, and understood the vet was trying to accept that the animals he loved so much loathed him.

“I sewed him up, but...” The vet stopped, turning away.

Marc ducked into the smelly tent and went to his

friend. Covered in bandages, it was easier to see the wolf's big body rise and fall, confirming that he was alive.

Marc's hand was gentle as he stroked the wolf's fur. But he wouldn't be for long. Death hung thick in the air.

Dog whimpered, trying to nudge his fingers.

Marc's resolve broke. "I need you to wake up! Please!"

Dog stiffened, whimpering again.

Marc dug deeper. "Just this once. Please."

And what will you give?

Marc cringed at the voice he'd locked away before meeting Angie. He had expected it to take longer, to be harder. "Please help him."

What will you give in return? that bitter voice insisted.

"What do you want in return?"

I'd be there when you take her, Marcus, the witch, cold and angry, revealed the price with glee. I'd feel her surrender too!

The wolf's body went slack under his fingers. Marc broke. "Yes."

Blinding blue light filled the tent, shining through the cracks and shooting through the cloth like it wasn't there. A cloud of it settled over the wolf and slowly sank in.

"I'm sorry, Baby-cakes." Marc knew his secret would be discovered because of this.

I can help, the witch stated. I know what she needs, and it is not a boy scout.

Marc had been forced to deny who he really was. Mother had beaten him at first and then insisted that he didn't have the curse at all. To escape the misery, he'd told the witch to go away and it had. Once locked up, it had been easier to believe the lies than to face the truth and keep fighting his mother. That type of lifelong mentality wasn't going to change overnight. "No. Thank you, but go away now."

The witch faded back into his lonely cage.

Marc allowed himself a single ache of regret, then closed it all off behind that thick wall of denial his childhood had been built on. *I'm not like the rest of them. I don't hear voices. I have no power. I'm not cursed with a gift that marks me as a freak and prevents friendships. The vet saved Dog.*

He masked his emotions and threw himself into the next step of cleaning up the fight and handling the camp.

3

Samantha wasn't sure where she should be or what she should be doing. A drink was about the only thing that appealed, other than going back to the shower to finish what she'd started. The current line there discouraged that choice.

The light wind blew Samantha's hair back, revealing her frown to the man at the center mess table. His gaze was drawn to her, as always.

Wanting a few minutes, even if they were spent

arguing or in silence, Neil spoke up when she would have disappeared inside the truck. "I've got a thermos."

Their eyes met with a sharp flare of need that made Samantha suck in air. It also sent enough lust through her body to break the final chain of morality that had been holding her back. Their petty games didn't matter anymore. She wanted him. She was done resisting it.

Samantha sat down, sending out a thick spark. "Come here often?"

Neil blinked, not expecting it. He refused to let his gaze go anywhere but hers.

Samantha snickered. "Sorry. It seemed like the thing to say."

Neil felt his body wake at her inviting demeanor. "It is, if you're trying to pick me up."

"If I were, would it work?"

She got him again. Neil chuckled. "That depends on the expectations. I have to know them up front this time."

Samantha's body hummed with desire. "If I were picking you up, I'd say you could expect a couple hours of fun. And that's it."

Off duty until morning, Neil did a visible check on the settling camp. Marc had it under control... "What about them?"

She shrugged, not caring about that anymore either. "Let them get their own one-night stand."

Neil leaned closer instead of chuckling. "What if one night isn't enough for me?"

“Then, I wouldn’t mention that again, or you’ll scare me off.” Her profile darkened. “Take what I can give. I’m not wired for forever.”

Neil sighed. How could he say no? He’d wanted her since that day at the gun class, and it hadn’t changed. “You’re the boss.”

Samantha ran a finger over the scar on her hand, marveling at how far she’d come from the broken, abused woman who’d been sent here on the heels of a witch. “Good.” The feel of his hot gaze on her body wasn’t nearly enough. “I think we should go to my tent, where we can be alone.”

“They’ll see me come.”

Sam’s breath caught at the image.

“You’ll let me?”

Oh, yeah! She nodded with a red face and rocky chest.

Neil couldn’t stop himself from staring as she stood up, mouth going dry.

“Give me an hour. If the lights are out, I’ve changed my mind.” Samantha left quickly, not waiting for a response. She was sure she had embarrassed herself, but the excited liberation in her stomach was worth it. *I’m truly free now.*

Neil wasn’t sure whether he would go or not. A gentleman wouldn’t, but he wanted her in a way he’d never experienced before...and he wasn’t a gentleman. He was an Eagle in Adrian’s army, and they went after what they needed, even when the odds appeared insurmountable.

“Marc to the center fire!”

“Copy.”

No longer feeling his mauled wrist thanks to the shot John had given him, Marc’s gaze went over the mess where the doctor and Anne were coaching the pregnant females while having a snack of leftover tuna casserole. Jennifer was there too, along with Charlie and Becky.

Angela had told him about the deal Peggy and Hilda made with Kyle. Marc wasn’t surprised. It was politics and it went on everywhere. Jennifer was well protected, either way. On top of Angela’s request for him to keep track of her, Kyle had assigned his own security to the teenager—Billy and Charlie. Charlie was taking his first shift right now.

Marc refused to consider all the implications of that, studying their surroundings instead. The area was brown and dry, despite this being the first official week of summer. *But the damn flies are worse.* Marc waved one off his bandaged arm. If they got any more aggressive, the camp would need to carry swatters on them at all times. Was an insect swarm the next of nature’s blows?

“Screw you!”

Roger Sawyer’s words were brutally loud from across the camp, drawing people from tents and activities.

“You shouldn’t even be here!”

Marc and his shadow, Zack, hurried that way.

“Let it go.” The vet moved in front of Dale. He had come to the mess to forget about the animals for a while, but here they were again—in human form. “He didn’t mean anything.”

“Bullshit! He said I was staring at his ass! I’ve never done that!”

“He asked if you’d been looking,” Chris refuted tiredly. “You’re the one who twisted a joke into something else.”

“Don’t joke with me about anything—ever.” Roger pointed a finger toward Dale. “Don’t even talk to me!”

Chris could feel his temper wanting to take control—he’d had a rough night—but he was also aware of the growing audience. A lynching could happen in this atmosphere. “He won’t, right, Dale?”

“I think he should say what he wants, to whomever he wants,” another voice spoke up, one that swung attention her way because of how quiet she usually was.

Tracy took Dale’s left, tired of the bickering when the bosses weren’t around. “You sure shoot *your* mouth off enough, Roger.”

“We want homosexuals banned from Safe Haven!”

“For what reason?” Tracy was on Angela’s team, suddenly a respected member of the camp, but the angry men didn’t bring that up.

“They’re gay! That’s reason enough,” Tucker defended.

“No, it isn’t. What crime was committed?”

Tucker wouldn’t answer.

Roger gestured. “It’s a sin.”

“It’s wrong,” Anderson added.

Marc snorted from behind them, making the crowd part. “So said our old world, and we all know how morally correct they were.”

“Do you support it all starting up again?” Roger glowered at Marc.

“Unless they commit a crime, they’ll be judged individually, like everyone else in Adrian’s camp.” Marc ignored the protests and support, going to the training area instead of lingering for the action.

Behind him, Zack spoke up. “He told you how it is, now back off.”

“We don’t take orders from you!”

“You’re wrong, Sawyer. You always were. That’s why you’ve never been chosen for the Eagles.” Zack sneered. “We’ve known about you and the others who pick on people, but we’ve been waiting for Adrian to get tired of giving you chances to be human to each other. Now that he is, we won’t tolerate it anymore!”

Marc was aware of a physical fight starting now. The camp needed a release, but this had been coming anyway. The Eagles would handle things tonight and Adrian would reclaim a camp that no longer hated their gay population. There wouldn’t be acceptance yet, not so soon, but the vileness

spewing from Roger's mouth would be the last that anyone here let fly without grave consequences.

"Hey!" Camp radios crackled loudly. "I think we need some sssongs!"

Mitch's slurred declaration had Marc's feet pointing toward the com truck before he was called. Adrian had been right to leave a plan for the drunkard.

Marc waved Kevin over. "Set it up, just like Adrian said, then find Matt before you take over the radio. Mitch probably ordered him off it."

"Been a fun night so far." Kevin grinned. "You're doin' real well."

Marc couldn't help the pride that had him matching Kevin's good cheer as he continued toward the com truck.

Those observing had no idea that under his pleased appearance was a Marine set to hand out a punishment. When they saw Marc greet the drunken radioman with a handshake and a smile a few minutes later, muttering started. Up until now, Marc had been doing well, but as he led Mitch toward a picnic table that was being brought to the center fire, there was unease.

Marc gestured at the table. "Have a seat, there, buddy. Let's tie one on. Whadda ya say?"

Mitch stumbled onto the bench seat. "Soundsss glood to me."

Marc joined him, twisting the top on a cold beer. He sucked down foam as Mitch grabbed the bottle that Li Sing set down, shunning the beer.

Marc gestured. “Bring another one and keep ‘em comin’.”

Li bowed as he backed away, expression alive with curiosity. The small group of witnesses parted to let the cook through. Their quiet alertness told Marc this lesson was also for the other drinkers here. That’s why Adrian had insisted it be done publicly.

Marc waited for Kevin to update the rookie about to take over his post. Kevin was headed to little Rock now, with a few others to join Adrian’s team. “We’re gonna be here a while. Get something flowing, will ya?”

“Calm and slow?”

How about Highway to Hell, Marc thought sarcastically, nodding. Damn, it would be good to hand this back to Adrian. *How does he keep from shooting them all?*

“Are we drinking or w-what?” Mitch was already loaded.

Marc raised his dripping beer and downed it.

6

Neil paused outside Samantha’s brightly lit flap. When she waved him in, then closed the shade, he went, not caring that Jeremy might be one of those witnessing. At this moment, he also didn’t care that tomorrow night it might be him waiting out there, alone in the dark.

“Thank you.”

“For what?” He grunted bitterly. “Coming here to take advantage of you? No problem.”

“I know what I need, Neil. Right now, that’s you.”

Her whisper went through him like fire. When she slid closer and curled her arms around his neck, Neil surrendered. “What...whatever you want.”

Samantha smiled softly. “Hold me?”

Before the war, Neil had slept with less than a dozen women, all quick fumbles in the dark. He’d never held them; he had no need to make sure they enjoyed his touch, but this! Samantha was molten warmth against him. Neil struggled to control his hands when she placed a slow kiss to his jaw. His grip on her waist tightened as she did it again.

“Been a while?”

He nodded jerkily, almost flinching when her mouth neared his.

Samantha shuddered. *Hot! So hot!* Her lips pressed lightly to the corner of his mouth, absorbing his groan. Her need flared again, brighter this time.

“Samantha, I—”

“Don’t.” Samantha inhaled deeply, picking up smoke, sweat, heat. “It’s okay. You can go if you don’t want me enough to—”

Samantha moaned in satisfaction as his mouth descended over hers with a snarl of lust. *Neil!*

As if he’d heard the mental shout, Neil steered them toward her neatly made bed.

His hands roamed freely, tangling in her hair to bring her mouth up for another punishing kiss that

had her pushing against him in desperation.

“Please!” she gasped this time when he allowed her to breathe. “Don’t stop, Neil, or leave now. I couldn’t take it if you—”

“Shhh...” Neil slid his hands down to her waist, fingers lifting her shirt.

Samantha trembled at his hot hands against her bare skin. He unhooked the front of her bra and pushed it aside, dropping low to capture a rocky nipple.

“Oohh!” Samantha arched against his mouth, barely noticing his fingers working the buttons of her pants. His mouth rose to capture hers and she held on when he dipped her to the cot.

Neil paused, unable to help being distracted. “Uh, Sam? Why do you have a handcuff key taped under your breast?”

Samantha groaned in frustration and need. “Not now!”

Neil stored the question. “Okay, later.”

He gently stripped her, rubbing that beautiful body until he thought he’d go crazy with waiting. She twitched against his hands, mewling little moans coming from her mouth that had him shedding his own clothes.

Samantha helped him push off his shirt. Her nails found his shoulders, pulled him closer. “Neil...”

He bent down to kiss her again, using his free hand to remove the last of his clothes. His eyes burnt into her soul as he carefully lowered himself

between her legs.

Neil brushed her soft curls, arms flexing, hips tilting.

She trembled as he slid against her, arching upward.

Neil thrust.

Samantha whimpered, nails digging into his wrists as he shoved into her.

Neil sank deeper, body tensing, tightening at the sensation of her wrapping around him. He shoved harder and slid all the way in.

His taut body strained against hers, a groan of guttural lust rising to spill from his lips. Neil pulled himself away from the edge with determination.

He jerked forward suddenly, hitting a sweet spot, and she arched against him in response.

“Neil!”

He rubbed them together instead of thrusting, using his thickness to secure her pleasure the way his police pals had jokingly told him could be done. It slid him against her clit and sent her into a spasm of pleasure that tensed her whole body.

Her orgasm was unlike anything Neil had ever felt. It was his pleasure too, and he memorized her expressions as he rocked against her.

Samantha shuddered violently. *So good!*

Neil slid back, breathing roughly. She was slick and pulsing between them, no faking there. He thrust into her without any of his previous hesitation.

“Yeah...uuh!” Neil growled in stunned delight

when she arched up to meet his violent move. He stiffened above her, too far gone to stop this time.

When he would have pulled out to finish, Samantha held him close. "I need that too, Neil."

He stifled a shout against her shoulder, hips jerking forward as he exploded.

7

"Allan's gonna take my place." Marc stood. "Gotta do rounds."

Mitch looked up in bleary happiness. "G'on then."

Marc stood up without any signs that he'd just crushed three beers. But he could feel it. Drinking hard and quick wasn't something he liked to do, but beer was usually okay. Demons came out when he drank, but beer didn't usually do that to him.

Marc continued his rounds, seeing the fight at the mess was over. The brawlers were now sitting sullenly outside the medical tent to wait their turn. John and Anne would be busy for a while.

So will I, he thought, noticing more than a few inviting stares, including the current one from Tracy. They saw his thick body, remembered Angela's smiles, and wanted him. Marc loved the feeling and hated it at the same time. It made him uncomfortable and lonely. It also sent his ego to new levels and made him grateful they'd come to Safe Haven. Even during his time in the Marines, he'd never been as useful, as wanted, as he was here.

His mind went where he'd vowed not to let it go. Marc wondered if Angela missed him as much as he missed her. He pushed it aside. Right now, he had to smooth Samantha's ruffled feathers and make sure things were okay on the weather front. After that, he would check on Mitch. They were walking yet another fine line with this setup—they always were with Adrian's methods—but if it worked, Mitch would have the chance to become a different man.

As Marc reached the female side of the tents, he noticed a lone Eagle standing stiffly in the shadows. Jeremy looked as though he'd been gut-punched.

Marc followed his line of sight to the very tent he'd been on his way to, realizing there were shadows moving on the canvas wall.

Entwined on a cot, one shadow had a hand between her spread legs and long hair spilling over her shoulders. The other wore an all-too-familiar hat as he rocked against her.

Looks like Neil's smoothing those feathers. Marc hurried to intercept Jeremy when the Eagle moved toward the tent. "Damn, I wish Adrian was back."

Chapter Twenty-Three

Deeper and Deeper

1

“**T**here’s no damage here, ya know? Just can’t get over that.” Doug pushed away his half-eaten bowl. Even the dogs were fed better. “Why wouldn’t this be destroyed, too?”

The sky above them was roiling with pale gray through dingy black, but clouds were there as well. It appeared they were going to get wet, but none of them could bring themselves to dread the mud and mess involved. They needed the rain too much.

Doug’s was a general question, but everyone looked to Angela for the answer, even the new arrivals who had just joined them for this run.

Catching Adrian’s subtle nod, she gave them the truth. “Fate spared it because no innocent blood has ever been spilled here. It was left alone after the war because people think it’s haunted.”

Some of them chuckled.

Adrian lifted a brow. “Is it?”

The amusement vanished at his question.

“Not any more than the rest of our world now.” Angela continued to roam through the mental fog...and found something.

Adrian instantly responded to her concern,

keying his radio. “Full alert.” He looked at Angela. “What is it?”

“It’s okay. Marc’s calling.” She didn’t hide the satisfaction. “They had some trouble, but he’s covering... Damn it!”

When Angela drew her gun, so did everyone else who saw her.

She swiveled to a view of their back trail. Those stunning blue eyes blazed into crimson as she brought the witch forward.

Adrian and the rest of them gaped at the enormous number of small shadows streaming their way.

Behind the rodents, running over the mounds of debris, were bounty hunters.

Kenn’s mind added it up the quickest. “Too many! Into the vehicles!”

Their team fled toward the vehicles that lined the cleared street. Angela, no longer restrained by twitchy camp members, immediately brought a shield up around them—including their UPVs.

Adrian turned to stare at her in shock. She hadn’t just been laying low about how recovered she was. Those basic gifts she had lived with all her life were now fully under her control. She’d mastered a new level without telling anyone. *On her own!*

Outside the small shield, the animals didn’t leave. The Mother said humans were too alert for another direct attack in Safe Haven, but this small group was vulnerable despite the power in it. The

attempts on Safe Haven had shown nature how best to attack.

“They’re everywhere!”

Many of the rodents had made it through the shield as she brought it up.

Angela slung her foot and then stomped on the rat trying to chew through her boot, then another as she added her weight to keep the manhole cover on. Around her, the others were doing the same or shooting at the legions of sewer rats scurrying from storm drains.

“Get in the trucks!”

“No!” Adrian overruled Kenn. “Too many cracks and holes. We have to get off the ground.”

Hiss...

Gas exploded inside their circle, thick white fumes that sent the rodents inside the shield fleeing back into the sewer.

Adrian motioned the Eagles to cover their mouths and noses as best they could.

Some of the rats fled from the fumes, stopping along the way to shudder in violent spasms.

Hiss...

Another canister came. The amount of gas inside the shield became smothering. Coughs and gasps for air made Angela bring it down.

Hiss... Bamm!

The release of gas as the shield vanished was like a small bomb, spreading out in a circle of lung-injuring confusion that slammed into the waiting predators.

Not expecting it, the rest of nature's army fled, coughing in agony. A lot were killed outright from the amount of chemical shoved into open, lunging mouths, giving the team a carcass perimeter.

The sound of coughing and spitting echoed loudly as the team recovered, tears streaming too heavily to see who had saved them.

Adrian was also hacking and crying, but he knew who to thank. He could feel the anger and energy being directed at him and recognized it. "Conner."

The boy didn't come any closer to the armed group. The mask he'd worn left him unfazed by the gas. He removed it now and secured it to his belt. "You still have company."

Shadows raced over the hills of debris, shifting garbage in their rush. Dressed in long, tan coats and goggles, the bounty hunters carried military kits and well-tended rifles.

The Eagles got into a defensive V as Adrian took point.

"Get them!" This voice was cold and hard, ordering the hunters down into the debris piles.

More shadows ran their way.

"Fire the nets!" Adrian did the same as he ordered.

Safe Haven's defenders had learned the bat lesson well. Their aim had also improved through practice. The two dozen attackers weren't expecting cargo nets that trapped them and prevented shooting. The bullets that followed were lethal, but

there wasn't time to kill them all.

Major Garret led his men. "Move in!"

A second wave of bounty hunters ran by the entrapped men in the ropes. These hunters didn't wear hats, but black bandanas that instantly reminded the Eagles of Rick. It made the bounty hunters into walking targets that the team looked forward to shooting as soon as they'd rescued the kids.

"This way!" Conner gestured as he ran.

Adrian followed. Underground was where they needed to go, where Conner would have his charges stashed. "Eagles with me!"

Slat! Ding!

Five Eagles dropped into the hole that Conner knelt by. Angela vanished into it behind them.

"Switch!"

The cold order gave the team a brief second's respite as the bounty men changed from darts to bullets.

Kenn shoved Adrian into the hole and then followed him. The last two men were Daryl and Doug. Both of them were wounded, but Conner already had the group moving through the dank darkness.

Adrian tried to keep track of everyone. "Count off!"

"Two!" Angela was trying to wrap Doug's arm as they ran through the murky sewer. He and Daryl both had a trim.

The check in didn't take long to complete.

“Twenty-five!”

Adrian flipped on his light. He did a quick visual check of his crew, then took the place behind Conner’s pumping heels.

Behind them, there was no sound of pursuit yet. Conner hit the light on his belt. The double illumination allowed the team to view the filth and muck they were running through. Snakeskins, molding vines climbing dark, dripping walls and thick mushrooms greeted them. Then the smell hit; a few of the team gagged.

“Are we far enough?” Kenn’s finger was on the button.

“Leave it, let them gather.”

“But we’ll miss—”

“Leave it!”

Adrian’s annoyance earned Kenn frowns from those closest. Kenn had done a lot of training, but on runs like this, he was a rookie. Kenn was valuable in the office, but he was the tripping-over-himself Platoon commander that every team leader both scorned and used to their advantage. He hadn’t been that way before the war, but his time in Safe Haven, and Adrian’s choice to keep him off an official team, had changed everything for Kenn.

Angela tied a strap around Daryl’s leg next—it would have been funny if they weren’t in such danger—and moved back to Adrian’s left, where he wanted her.

“Gets low here!” Conner called from ahead, sounding like he was having a good time. There was

no mistaking the cheer in that tone.

The adults ducked suddenly as the walls and floor sloped upward, but the ceiling didn't rise with them. *A drainage route*, Adrian thought.

Running through a dank sewer while hunched over allowed for only a limited view squinted against the splashes of so many feet. It kept them from seeing what they were about to hit.

"Hold your breath for 10 seconds!" Conner ordered. "Don't stop!"

Adrian heard Angela's dismayed groan and quickly reached out to take an iron grip on her wrist.

Close by and aware of her fears, Kenn did the same. The two men took her into the stagnant water and then under it.

2

Angela didn't struggle, but she didn't try to help them either. She was totally disoriented, with no idea which way to propel herself. She spent the time fighting her fear of death by listening.

Big ripple. Daryl was now in the water with them.

Smaller ripple. Lee's wiry body.

An enormous splash. Doug, in the rear. It told her they'd all made it in.

Adrian yanked Angela above the surface and pulled her aside so Kenn could come up through the narrow opening. He slung her arm over his shoulders as she gasped in air and hefted her onto

the concrete. He let go, then did the same for himself as quickly as he could. Only one person could come through at a time.

Adrian knelt at the hole, jerking men through. Twenty-five had gone in. The same had to come out.

Lee's thin frame bobbed to the surface and was grabbed, hauled up.

"One more!" Lee gasped for more air, face an alarming shade of red.

"Where's Doug?" Adrian saw the water start to settle and responded accordingly. He dove back through the narrow opening.

"No!" Kenn shouted. "Get him back!"

Angela grabbed Kenn before he could jump in. "He's okay."

Adrian's head broke the surface.

Doug followed a few seconds later.

Adrian sucked in a quick breath and then dove back under to push.

Doug coughed heavily, clinging to the side. Eagle hands gripped him anywhere they could get a solid hold.

Adrian heaved from the bottom with Doug's ass centered on his shoulder.

The big man shot out of the water and flopped onto the concrete.

Adrian joined him. "We're not...going back...that way."

Eagles chuckled.

Conner left them alone for a moment, but he never stopped watching the water. He wasn't

concerned about the dark tunnel behind him that they had to traverse next, but even standing water was dangerous. His group hadn't been underground for an hour before learning that brutal lesson.

Eagles dried off, but they didn't change clothes. Angela followed their lead, despite the way some of their eyes were going over her wet shirt and pants, and then darting away. They couldn't view much through the front. The vest prevented it, but the sides of her clothes clung to damp swells that even in the dark, marked her different than the rest of Adrian's army.

Conner frowned at them. "We should go."

The scold in his tone was clear.

Angela was surprised when the Eagles responded. Apologetic looks were given and men took steps back.

Adrian swallowed his pride as he motioned to the tunnel. "You're the guide."

Conner took up a double-time run into the darkness.

"Shit!" Adrian darted after him, catching Angela's wrist to be certain she was next.

Kenn again provided the security sandwich, leaving the others to catch up.

3

"This way."

Conner stopped suddenly, bending down to pull on a moldy piece of wood. A gaping black hole

appeared.

The teenager disappeared into it without a word.
The Eagles frowned.

Adrian shined his light as Kyle and Kenn descended the 10 feet to find Conner standing to the left of the ladder. They were at an intersection where dark, dripping tunnels branched out in four directions.

Conner waited until they were all down and ready, staring at Angela instead of the father he'd begun to doubt would come for him.

Always take the farthest tunnel to the left, Angela delivered Conner's message silently as he got them moving again. Those to the right are mostly flooded.

Angela stopped searching the floor and began looking down the other tunnels they were passing. The bones down here could fill two cemeteries.

“How many people are here? Are there a lot of you?”

“That depends on what you mean.” Conner answered Kenn's question as he wound them through stacks of supplies in crates and buckets.

Each of these had a large red X that the team assumed meant they were spoiled.

“There are 31 kids and at least twice that number of adults in our sector, but we're not part of their group. We don't help each other.”

Adrian was busy noting things. The boy hadn't been corrupted despite being abandoned. In fact, he was stronger. That protective tone was impossible

to miss. “You’ll take me to talk with them?”

“Yes.” Conner was still unable to deny that timbre anything.

There was heavy bitterness in the one word.

The teenager wore jeans and a long sleeve black shirt under a dark hoodie layered in months of crud. It was like looking at Adrian from a long time ago. Conner was roughly a third of his dad’s weight and about even on Angela’s height. Pale, filthy skin covered hard muscles, and a hood hid the hair they all knew would be like rippling wheat when clean. Angela’s mind went to the child’s words on the tape.

“The grownups left us.”

How could they do that? Would Adrian still let them into Safe Haven?

No, I won’t, but I can’t leave them as hunted animals either.

Understanding and agreeing, Angela walked between Adrian and Conner so she could play mediator if it was needed.

And because he makes you feel safe, the witch stated.

Angela didn’t deny it. Adrian was the light.

“I have to make a stop,” Conner informed them.

Adrian slowed when Conner did.

Behind him, grunts and groans of relief echoed. They’d kept the fast pace for the better part of an hour now.

Conner scanned them. “You guys should be quiet.”

Angela stayed at Adrian's side as Conner tapped three times on a huge stone door. Set into the wall, Angela was sure she would have missed it.

"Who iss it?" a female voice called.

"Conner, for trading."

The door began to roll open.

The mission team stared in surprise at the underground market. Shelves, tables, crates, and boxes were what they picked out first. Then the clerks running this bonanza caught and held their attention.

The women wore some sort of shiny decoration—their boots and long gloves were covered in them. The small sequins caught the light of homemade candles anchored to the damp walls and cast eerie forms along the tables. The shiny decorations were in their hair and covering the packs worn on their backs. A few of them even had the decorations sewn over their gray trousers and shirts, giving a sensual, frightening impression of dangerously glinting women.

Angela classified them that way for many reasons, not the least of which was the blowguns and rows of needle darts on their belts. These females knew how to survive, clearly, but the way they had adapted was amazing.

Conner eased into the room.

The adults followed slowly, staring. There was an assortment of fresh fruits and vegetables, and even producing plants for sale, but the gallon jugs of clear water drew Angela. Apparently, Conner

needed the same because he went straight for them.

As the team came closer, they realized the shiny decorations were scales. Respect went up. The team hadn't seen the sewer snakes yet, but the size of the skins and the number of scales the women were using implied the reptiles were large and numerous.

The clerk behind the low table stepped closer to her stock as she got a look at the hard asses lingering by the slowly closing door.

Conner waved. "Three gallons."

The clerk's eyes swung back to Conner.

Angela wasn't able to place exactly what it was about these merchants that she didn't like. They wore the same mismatched clothes covered in dirt; they even had the same abused auras, but there was something else.

"Let'sss see your cash."

Angela gaped. The clerk sounded like a snake!

Conner pulled a gun from his jacket pocket and slid it onto the plank. "Five bullets left. Use 'em in good health."

The clerk made the gun vanish before Angela could blink.

"Deal. Anything elsesss or change?"

Conner pointed toward a basket of dried apple slices. "Use the rest on those."

"No meatsss?"

Conner shook his head. "I don't like snake meat. I trap coons and badgers, a rabbit or two when luck's with me."

The clerk nodded. "As do most since the

mutations began showing up in reptiles.” Cara grimaced miserably. “Until we broke free of the prisson, rodents and the like were all we had.”

Angela sensed the lie but didn’t remark on it.

Conner reached out, putting a hand on the woman’s arm. “Thank you for the trade.”

She smiled hotly at him, burning with a feverish light she knew he could see, if not sense. “You won’t reconsider my previous offer?”

Conner blushed. “No.”

Cara took a step back, making his arm fall. “Then stop touching me or the choice will no longer be yours to make!”

Eagles stepped closer at the threat, but Conner only laughed. “Pretend for them, but don’t bullshit me, Cara. You’re Garret’s girl. You won’t sacrifice that position.”

Cara glared in defeat. “No, but it doesn’t stop the want.” She tried to get herself under control. “What about your friendsss? Are they buying?”

Conner raised a brow.

Adrian opened his hand, revealing a number of small gold and silver ingots. “Whatever you need.”

Conner sneered, but didn’t refuse the generosity. “They only want me, not supplies, so load them up. My *father’s* buying.”

The room went still, and then cold. The snake clerks glared. This man had left the gifted boy to rot here.

Adrian faced them without anger, but also without guilt. *The only one I have to answer to is my*

son.

4

“The Major’s coming.”

About to reach his favorite romance scene, Hudson marked his place in the book. It was one of three intact paperbacks he owned. He liked to make the other bounty men feel bad by reminding them that he could read. The Major didn’t want a crew that acted smart or thought for themselves. Hudson was the only one allowed to keep reading materials. The fact that Hudson had his books booby-trapped, and he was lethal with his knife, had probably helped that choice.

“Say it again.”

Despite the fact that he couldn’t see much of Embry’s face through the bandana he wore, Hudson disliked it immensely. If not for those sharp brown eyes that were so good at recognizing risky opportunities, Embry would have been placed lower in Garret’s crew. Then, Lenore would already be in Hudson’s cot at night. Those wide hips and thick legs would be perfect for passing the long nights of waiting for Mitchel to show.

“Major Garret is coming to talk to you.”

Hudson was instantly uneasy. *He must think the new people are a real threat.* Most groups that had come through Little Rock stayed low and quiet, but this newest one was the opposite. They had to know they were being followed, but they showed few

signs of worry. They might be a harder caliber. Hudson was glad the Major was on top of things.

“He’s here,” Embry whispered in awed admiration.

Hudson gestured rudely. “Get lost, Em, while the men talk.”

Embry spun, sputtering in protest.

Major Garret supported his XO. “Get lost.”

Embry flushed at the order and vanished into the lines of snickering, elbowing bounty hunters that made up Garret’s personal guard.

The Major signaled for the lines of men behind him to keep going. He approached his top explosives operator. “Get up to the dam. Set a surprise for dawn.”

“We floodin’ this shit-hole?” Hudson had wanted to do that when they arrived.

Garret confirmed it. “Yes. We’ve been here for months. It’s time to finish up and go.”

“But our men—” Hudson started to protest.

“Have served faithfully. Give them my honorable discharge. It’s time to roll.”

Garret hated Hudson’s way of rubbing his fat, crooked nose when he was deep in thought. The Major switched his attention to something more pleasant—the blood on Hudson’s army boots.

Hudson finally understood. The Major never left before he got his man, not once in the 20 years they’d been together. “That’s Mitchel down there! We’re in the homestretch.”

Garret was pleased, but also uneasy at the

intelligence. “And that’s why you have my right, Hud. Now, do as I say and do it right, like usual.”

Hudson swelled at the praise. He left in a fast trot. *Life is good.*

The line of hunters taking up perimeter places around the Major didn’t react to the order. Garret was as apt to kill as to sleep, but they were wired the same. Sympathy and empathy were things the Major’s chosen guards didn’t have.

5

It took a little while for the clerks to fill the order. Conner kept pointing to things and the clerks kept loading the team up. Only Kenn and Kyle weren’t given a pack, at Adrian’s orders. Those lethal hands needed to be free for protection.

Conner saw the clerk approach Adrian. Cara was glowering despite the nice chunk of profit she and her girls would get from this transaction.

“If you leave him here this time, he will die.” The scales on her wrist glinted in bright warning.

Shorter than the rest, it was still clear that Cara was in charge. Her scales were brighter, almost golden, and her braids were woven around the top of her head in a coil. Her painted face (heavy blue around both eyes and black lipstick) glared out to mark her different from her girls. Her markings said *Pay attention, I’m the leader here.*

Adrian took the heavy bag without complaint or answer. He had no intentions of leaving the boy

again.

Annoyed at the silence and worried for Conner, Cara lowered her voice. “The hunters are coming for him!”

She spun away before Adrian could ask when.

Kenn got a whiff of Cara as she moved away and couldn’t stop the vague interest. *Nice ass. Too bad.*

Adrian picked out things the others missed. The females had baskets of dried and drying meat in the corners, telling Adrian they’d been allowed to operate down here for a while. He wondered what they’d used for bartering with Major Garret. They also had weapons, which meant the kids might too. Adrian narrowed in on the carpet-layered walls and wondered how many exits were hidden behind them.

He stared at the clerks next, picking up their resentment, but also concern for his son. Conner had his own army here. *Does he know it?*

“They won’t fight. Not unless I agree to Cara’s deal.” Conner refused to look at his father as they waited for the stone door to open. “She wants a marriage. She’ll merge the kids into their group. Without telling the Major, of course.” Conner led them into the darkness without any change of tone. “I’ve considered it, but they kill all males, so I had to tell her no.”

“How long until we get where we’re going?” Kenn disliked the snake-like women now. There was no helping the anger, but it didn’t stop his eyes

from traveling their exotic bodies.

“I’ll handle that.” Adrian subtly flashed Kenn their hand code. “You give our newest friends a surprise.”

Kenn eagerly pulled the black box from his pocket. He powered it on.

Beep!

Kenn held up a hand. “Five...four...”

He curled a finger down with each number he counted. They all braced when his hand was a fist.

Silence.

“They found it, maybe.” Kyle listened again. *Or Kenn counted too fast.*

Booomm!

The explosion echoed for miles in the apocalyptic stillness, rattling the ground.

Kenn laughed. “Boo-ya!”

The concussion hit the tunnels an instant later.

“Come on!” Conner took up that fast pace again.

The team followed, hoping the dust would be the only thing to fall as the sewer walls groaned around them.

6

“What are those?” Kevin asked when Conner’s pace allowed breathing. “They smell funny.”

The floors were clear of debris and the dead as Conner led them deeper, but it had gained a few inches of murky, reeking water that none of them wanted against their skin. The boy had slowed down

when he was sure the tunnel wasn't coming down, but none of the team were relaxed as they followed a teenager through the nasty gloom.

"Those are Kudzu vines. The city used to spray to keep them from taking over. They grow super-fast anyway, but with all the water and no service crews to cut them, they've taken over most of these tunnels." Conner pointed as he jogged.

The thick plants were twined throughout the sewer tunnel, running along the walls and ceiling like webs.

"Not just underground though, and not only here." Adrian forced his body to obey, finally getting winded despite the slower pace. "A lot of cities were fighting Kudzu before the war."

"It's mutating?" Angela peered closer as they came to another intersection. This one was choked with the twining vines. "Don't they usually need sun?"

"I think they have a new energy source." Conner stepped high over the vines in a goofy way that made the Eagles snicker. He had no idea how funny it looked.

"We've found bones down here that aren't people. It could be from the snakes, I guess, but I haven't seen one in about three months. I believe the vines are carnivorous," Conner stated matter-of-factly. "I won't let the kids touch them."

Adrian and Angela exchanged a horrified glance.

Eagles immediately began to take those higher,

funny steps over the vines.

“Are there rats down here?” Angela was being flashed to her trip under Max and Lenore’s den.

“Yes.” Conner walked faster. “Also, spiders—big ones.”

“Are they mutated?”

“Some, but most are on the eastern side, where the water built up and went stagnant. Those tunnels would require a canoe. The water is halfway to the ceiling.”

“What keeps these tunnels from flooding?” Kyle already hated being underground. *Is this what the mountain will be like?*

“They slope upward, toward the dam.” Adrian adjusted so he was walking next to Conner.

His answer implied he knew this city. When Adrian began asking questions, the rest of his group stayed quiet, searching the damp darkness for trouble as they stored more details about their infamous leader—none of it was good.

“Has anyone been up to the dam?”

Conner unconsciously adjusted his stride to match. “The adults talked about it at first, but I don’t think anyone actually went to check. I’m sure it’s leaking. The place we swam through filled up after the war.”

“How many ways in to where your kids are?”

Stoking Conner’s ego, Adrian listened with a trained ear to the son he was overjoyed to have found, and an instinctive ear to Angela as she searched.

“A lot. These sewers run all under the city.”

“Is there a cleared way out?”

Conner turned confidently at the intersection. “Not that we know of. If there had been even a rumor of a way out, the adults would have forced us to test it. At least then we would have had a purpose to them, a reason to be fed.”

Adrian employed a facade of indifference instead of fury, carrying enough parental rage to easily obliterate this destroyed city with fire. “What about the enemy? Do they come down here?”

“Not much, but when they do, it’s in big numbers. They say they’re a new world militia, but we call them bounty hunters. Or assholes.”

Adrian could feel Angela wanting to smile and didn’t interrupt her lighter mood. He knew how deadly bounty men could be. He would carry that heavy knowledge.

“Is there something I should know?” Angela asked sharply.

Adrian’s lips curled as he shook his head. Apparently, concrete didn’t put a damper on her gifts. “Where are they based?”

“They took over Mansion Hill.” Conner gave the information he knew his dad needed. “Garret stays there, unless there’s a problem that his crew can’t handle.”

“Does anyone fight them?”

Conner’s face darkened. “Most of our parents fought and lost. There was a rumor the Junction Bridge had held after the quake, but it was a trap.

The parents pushed us into the sewers when the bounty hunters came, hoping at least a few of us would survive.”

Adrian’s throat stopped working, realizing where the boy’s mother likely was. He had been hoping she’d survived, too. He hadn’t been in love with Shannon, but he had cared enough about her happiness to give her the son she’d longed for.

“So, the adults down here now are not the parents?” Kyle clarified.

“No. The bastards down here came after the war, when the Major started clearing out survivors.” Conner’s shoulders stiffened in anger. “They pushed us in deeper, after taking what little we had.”

“What injuries do your people have?” Adrian’s manipulative words were chosen to reinforce Conner’s leadership so the boy would get the others to come willingly.

“If I tell you that, you might not take them.”

There was no answer to Conner’s hopeful tone.

The group behind them exchanged concerned glances in the gloom.

Conner spun toward Adrian, stopping their convoy. “Say you’ll take them all! Even the three we think will die. Say it!”

“We’ll take them all,” Adrian repeated tonelessly.

“You’re probably lying, but I don’t have another option.” Conner’s shoulders sagged. “What do you need me to do?”

“Ensure cooperation. Are they willing?”

“They are. I’m not.” Conner hadn’t expected his father to have his own mind reader. *I have to be careful.* “They made me come out and save you from that trap. They can’t wait to flee this underground hell.”

“*You* don’t want to go?” Angela was surprised. “We offer safety.”

“There is no safe place and no safe people.” Conner swiped a wide cobweb and adeptly deposited the sticky mess onto a damp wall. “Most of the kids voted for me because I’m the oldest. They don’t know who you are. We’re keeping it that way.” Conner propelled himself into the darkness with angry steps. “If you had taken her a month later, someone else would have been picked and I would be dead.”

Silence came as the team began to understand what that meant. Not all of them had realized who Conner was until now.

“How much farther?” Kenn tried a distraction. He didn’t like Adrian’s pain.

“Twenty minutes,” Conner tossed back.

“Wait. We’ve been underground for an hour?”

The males snickered.

Angela frowned at herself as she pulled damp clothes away from irritated skin. *I still have a long way to go to be a real soldier.*

Not the goal. Adrian was keeping a sharp ear on her thoughts for things her inexperienced mind might miss.

“When we get there, I’ll have to leave you alone

for a few minutes, but I won't be far." Conner slowed.

"You'll meet and tell them what you think?"

"No." Conner finally looked over at his father, feeling old. "I'll tell them you've promised to take them all, no matter how sick or flawed."

Adrian understood if he went back on that, Conner would convince his kids to run from them.

"This is it."

They came to a dead-end and helped Conner shove a large chunk of the wall to one side, exposing a narrow passage.

"This was an escape route some convicts dug from the prison. Now, it's our backdoor."

As they went through, the Eagles verified the crumbling bricks had indeed been gouged in millions of desperately taken swipes that appeared to have been made with forks, knives, sticks, and fingernails.

The passage was damp, making the floor a slick trail of thick concrete-like mud that filled in their footprints almost as soon as they lifted their feet.

Most of the letters on the door they came to were faded or gone, but there were enough left to warn them they'd better have their identification ready.

"When the guards found the bodies of the men who'd been snake bit before they could dig through, they convinced the city council it would make a good stop on a Halloween tour."

Conner pushed the door open to reveal a small,

dingy holding cell that hadn't been touched by a scrub or a prisoner in years. The toilet was red with rust, the bunk rotted through, and here, the floor was covered with a thicker layer of reeking sludge.

Conner swiped at the spider webs over the hall door before opening it, and they were all impressed as they realized the boy had brought them in a different way than he'd come out.

Another lesson he remembered. Adrian was grateful to fate. Thank you for letting him live!

"Wait here until I call. They're jumpy." The rusty door closed behind the boy, taking away some of their light.

Adrian and the team took up positions around the room.

Angela stayed close to the boss, frowning deeply. *Something doesn't feel right.*

7

"You can come in now," Conner called from the other side of the door.

Angela frowned, wishing she knew the boy better. As soon as he'd left her sight, her line into his mind had closed.

Adrian went first, using his hands to tell Kenn and Kevin to stay out here and alert.

Kenn was instantly uneasy at Adrian being out of sight. He watched the team go through the door, straining to pick up any bits of conversation from the room.

Beside him, Kevin did the same. Both men thought it odd to hear nothing from a room full of kids.

“Good job, son,” a deep voice praised Conner triumphantly. “He had no idea you were lying the entire time. Excellent.”

Thud!

“Rookie lesson R!”

Adrian’s roar meant trouble. The two Eagles waiting outside followed their training. They spun into the darkness to avoid capture.

Chapter Twenty-Four
A Major Pain

1

“**S**hoot him.”

Conner hesitated to complete his betrayal.

Garret growled, pointing. “Finish it!”

Conner’s thin shoulders slumped. He’d taken a risk, but there hadn’t been a better choice. It was up to his dad now. He fired the dart and hit Adrian in the neck.

Garret laughed in delight. He hadn’t been sure Conner would do it. Garret gestured to his guard. “Now, dart the son.”

Conner turned to run.

The dart caught him in the back and took him to the ground almost instantly.

“And now, a bit of fun for me!”

Thud! Thud! Thud!

Thud! Whap!

Garret paused long enough to throw an order now that Adrian’s team had seen him being beaten. “Dart them all.”

The drugs forced Adrian to endure the beating as his men fell around them.

Thud! “That’s enough, for now.” Garret panted, slinging blood onto the walls. “I want to save the

rest for later.”

Adrian sagged, sliding to his knees as the bounty hunters let go of his arms.

Around him, all but Kyle and Angela were down. Only Kyle holding her back was delaying their turn. Around them, three dozen bounty hunters dressed in long coats and hatred watched them alertly.

“Nice to see you again, Mitchel.”

The bitter man standing before Adrian was the same one Angela had seen in his mind, but with years of cruelty layered on. The green eyes and brown spiky hair were still sexy, and the body was incredibly defined under the dusty coat, but the demeanor was schizophrenic and unstable. Angela hated him on sight. Unlike Cesar’s vendetta, which could almost be understood, these were Americans. She was once again sickened by her fellow man.

Before the war, Angela had been one of the few who had believed things would be so ugly. Her time with Kenn had shown her the hard side of human nature, but she’d still never expected the aftermath to be this bad. She had hoped for groups of traveling aid convoys back in the beginning, but there was only this setup, time after time. Evil reared its head; she and Adrian destroyed it. That would be their life’s work.

“And what do we have here?” Garret cheerfully turned his attention to the remaining Eagles. “A female. Not smart, Mitchel.”

“If you don’t let me go, I’ll hurt you.” Angela

was furious.

Kyle gave her a rough nudge, keeping her behind his body. “Be careful! Rape is the least of your worries with someone like that.”

Angela closed her eyes as tears of rage welled. *I’m going to kill them all, Kyle, but I’ll need energy after the first wave.*

On your mark, Kyle approved.

Angela began to draw her power together for a spell.

Kyle jerked, distracted by the powerful sensation.

Flames spun onto her wrist. Angela drew back...

Garret sighed. “Shoot her.”

No panic in it, the icy voice told her where to aim. Angela threw just as a bounty hunter fired.

Flames exploded over the area where the Major had been standing, hitting two of his personal guards. Garret had sensed it coming and stepped aside, but he hadn’t warned his men.

Kyle spun around, but the man firing had counted on that. He knelt as he hit the trigger.

The dart plunged into her thigh.

Angela gasped as the drugs hit her like the blast of the fire she’d sent.

Kyle scrambled to catch her, flashed to the rest stop. Except this time, there was no blood and no smell of burning flesh.

Angela’s mouth opened, panicking.

Kyle held her closer. “I’ve got ya, rookie.”

She managed to smile, and then her lashes

fluttered closed and her face smoothed into a beautiful void.

Garret caught all of it. “Can you carry her?”

Kyle gently positioned Angela along one thick arm and shoulder, freeing his other hand. It went to rest on an empty case. His Glock was riding in the Major’s extra holster.

Garret laughed. “He trains them so well!” The Major stepped in front of Adrian, not caring about the loose ends that had fled. They would be blind down here, trained or not, and help wouldn’t come from any source, including those they’d already had contact with. The snake women had bartered Conner for their own escape from these tunnels and then taken it.

“You want him hit again, with the knockouts?”

Garret shook his head at Hudson’s query. “Adrian and I have catching up to do. We’ll have a talk now, while he’s unable to lie.”

Adrian was still alert enough to understand what drug he’d been given. Garret couldn’t find out about Safe Haven. Adrian forced the moment. “Shannon tasted like the best pudding I ever ate. Did she swallow with you—”

Thud! Thud! Thud!

Hudson watched the beating with uneasy eyes. When their drugged prisoner dropped, and Garret still kept swinging, Hudson reluctantly interfered. “Hey!”

Garret spun around, swinging and slinging blood.

None of his men were hit. They knew how to get his attention without the bruises now.

Hudson waved a hand. “No reward if you kill him. And no revenge later if you have it all now.”

The Major slowly froze. His face hardened into a mix of hatred and confused anger.

His men waited patiently. This was just Garret getting that dangerous rage back under control.

Hudson didn’t move, not even to scratch or switch feet. The Major was unstable. Everyone knew it, but if you were careful, there wasn’t a more rewarding place than on his crew. He had 100 semi-loyal men fighting for every run he handed out.

“Gather up the ones we want and take them to the cells. Leave the rest.” The Major slowly began to regain life. “Do it now.”

2

Kyle followed on the heels of the men supporting Adrian’s mostly limp body, mind racing as he subtly searched the dank tunnels they passed. If Kenn and Kevin followed the lesson, there was a chance for the unconscious Eagles behind them to be rescued. Kyle’s duty was to the leaders that had been captured by the enemy with just a few shots from a powerful dart gun and one giant betrayal by a teenager.

Kyle stiffened as Garret moved back to place a crushing hand on his free shoulder.

“You’re his killer. I can smell it on you.”

Kyle knew better than to ignore him. Crazy people didn't like that. "I do what I'm told."

"So did we." Garret's hand dropped. "Until he started seducing our wives and giving us his sons to raise."

The man fell back to talk with someone else.

Kyle didn't let the words bother him. He already knew Adrian had a weakness when it came to women. He also knew Angela would be the last. Kyle shifted her limp body to his other shoulder. *Adrian has great taste.*

Angela's shot had missed the Major but nailed the two men standing behind him. They were hissing and groaning lowly as they did triage from kits around their waists. After three months at Adrian's side, she was already dangerous. Kyle hoped to see her at lethal. He was determined that she would have the chance, and the boss would be there to see it.

Kyle studied the enemy, picking out details, as Garret was no doubt still doing with him. The hunters carried extra ammunition in wide straps across their shoulders instead of hips, and their holsters rode high. It was designed for fighting while moving through these sewers, Kyle realized. It kept the most important tools above the water. These men were fighters and survivors, but they weren't like Safe Haven's defenders. Garret's crew took what they wanted and left destruction in their wake. Adrian's army did just the opposite.

Unlike the tunnels they'd come in through, the

Major's route went through his bunker of supplies. Near to where Conner had taken them, it told Kyle the kids hadn't been down here in a long time. The man leading these hunters wouldn't have left any food, water, ammo, or buckets of other goods to be stolen.

The underground bunker that had obviously once been a utility room and bomb shelter was stacked floor-to-ceiling around the walls, leaving narrow paths for the passing men to traverse. With a burden over his shoulder, Kyle did the best he could not to disturb the stash, but he marked where it was. If possible, they'd be back for it when this was over.

Thunk!

As they moved out of the bunker, Kyle caught sight of the shelter door, and recognized recent modification marks. That heavy steel barrier would probably lock upon closing and trigger an alarm topside. *Clever.*

Thump!

Two mean laughs hit Kyle's ears. He shifted to be ready. "How much farther?"

"Why?" Garret sneered scornfully. "Tired already? I thought you were his killer."

Kyle grinned back as if they were having high tea. "Oh, I am. If they mishandle his son one more time, you're gonna have proof of it. Sooner than you've planned for, I'd guess."

Garret glanced at the two suddenly nervous men and the bloody boy, then back to Kyle. "You

understand he lied, right? Betrayed you all?"

Kyle didn't answer because it didn't matter.

Garret frowned. "Carry them both."

Kyle immediately turned around to do that.

Surprised by the boldness, the two bounty hunters carefully loaded Conner's body over his other shoulder and didn't meet the mobster's eye.

Kyle began breathing in and out in steady breaths and resumed matching the pace of the marching convoy.

Garret laughed. "Once we wash Adrian's stink off you, there might be a job offer." The Major stopped laughing. All friendliness vanished from his tone. "Or a set of slugs, just to be sure you can't follow. That choice will be yours to make."

Kyle didn't respond to the prompt. When Adrian woke, there would be hell to pay, and the Major would pay the bill. If Garret knew Adrian, then he already had that information.

Garret came back up the long line.

Kyle eyed the shotgun on his back, and then the full belt of knives, clubs, guns. "Jumpy?"

Garret nodded without offense. "Yes, and you know why, don't you?"

Kyle kept quiet. Of course, he knew. Garret was scared of dying at Adrian's hand.

You should be, Kyle thought, breathing deeper. But it's the witch over my left shoulder that you won't see coming. Angela will kill you for this.

“Come on!” Kevin waved. “We’ll lose them!”

“That’s not everyone.” Kenn didn’t say the others probably weren’t alive. The fact that they hadn’t heard any gunshots was good.

Adrian’s bloody form had angered them, as had Angela’s unconscious body, but the careless handling of Conner by those in the rear was enraging to Kenn and Kevin. They tossed him over shoulders, bumped his arms and legs into the walls, and snickered. They clearly hated the boy. It filled Eagles with determination to see that they paid for it. Kenn and Kevin didn’t understand Conner had betrayed them, but it wouldn’t have mattered to them either. He was Adrian’s son. Like Kyle, that made him valuable in their hearts.

Kenn and Kevin eased back into the area, glad to find their men alive, but confused as to why they were. Whatever the team had been hit with was strong. None of the men responded to wakeup attempts.

Kenn was sure Adrian didn’t have long to live. The man in charge here had already beaten him and left his men for the predators. The fate planned for Adrian couldn’t be any better.

“If you leave them here, the vines will come. They’re quite bloodthirsty.”

Both men spun around, guns coming out.

Cara didn’t move, but her snakelike demeanor was enough to startle them both, even after they recognized her under the new fighter’s clothes.

Cara stuck her tongue out and sniffed. “Smells like good meat in here.”

Kenn blinked in confusion. *Sniffed?*

Cara closed her mouth, still yearning for what she couldn't have. She saw Kenn's eyes on the golden scales in her hair. “We are waterproof this way.”

“We could use some help.”

Cara snorted at Kenn's request, pupils reddening. “You need a miracle.”

Kevin followed his instincts. He had a good idea why she'd come prepared for battle. “So does Conner.”

Cara stiffened, paling in near panic. “Can you save him?”

Kenn silently thanked fate. “Yes.”

“You'll owe me. I will be saving many lives.”

Kenn wasn't about to argue that point. “Name your price.”

Cara looked at the bodies and then back to Kenn. This time, greed and lust warred for room. “We'll take them to the park and cover them with netting. After that, we're leaving this city.”

“The Major probably thinks you're already gone.” Kenn wasn't immune to the way she was admiring his body. “Since you're the one who betrayed Conner and his kids, right?”

“Yesss, well, the Major is on a need-to-know basis with us now.”

Kenn chuckled. “Fair enough.”

Cara's face lit up with raw hunger. “Again!”

Kenn didn't have time for the games. "Now or after...Cara, was it?"

She shuddered at the sound of her name on his lips and forced herself to breathe. "Now. If you die during, I'm already paid."

"How do I know you'll keep your word?"

Cara whistled.

The sound of footsteps came. Women in shiny snakeskins began to fill the room.

Cara indicated the fallen Eagles. "Take them to the park and hide. They are valuable cargo, not for eating."

The women muttered and grunted, but dutifully began picking up burdens and taking them out.

Kenn and Kevin both frowned.

Cara saw their worry and shook her head. "We are not starving because we'll eat what others won't. It just means they can't sell them to the other residents for food."

Kenn wasn't amused. "And when your food source runs out? What will the snake women eat then?"

Cara stared back with a dark, unblinking gaze that was almost hypnotic. "Each other, of course."

Kenn's stomach flipped. He forced it back to watch their men be taken out.

The trousers and gray shirts covered strong, lean arms that didn't strain under the weight of the men they were carrying. Kenn wondered if the snake meat might be doing more than causing physical mutations. Was it giving them strength as it merged

with their DNA? Even their hair was thicker, longer, than on Safe Haven's women. Thigh-length brown and black braids swung on most of the females. Kenn made a note to talk to Adrian about it when this was all over.

Cara took a step closer, ignoring Kevin and her busy girls. "Satisfied?"

Kenn sent his mind to the last time he'd stolen a moment with Tonya. They'd been interrupted. "No, I'm not." He lowered his voice, trying to emulate Adrian's magic and get himself in the mood. "But you will be."

Cara smiled, keeping her tongue in her mouth.

Kenn saw the woman she had been before. Not much compared to Tonya, the snake leader still held an appeal with her sinewy body and determination to get what she wanted.

She motioned toward a smaller, narrow doorway that led into a closet of some kind.

"Go with them." Kenn waved at Kevin. "If she doesn't burn me up, she'll drop me off."

Kevin moved away from them in relieved revulsion. He didn't think he could have made that choice. She'd actually sniffed, with her tongue. *Yuck!*

Kenn waited until they were alone, forcing his mind and body to work together. This wouldn't be hard compared to some of the things he'd done before the war.

Hell, Kenn thought, watching her drop the dusty coat to reveal soft curves and flawless skin. *I might*

even like it. He was always up for something new and exotic.

“Are you for rent, as well?”

Kevin flinched back out of reach, shaking his head at the tall woman with snake tattoos along her exposed legs. “He’s not for rent like some item you could lease from a store! He’s paying a debt.”

The woman smiled knowingly, showing beautiful teeth and a long tongue. “He’s bartering our servicesss. I’d like to have yours.”

Before Kevin could say no, the woman held out a small pouch. “Be sure.”

Kevin stared at her. “Why don’t you guys have men? Not all of them were taken in the draft, right?”

Nuna jerked at the alert observation, but she didn’t lie. “They involuntarily joined the Major’s army. And never came back.” The woman’s demeanor grew cold. “Now, we allow no males to live among us.” She went toward the front of their walking convoy. “Think about my offer.”

That type of confidence said they needed whatever she had given him. Kevin tried hard not to peer into the pouch. He didn’t want to have to pay for it.

He caved quickly.

Kevin gently pulled the object out, mind flying along a hundred paths. It was a key. The one to wherever the Major would put their other team members?

Nuna glanced back, eyes glittering. “It opens the back door of Garret’s compound.”

“Holy hell!” Kevin blew out an unhappy breath, looking down at his groin. “Get ready, dude. We’ve just been called up for special duty.”

Ahead of him, the tall woman laughed.

4

“Adrian?” Angela leaned closer, willing him to wake. She’d already healed his wounds, unmindful of the audience of cameras and guards, but he still wasn’t responding. “Adrian!”

Sharper, it didn’t pull him up from the drug and fist-induced sleep. She did what she knew would work. *I need you!*

The call rang through the cell and then the compound, drawing attention and the urge to come running.

But from Adrian, there was only silence.

The intercom crackled. “He won’t wake for another hour. Stop disturbing the others.”

Angela started to ask what others, then realized she knew. “I need to pee.”

Laughter rolled over the radio. “So go on.”

Angela flipped a finger toward the voice box.

More amusement greeted her. Under it, was hatred and fear. Their guards didn’t like this duty. Why?

Angela worked on it as she studied the cell for weaknesses and tried not to think of the team that had been left behind. Garret had darted Kyle upon arrival. Now that Adrian was in custody, the rest of

them were expendable. Angela was sure Garret had considered killing them right then, but it would torture Adrian to see it happen.

Angela turned to find Kyle awake, watching her in concern. She'd let him sleep and tended Adrian when she came to. Conner, she hadn't seen. "I was trying to wake him."

Kyle pushed up against the wall. He had been darted as soon as he put the bodies down. He peered around groggily. The cell held four bunks, with both tops empty as Angela paced the damp stone floor.

I'm not sure if they have our thoughts covered. I'm going to send another call and find out.

Kyle trusted her judgment. He'd seen the pleasure on Garret's face as Adrian dropped to his knees. Kyle had recognized the ability to cause chaos. Like Adrian, the Major was a leader, but his casually wrinkled trench coat and long fingernails exposed a crucial difference. Adrian led by example, while Garret controlled his men with fear. That meant he was flawed and beatable, despite the odds.

"You can only do it one more time, and then Major Garret will have you darted again," the voice on the intercom warned. "Use it wisely."

Angela snapped her mouth shut and resumed pacing. The cell had been a basement room at one time. The welds on the bars looked too solid to waste time on. Two bunk beds made a holding area for four people, one that had only a heavy cage door that appeared to be electronic. She would have to

blow it open when the fighting started.

Kyle assumed Angela was busy building a wall so they would be able to communicate and kept quiet.

Angela paced faster, mentally pushing.

Bang!

Angela and Kyle both jumped at the nearby gunshot.

The intercom crackled. “I killed him for trying to help you. I’ll do the same to the next one.”

Angela pushed aside the guilt. “Line ‘em up, baby. I hate you and they mean nothing to me.”

Another chuckle rolled over the intercom, but now, it was laced with respect. “The Major wants you watched.”

Angela shrugged, sending out another mental wave of obedience. “Don’t really like the Major either, Harold, is it? What if you and I blow this place, together?”

Now there was a low growl, and a tense chuckle. “He said you’d be dangerous, but I think he’s underestimating. The next shift is female. Good luck.”

Angela sighed in resignation and resumed her furious pacing. She hated being caged. *You’re up, stripper. Win us a friend or two for the fight.*

Kyle burst out laughing. He couldn’t help it. They were in an ugly situation, and she wanted him to strip for their guards. It was better than priceless. It was one for the Eagle table. “Should I hum or something?”

“Maybe.”

Kyle stopped laughing slowly, thinking he hadn't felt this good in a long time. It was a bit worrisome. *Shouldn't I be upset?*

“It's from being so close to all of us for so long. Things rub off.” She gave him a quick hand gesture. *I can't get another reader killed. Will you carry it for me?*

“Yes.”

I'm going to connect us, show you what I did. And then step... Angela stiffened, moaning. “Damn it!”

Kyle already knew. “They brought Conner in, right?”

Angela no longer bothered to talk silently. “Kill them, boy! Leave us!”

No chuckle came over the radio this time, but light scorn hid the relief. “He knows his place. Conner's been extremely useful.”

“Deals made to save those kids are not his guilt to carry! You hear me, Conner? There are no rules in war!” Angela slung herself onto the bunk and hid her satisfaction when Conner's startled mental presence began asking her what he should do. He'd expected hatred because he had aided the enemy, and the enemy had counted on that to keep them apart. She'd flipped it around on them and given him absolution. There wasn't anything he wouldn't do for her now.

“I’ll do that again, for information.”

Cara, who’d gotten what she came for and was only glad it was over, snorted. “Your questions are paid.”

Kenn grunted in relief. It would be a long time before he didn’t shudder at the sound of a snake. Instead of moans or groans, or even screams, she’d hissed as she climaxed.

“What do you know about the Major?”

Cara leaned against the damp wall lovingly, stealing the sensation to take with her as their people fled into the arid wastelands of the west. “Everything. He likes my noises.”

Kenn flushed at the bluntness. “I’m sorry if I offended—”

“Sssave it!” Cara glowered. “I needed the seed, not the man.”

“Why?”

Her face slowly lost the anger. “Our people are mutating too quickly. We need babies who are half breeds, or we will die out.”

Kenn took that in with a grimace, but he didn’t protest. He’d suspected it. He just hadn’t wanted to deal with it himself. He didn’t like kids, so it wasn’t a terribly hard choice, but if he thought about it too much...

Cara sensed he might decide against letting her leave here alive if he dwelled on it. She shoved them into another direction. “Garret was Adrian’s best friend.”

Kenn gaped. And then began placing pieces. *That's how the Major was able to capture Adrian so easily.* He knew him, knew his ways. "They served together, right?" Kenn's sense of doom grew.

"For years. Until Adrian met Shannon."

Kenn waited for more, watching Cara slide back and forth along the rock as if she wanted to crawl up it.

"She didn't have power, but she was a pure soul, which is rarer. The Major drugged her. Her parents forced a marriage."

"She and Adrian were dating?"

"No. Adrian and Garret were her security detail. The Major said Adrian was obeying the rules and waiting for the job to be finished."

"But Garret didn't."

"No. After it came out, Adrian split their team up and disappeared. For three years." Cara's voice lowered. "When he came back, he kidnapped Shannon, seduced her, and sent her back six months later—pregnant."

Kenn fit another set of pieces into place. "That's step daddy. Conner's been working with the enemy the whole time."

Cara exhibited the first sympathy Kenn had seen from her.

"Yes. Conner loves those damn kids. He'd betray his father to save them."

That sent Kenn's mind into another possible outcome he didn't want to face. "We gotta go."

Cara pointed the way toward the park.

“Kevin! Let’s go!” Kenn had heard the rookie laboring not long after finishing his own revolting chore.

“Comin’!” Kevin replied, wincing.

Kenn barked out nauseated amusement and stepped up his pace. “Do all of your women feel the way you do about having babies?”

“Yes. We’ve been allowing the soldiers access to us in exchange for safety, but only a few of them can have children, due to the wars they’ve been mired in.” Cara glanced over. “You’d ask for our help in exchange?”

Kenn wasn’t sure the others would go for it. “Can you wake them up when we get there?”

“Yes. We have herbs and such.”

Kenn caught the tone. “You have an antidote, you mean.”

Cara was pleased. “If our child has your intelligence, I will mold her into a leader.”

Kenn didn’t say anything, torn with pride and an unfamiliar ache deep in his gut. *I don’t care. I don’t want kids...right?*

6

“Damn, I enjoyed that! I always hated those kids.”

Garret frowned at Hudson and his new defensive wounds. The kids had obviously tried to fight back.

“Emotional bonds make the perfect collateral.

Don't ever forget that.”

“I never fought with them. Never touched one of Conner's kids until today,” Hudson stated, happiness fading a bit.

Garret turned from the reminder. No, Hudson knew better than to disobey orders. “You're my one true man.”

Hudson stood up straighter, feeling orders about to flow. He loved these moments.

“The snake clerks had a lot to say about their meeting.” Garret couldn't wait for Adrian to wake up and see what waited. “Adrian's men weren't afraid to talk in front of the snakes and compare living situations. I want his Safe Haven.”

Hudson felt the thrill of battle looming and welcomed it. Maybe Mitchel's camp guards would be a challenge. He certainly hadn't been. “I'll set it up with the squad.”

“Two-side attack formation, five teams per. Use the automatics, but remember to have them check for those on our list *first*. Then, kill everything he loves.”

“What about the loose ends?” They'd observed movements on the tracker and assumed Adrian's men were more immune to the drugs than most of their prey.

Garret sank down into the comfy army chair that went everywhere he did. “What's the best way to get an ant colony out of your yard?”

Hudson, whose father had been an exterminator, smiled. “Water, over and over. It drowns the larvae

and ruins the walls. They collapse. If you keep doing it, the pests move.”

“And we already have that coming, don’t we?”

“Yes.” Hudson’s grin widened. “We do.”

“Good. Dismissed.”

Hudson slipped from the luxurious control room in time to see Embry and Lenore gliding down the dark hallway in oblivious joy. His unease over the orders to kill their men was instantly pushed aside. They didn’t know the dam would blow at dawn, and what was left of this city would be washed away or submerged. It would be him, the Major’s personal squad, and the captives.

Which means all bets are off. Hudson looked at his watch. *I can take a 20-minute break.*

Hudson followed the happy couple toward the garden, seeing Embry’s dirty hand tangle in that pale hair and tug Lenore closer. As soon as they were in the green grass, Embry took her to the dusty ground.

They made love fast, with a passion that had their observer hard and determined to be next.

As Embry stiffened, groaning in pleasure, Hudson stepped from the shadows. “I’m up!”

“What the hell are—”

Hudson put his gun to Embry’s head and pulled the trigger.

“No!” Lenore screamed.

Embry fell heavily, blood running.

“Guess that makes me next in line for you.”

Hudson dropped to one knee.

“Help!”

“Lenore, Lenore!” Hudson chanted over the screaming, jerking his belt loose. “Let me in, Lenore.”

Lenore felt her mind blur into a gray area where only fear and hatred existed. It had been this way since the war. Only hoping to survive long enough to kill him, the captive woman held in her tears of grief and rage and opened her legs.

“Very good!”

As he fell on her, Lenore’s bloody hands began searching Embry’s body for his gun.

7

“Message, sir.”

Garret moved away from the window where he liked to spend his waiting hours. The sight of the decay that surrounded them never failed to inspire. Unlike his men, he loved it here. The deeply overcast skies were perfectly suited to his moods.

“Let’s hear it.”

“We are under evacuation. Radiation levels are critical in the east. The reserve bunker has been activated. Take Mitchel Jr and Angela to Utah. Mitchel Sr. is to be terminated.”

“Tell them I’m happy to comply, as always.” The Major switched his attention to the modified cells on the screen. Adrian had just woken.

Garret waved to the sullen teenager in the chair next to him. “Go say goodbye.”

Conner shot from the chair, almost running.

Garret grabbed his arm. He jerked the boy to a halt and gave him a hard shake. “Don’t forget our deal, *son*.”

Conner twisted free, expression ugly. “And don’t you forget it, either, *dad*. If those kids get hurt, you’re the first one I’ll kill!”

Conner stomped from the room.

The Major grinned cruelly. This was going to be fun. *I get to break the father and the son, at the same time. Moments like this only come around once in a lifetime.*

Garret and his guards followed Conner to the basement cells they’d built. The control room was in the basement, separated by storage areas that were full. He wasn’t one to leave behind supplies.

The wide room held a bank of computer screens and heavy-duty cords that brought in the power and allowed these men to control the complex. Positioned directly under the main home, it would be hard to take over unless the hunters didn’t suspect anything, but his men always did. He’d trained them that way. *Just like Adrian trained me.*

Chapter Twenty-Five
The Right Bait

1

“**O**ur time’s up.” Angela tensed as the basement door swung open.

Adrian sensed it too. Garret had come for his finale scene, but Adrian only had eyes for the son under Garret’s control. *I came back for you both. She sent me away.*

Conner didn’t doubt it. *She was scared of him. She always was.*

She needed me.

Conner shrugged. *He left and we thought we were free to come find you. He was always watching us.*

Adrian stood up, going to the bars. He spoke openly. “I’m sorry for everything you’ve gone through.”

Conner didn’t have any rage left. Adrian wasn’t his enemy. “I know.”

“I’m also sorry for everything you still have to face.” Adrian tried to prepare him for the ugliness lurking in Garret’s scornful expression.

The Major delivered his sword tip. “You should be sorry, since it’s your fault the kids are dead. Hudson handled them upon our return.”

Conner screamed, realizing the betrayal.

Garret swung, punching him in the mouth.
“Dart him.”

Conner dropped to his knees.

The closest guard shot Conner in the arm.

The teenager groaned, slumping to the floor.

Garret pointed at Angela. “Come out.”

The cell door buzzed open.

Angela’s laugh was brittle. “So you can hurt me in front of Adrian for your victory? Yeah, that’ll happen.” She slid off the bunk and backed up against the wall as Kyle and Adrian stepped shoulder-to-shoulder in front of her. “Come in and get me, Major.”

Garret pointed his gun at Conner. “If you don’t come out, I’ll kill him.”

“Your orders say he has to be alive. Nice tr—”

Bang!

“No!”

Conner’s leg began pouring blood.

Angela screamed again, in rage this time.
“You’ll die for that!”

“Dart her!” a young voice insisted over the intercom. “She still has her power!”

“We have a breach!” One of the Major’s personal guards appeared in the doorway. The scanner in his hand was flashing.

Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang!

“Major! We need you! Now!”

Gunfire outside reluctantly drew the Major and his guards. Garret threw an angry order over his

shoulder as they rushed from the room. “Lock that cell!”

2

“He says he’s Mitchel’s XO.” Their gate guard met the Major as he came to the com room.

There was only one man standing outside the gates, but the monitors revealed nearly 40 green dots in the area. Despite their deals, it would seem that Adrian’s loose ends had found some help after all.

Garret hesitantly stopped the guards from opening fire like they wanted to. “Stand down.”

The hunters frowned, but obediently stepped back.

The Major waved his personal guards along and strode confidently outside. He didn’t need Mitchel’s right hand as leverage. However, he was always on the lookout for useful men to add to his collection—like the Italian killer in Adrian’s cell. Garret occasionally made exceptions in race when the man was useful, but Kyle would be gelded. Continuing that line, in this country, was now illegal.

Garret waited for the guards to open the iron gate they’d installed in their first days here, then stepped out to meet the lone Marine standing in the middle of his street. The Major would have known what Kenn was without picking out the dog tag and tattoos. It was in those steel blue eyes and firmly planted boots.

He's set to kill me. Garret was starting to think he might need to scour all of Adrian's top people for new hands. Adrian knew how to pick hard men. "If you kill me, he dies."

Kenn could feel Adrian somewhere inside that well-fortified building. The silent order was clear. Adrian wanted this man dead, but Kenn already knew he wouldn't be the one to do it. "I'm surrendering."

Garret frowned slightly. "With your gun in hand?"

"Surrender, not suicide." Kenn scanned how many targets, where to hit them, and accepted that his hopes of rushing inside were unrealistic.

Garret chuckled. "Just you? Where are the rest of his men?"

Kenn scowled. "You don't have them in there?"

The Major gloated. "Guess they didn't survive the snakes and vines." *The green dots are snake women.*

Kenn took a step forward in mock rage.

Garret raised his own weapon. "Stop."

Kenn did, playing the role. "I go where he goes."

Garret frowned at the sense of danger. The Italian might be a well-heeled killer, but this man was lethal. "I think not." The Major pointed toward his tower guard. "He'll kill you in three seconds."

Kenn was loose and ready. "I only need one."

Garret hesitated to give the order. His death was in that 9mm, even if the Marine died too. The Major

tried to calm things, recognizing a kindred soul. “You can’t save him. He’s been marked for termination.”

Kenn growled. “By who? You?”

“He’s been on my list for almost two decades.” Garret subtly motioned his hunters to kill, not capture, when it started. “The official order came down today. The government has declared him a threat to national recovery.”

Kenn took that in with no change of expression, but inside, worry boiled. The government was finally rearing its ugly head. “I can pay a bounty.”

Garret played along. “You can’t afford the pound of flesh he owes, let alone the final reward.”

“Will you trade something for him? I have access to a lot of the old world.”

Garret laughed, scornfully taunting. “I take what I want!”

Kenn had expected that, but he’d had to try. It was what Adrian had taught him. “Then, take this!” Kenn pushed the button in his pocket.

Booommm!

The front of the shopping complex across from them exploded, sending shrapnel flying over the street. Flames and acrid smoke rolled their way.

Kenn hit the button a second time and the small house next to the compound gushed outward in a violent eruption of flames and wooden slugs.

Garret ran, given cover by his guards.

Kenn unslung his rifle, ducking behind the edge of the alley wall from the firing tower guards. The

Major was quickly out of sight, but his men weren't.

Hunters began falling, screaming in agony from well-chosen shots. *Garret should have at least listened to my deal.* He'd insulted Kenn and there was a price to pay for that.

Pop-pop-pop!

3

“Step aside!” Angela was sweating furiously. The second Adrian and Kyle were clear, she released the ball of fire and blew the door off their cell.

Before the guards recovered from the blast, she was at Conner's side.

“Help! The prisoners are...Ahh!”

Kyle and Adrian were hoping that sound over the intercom meant their lost men had found them. They weren't prepared to see the snake clerk from the tunnels come through the door.

Cara rushed to Conner and began helping Angela as she searched for the slug with her fingers.

“I am your guide.” Cara held the cloth where Angela pointed.

Adrian looked around. “I think we're ready.”

Conner stirred, surprising those who knew he'd been darted.

Angela motioned. “Grab him. I've got your six.”

Kyle didn't hesitate.

Cara led the way to the door. She liked working

with people who were as organized as her group.

Kyle left the Major's control center the same way he'd entered it—walking single file, carrying an unconscious loved one. For Kyle, Adrian's son was like Adrian himself. It was also a flashback to the rest stop, but this time, Kyle was glad to find it held little power over him. He'd survived it. That was a ghost he might finally be able to let rest.

“This way.” Cara led them through the debris-laden alley behind the brick building that only Kyle had viewed upon entering. His first thought, *Now, that's a fortified place*, still held. From bars over windows with unmanned guns, to the razor wire and dark spotlights, the Major knew how to shelter-in-place while he got a job done.

Kyle was impressed with everything about Garret's setup and plan, except for the man himself. The solar setup for their lighting was efficient, as were the solar dehydrators and small farms on each rooftop. The only thing that kept this from being a perfect compound, despite the evil running it, seemed to be Garret's lack of consistent correction. After his own background, and then being with Adrian so long, Kyle recognized the dooming flaw. If Garret let one man kill or steal from him, but beat another just for backtalk, it sent out mixed vibes that caused dissension. Leaders had to remain constant. Now, if Garret had killed Adrian as soon as he'd had him in custody, it would have been over. Adrian had also made mistakes, but Garret hadn't caught them.

Bang!

The gunshot echoed from directly behind them. Cara took off running.

It quickly became *keep up if you can*.

The trio was careful not to lose sight of each other, though they had to guess on Cara's direction more than once.

Cara took them toward their waiting men, and then away. She scaled the broken walls and mounds of filth as if they weren't there, increasing speed.

"Wait!"

They tried to keep up with her, but unlike Conner, who'd been leading, Cara was now evading.

After only minutes, they were lost, and Cara was gone.

"But we're free." Adrian waved it off when Angela would have complained. "Just be grateful and go back to caring for yourself. That's rookie lesson X. We haven't covered it yet."

Angela took it in humbly. He was right. Cara had risked her life to help them, though they didn't know why. There hadn't been time to ask.

"Where to?" Kyle knelt to conserve his strength.

"We hunker down and watch for a signal." Adrian eyed the lengthening shadows. "We can't be out here when night falls, unless there's no other choice."

Angela and Kyle began searching for a shelter in their surroundings.

Adrian gently took Conner's weight into his arms. Heavy and awkward, it was the first time he'd

held his son in years. He cherished it now in case there wasn't a later.

"Rooftop or trees?" Kyle was missing his Glock right about now.

"Rooftop." Adrian adjusted Conner's weight so he could elevate the leg a little.

Kyle pointed. "I suggest that transmitter tower. It has a small utility stair you can only see from one side. Just need to scavenge cover along the way."

Adrian nodded to Angela. "Give him that pissy little thing Marc insisted you carry on your thigh. He might be able to put someone's eye out with it."

Angela grinned. She'd said about the same thing. She handed it over and gave a slight frown when she saw Kyle take a quick sniff of it. *What the hell was that?*

"Let's go." Kyle took point.

Angela fell in between them, hands resting on empty holsters.

Around them, the silence was nerve-wracking.

They moved steadily south, feet crunching through layers of debris while even more began to hide them from view. They stepped lightly around and through horror, wood, death; it didn't take long to realize there was a path.

Angela picked out barely visible trails in each direction as they wound through collapsed houses, burned businesses, upended, reshaped cars. Their feet squelched, sometimes sinking alarmingly.

They went west, and then south again as the piles grew larger, sharper. *Almost like they've been*

stacked. Kyle realized they had been to create the maze they were now inside. It would be hard to spot them from anywhere. The debris was too high.

Angela broke off from the formation and veered toward a line of partially collapsed stores.

Kyle frowned but didn't order her to come back. "Where are you going?"

"Getting something that we need."

The Premium Pet Products store was half-crushed and half-collapsed against the neighboring convenience store. The smell of dead fish was strong as they neared it. Piles of bones in window cages gave the whole block a sense of doom.

Adrian indicated Kyle to follow her. He gently set Conner's body on a mostly clear patch of concrete.

When Angela disappeared into the pet store, moving carefully over charred rubble and sharp metal, Kyle was on her heels.

Angela stepped carefully, penlight glaring off bodies and gore as the reek of aquatic decay permeated the disturbed air.

She walked down the two aisles that were still intact, noticing the store didn't seem looted, only damaged. She was counting on that. No one thought of going to a pet store when the end of the world came, but it held a vital item. In their case, it was now as valuable as water.

Angela blew the dust and layer of webs back to read the small bottles, then grabbed the edge of her shirt. She swept them all into the makeshift carrier

and went outside.

“Fish medicine?” Kyle watched as Angela began opening the bottle and dumping the tablets into her pocket.

“Surprised to find out it’s the exact same ingredients as human antibiotics and legally bought? The strength is the difference.”

Kyle scowled. “That was the old world. \$150 bucks for a ten-day supply for a child with Strep throat, and yet the same medicine for a fish ailment was...” He picked up an empty bottle. “\$33.89.” Kyle tossed it away angrily. “And people wonder why it all fell.”

Adrian helped Angela force one of the small pills down Conner’s throat, getting him to swallow as he began to wake.

“We need to be under cover soon.” Adrian picked Conner up. “Night’s coming.”

Kyle took point again. They headed for the tower as thick clouds roiled above them.

Faint drops sizzled on their skin as they hurried to get under cover. Rain was coming.

Except it didn’t. The sky looked ready to burst, but they stayed dry.

The radio tower base was nearly covered in the rotting wood of a lumber company across the street. It took them a long bit of climbing to reach the narrow platform, taking turns helping Conner. Once on it, they settled down and tended the issues they were able to handle. From their new vantage point, they could see the movement of both Garret’s

hunters and survivors fleeing the city ahead of them.
There was no sign of their own men.

4

“Where did they go?”

Kenn didn't bother to answer, since he didn't know. Cara was supposed to lead Adrian away from Mansion Row and then circle back so they could grab one of Garret's loaded vehicles for a ride out of this hellhole. It had been an hour now, and there was nothing. No Adrian, no Cara, not even any noise. The chill in the wind wasn't comforting.

“She set us up.”

“Maybe.” Kenn shrugged. “Either way, Adrian's free. We saw him exit.”

Training surfaced in Kevin's tired mind. “We need a signal!”

Kenn nodded. “But not just anything will work. Asshole knows Adrian's methods too well. This has to be something Angela will recognize, or we'll all be prisoners this time.”

“Like what?” Kevin hated the isolation, but he was enjoying the rush from it. If they all survived, he would gain another jump in rank and have more respect for himself.

“They'll watch hardest as it gets dark, when they have a clear view...” Kenn grunted. “We'll settle in somewhere until then. Pick it, rookie.”

“Unless we want to swim with the fish, I'd say up high.” Kevin pointed. “The billboard would be a

good vantage point.”

Kenn motioned him to take the lead, thinking he would be glad when Adrian was back with them. *I'd even take Marc.* He winced at his own loud steps. The debris was impossible to avoid.

Kevin squinted upward for a moment and then did the same on the other side. “Hey, we’re in luck! One of the panels over here is hanging down. We’ll be out of sight.”

Kenn followed Kevin up the rusty ladder, straining a bit under the weight of his kit. He’d been scavenging as they traveled. Kevin didn’t have his kit anymore, but Kenn’s would allow them both a comfortable night. Being prepared had advantages.

From their perch, Kenn could see the top of the Major’s compound and a small group of his guards on the roof. In the opposite direction, Kenn picked out the street that would take them back to Safe Haven. He turned from it. *We can’t go home yet. I have a boss to find and an ex to rescue.* Kenn studied the site again.

Garret’s compound was just a fancy house in the middle of two others. He’d knocked out doors and windows to create an adjoined base of three brick buildings under constant patrol by his personal guards. The bounty hunters didn’t do shifts on stationary guard duty. They were above that chore. Kenn recognized the type. They hadn’t lasted long in the Marines, where everyone was required to work. They’d become hired guns instead, skipping half the labor and all the valuable lessons that came

with it.

The center building housed basement cells and Garret's personal residence, according to Cara. Kenn believed that was where Adrian would be stashed. He eyed the stores across the street and the small refrigeration company on the corner. Neither had been damaged in his first explosions. *Maybe I can do something with those...*

"Damn. You've got some great stuff in here." Kevin was eating and digging in Kenn's kit—without permission. "My kit was light in comparison."

Kenn leaned back, soaking up the praise. "Years of missions taught me the manual never has it all covered."

Kevin scraped the last of the applesauce from the packet and muffled a belch that could have echoed for a while. He began to clean up the mess.

Kenn shook his head. "Leave it. If someone catches a movement, we can send a piece of debris flying on the wind for cover."

"Good idea!" Kevin was absorbing information. Most of the Eagles loathed Kenn, and while Kevin didn't want to be best friends, he did want to learn whatever the Marine wanted to teach.

The billboard, asking those in Little Rock to visit the children's museum often, swayed in the wind, creaking and groaning. Kevin didn't care for heights, but the view was great. Among the rubble, they'd discovered paths. Kevin was still trying to figure out where they all led even though it was too dark for that now. Many of those routes through the

decay weren't random. "What are we using for a signal?"

Kenn pointed to the kit. "You tell me. Remember your lessons."

Kevin began digging again, paying attention this time. He came up with a firestick, glow sticks, a flashlight, and a mirror. "The flashlight?"

"Too noticeable. Try again but rule out using light to communicate."

"Can't you...uh, I mean... You know?"

"I've been trying." Kenn shrugged. "If she could hear my calls, she would have responded."

Kevin frowned. "Do you think they're okay?"

Kenn snorted. "This is Angela. She crossed the country with only one man for backup. Adrian's been doing this his whole life. Not to mention his trained Italian assassin and the clever teenager who's been surviving here for six months. If you want to worry over someone dying, consider how the rest of the team's going to feel when they find out Cara betrayed us."

Kevin hadn't considered that. "They'll kill them all."

Kenn, in full training mode now, corrected the rookie again. "They'll strike a deal, try to avoid honoring it, get us out of here, and then we'll help kill them all. Make sure you have the order correct, because Adrian won't leave any of them alive after what they've done and forced his son to do."

"Good." Kevin patted his rifle. "I didn't bring it because it matches my eyes."

Cara lowered the binoculars. Now that she knew where both groups were, she could go to the Major and bargain. He'd forbidden the snake women from staying here, but he didn't hold all the power anymore. She would use his vendetta to regain her home.

And Conner? her inner voice asked.

Cara winced. That one she might die for once her people had the permit to stay. Conner wouldn't be the Major's prisoner for long.

"You ready?"

"No." Cara wasn't about to let her XO see weakness, but she had to let her in enough to be certain Gina would do as instructed. "Each of those men are pure stock. If we keep them with us when it's over..."

Gina's scaly body tensed. "Yesss, our women will agree for that reward."

"Even if I want to break into the compound and kill Garret, so that Conner will stay with us?"

Gina was impressed with her leader's level of greed. "Guilt will work on that one. Smart."

"Will it work?"

Gina shrugged, thinking of the one she wanted for herself. "After the samples they've given out, it iss a safe bet the girls would agree to whatever you want for the chance."

Cara had been hoping for that, but she had to

hear it from her XO to be sure. Gina never lied, never softened things. It had made them an inseparable force to be reckoned with. They expected to be together forever, which was perfect since they'd been lovers long before the war. If not for reproduction, they wouldn't have anything to do with men again, not even for trading. That part of the human race was to be shot first and used second.

“Let'sss go make a trade. Garret can have Adrian and his witch. We get Conner and Adrian's men.”

The two women turned toward the compound.

Hiss!

The large snake lunged forward.

The tall woman didn't react fast enough. Fangs struck her in the chest, sending poison into her heart.

“No!” Cara charged the python with her knife, slicing and gouging.

Hiss! The python spun and slammed into her with its full weight.

Cara slid into the side of a crumbling house. Part of the roof fell, hiding her.

Angry and wounded, the snake flinched back from the dust. When nothing moved, it slithered toward the paralyzed prey, jaws distending to consume the meal.

Cara gained alertness just in time to watch it happen.

“Where are they?!”

“I don’t know, sir.”

Bang!

The mercenary fell to the ground.

Garret aimed his gun at the next guard. “Where are they?”

The man thought fast. “I, uh...I’ll find out.”

“Make it so.”

The man ran.

Garret couldn’t believe he’d made such a mistake. Leaving the prisoners alone was a rookie move. It had been a long time since he’d done such a stupid thing, and he was blaming it on Adrian. He hadn’t been the same since receiving the video of his wife willingly conceiving Conner.

Hudson came down the walk looking satisfied.

The Major’s control snapped a bit. “Shouldn’t you be invading his camp?!”

Hudson motioned at the parking area. “We’re all set to roll, Boss. Just waiting on nightfall.”

Garret paused. What if Adrian got out of the city? “Hudson.”

“Yeah?”

Garret grunted in affection. “My most trustworthy man. Would you keep me alive, Hud?”

Hudson nodded. He would have anyway, but he was glad to be able to mean it. “Yes.”

“Good. Mitchel is trouble, Hud. From his graying hair, to his weakening fists. Because he’s a hard-ass.”

Hudson took the hint and offered assurances.

“Some of the crew can hang for a while, out of sight. If he survives, we’ll grab him and make him watch us conquer his Safe Haven.”

Garret began to feel better. “Yes. That’s a good idea. He’ll come in tonight, one way or the other.”

Hudson gestured toward the team leaders. “We’ll be ready, sir. We won’t let him through to you.”

The Major went toward his office without sneering like he wanted to. He wasn’t worried about being killed, just missing the opportunity to snare his prey.

“I have an ace.” Garret locked the door. “One juicy piece of bait to bring you back, buddy. And our son will insist, even if it costs your life.”

7

“Something went wrong.”

Daryl had already been thinking it, but the words brought a sense of doom over the entire team. Waking to the snake women and their slurring explanations hadn’t been much of a comfort.

They were inside an above ground storm drain that ran alongside the park, huddled together for warmth and comfort while they ate. The Major had taken their kits, but the snake women had fed them.

The five women grouped in the tunnel entrance were covered in shiny scales. The men kept stealing glances as the females stood watch. The team was intrigued and nervous.

“She wouldn’t do that!”

An argument among the females caught attention.

“Then where iss she?”

“Maybe she got caught. She wouldn’t betray us.”

“Not even for Conner?”

Silence.

Daryl and Billy exchanged looks. If Cara had betrayed her women, then their deal was broken. The snake females had been counting on Cara to bring back Adrian and Conner for trading with the Major. Kenn had promised Adrian would send the women on their way with trucks of supplies, but Cara wanted Conner and the Major wanted Adrian.

“We have to get out of here.”

Billy glanced toward the tunnel, where three more snake women had just appeared. “Easier said than done. No wheels, no weapons, no idea where to search.”

The new women walked in with tongues out, sniffing. The expressions on those faces, the longing in them, made Daryl’s stomach turn. “We could do what Kenn and Kevin did. If we give these females hope for their future, they’ll help us.”

Billy moaned lowly. “I knew you were gonna say that.”

Their voices were carrying, telling the women they were aware of the dangerous situation and trying to figure out how to solve it.

“Adrian will still reward them for helping.”

Alex was furious with himself. “We don’t have to be...donors.”

Next to Alex, Ray kept his eyes down, feeling the heat of needy stares. Dale did the same thing when it had been too long between physical moments, but Ray wasn’t sure he could handle this.

“What if we offer them a place in Safe Haven?” Alex loathed his body for jumping at the revolting thoughts of something forbidden.

“Will you provide an escort when we decide to leave?” Nuna had been listening.

Daryl nodded. “To anywhere you want to go.”

The middle woman knelt down in front of Ray, finger going out. *His skin is so soft!* Their child wouldn’t have a layer of scales like many of the births now did.

Ray held still, realizing this woman would make the choice.

Nuna’s face was the only other one they’d seen painted, though her eyes were lined in brilliant green instead of blue. Her weapons were also different, in that she had no blowgun or darts. She had the real thing on her hip and twice as many ammo belts over her shoulders. Ray saw the scales in her blonde braids and swallowed the first thought so that he didn’t say it. *How do you keep the scales on-glue or sew?*

Ray picked out the tattoo of female lovers on the woman’s skin and realized it wasn’t so much lust as a need for offspring that wasn’t damaged. She didn’t want him because she would enjoy it. For the

gay man, it somehow made the thought bearable. She was doing it to save her people. *So am I.* Ray drew in a breath. “Where and when?”

The woman blinked. And then made the deal. “The very second Mitchel is returned to you, wherever we are at that moment.”

Ray cringed inwardly but did his duty. He smiled at her. “I’ll be ready.”

Nuna backed away. “Don’t die during the fight. If you do, the deal is off and we’ll kill you all.”

Ray swallowed. If he couldn’t give her what she wanted, things would get ugly.

The other two women followed Nuna out of the tunnel, but she came right back with a large pack over each shoulder.

“Pick a weapon and come stand watch. The Major doesn’t fear things in the night. They fear him.”

“How long has the Major been here, waiting?” Alex felt somehow smaller because Ray, the gay man, had volunteered to take one for the team.

The shortest of the females tossed a small packet to Ray. “The month after the war. He knew Adrian would show up for his son. He’s had all of us watching.”

The team took that in, accepting a dusty weapon and a single extra magazine each.

“We’ll hit his convoy as they roll out of the compound.”

Daryl decided to let the women know a few things. “First, Adrian isn’t inside there anymore.

We're sure of it. Second, if the Major's like Adrian, he'll expect a convoy hit and be ready. We need to get him right before they load up to leave. And third, what is Ray putting in his pocket?"

Ray flushed, head dropping.

The woman didn't laugh. "A pharmaceutical hand, one that may keep us all alive. Now that Cara's gone, Nuna's in charge. If he can't satisfy her, she will kill you all."

Daryl didn't tell her the females would be the ones to die. He hoped it wouldn't come to that. Daryl motioned to the team.

They fell into a single line of determination. They wouldn't rest until their people were freed.

Alex frowned. "What about Kenn and Kevin?"

Billy had already covered it in his mind. "They're with Adrian, or on the way to him." He was sure of it.

The others found that easy to believe and didn't ask more questions. Kenn was always close to the boss, and when he wasn't, he was trying to get there. If anyone could find Adrian, it was his XO.

8

"Ready?"

"You know it."

Kenn was waiting for the last rays to fade from the sky, sure Adrian was already watching for their signal.

"You're sure this will work?"

“Oh, yeah. We all have...fond memories of it.”

Kevin got ready to swing the object Kenn had made from hollowing out a bone with his knife. It had taken an hour of careful work, but they'd had time to kill. Kevin had been fascinated as the graying animal leg became a caller like Neil had used at the rest stop.

“Go.”

Kevin drew back to swing.

“*Adriaaaaannnnn!*”

Kevin and Kenn both flinched. The caller fell to the ground without echoing a single howl.

“*Plllease stop!*”

The pain-filled cry echoed over the deserted streets and tunnels in bright, glaring sound fed through various radios and speakers. The result was a city that screamed.

“Damn.” Kenn sat up and began gathering their things.

Kevin frowned. “Where are you going?”

“*We*, rookie. That's bait. We have to get to the compound before Adrian does.”

“*Cooonneeerrr! Help meee!*”

9

“That's my mother.”

Conner didn't scream or demand Adrian go save her. He just cried. Deep, heaving sobs of guilt and misery, they were the sounds of a little boy who wanted his mom more than anything else in the

world.

Angela couldn't take much of it. She knew her limits, but apparently, Adrian's were lower than her own.

"You two stay with him and follow." Adrian met Kyle's eye with an intense look of trust and fear. "I'll see you there, Eagle."

Kyle nodded. "Yes, you will."

Adrian knelt down in front of Conner and gently pulled the sobbing child into his arms. "I forgive you everything and so does she."

Conner cried harder.

Adrian hugged him tight for a brief moment before pushing him back. "I need you to lead them around the guards and be ready to take a ride. Can you do that?"

Conner wiped at his face, but he didn't dare to hope. "Yes."

"Good. Get them there quickly or none of us will make it out." Adrian vanished into the debris piles.

Angela waved at Kyle. "I'll take a few minutes with him. It'll be short, but I want to pull my weight."

Kyle didn't argue, suddenly feeling better. Adrian would meet up with their team. Kyle was sure those Eagles were already sheltered around Garret's compound. He wouldn't have to go in alone, but even if he did, Kyle wasn't worried. Watching his son cry like that had hurt Adrian. Someone would pay for that feeling. It was a

reaction Kyle knew well.

Angela loaded the wounded teenager onto her back, glad to feel no actual pain in her shoulder. There was a sensation of pressure, but it didn't hurt. That meant she really was recovered.

“Take the alley to your right.” Conner pointed, eyes damp and red. “I know a shortcut so we can be close enough to hear, even if we can't see what's happening.”

Angela did as he said. That was almost enough for her. She wanted to be at Adrian's side for the fight, but like Kyle, she understood she wasn't needed.

10

“Who is that?” Daryl winced each time the scream sounded.

The snake women didn't answer. They were grabbing things and fleeing.

Daryl shook his head when Billy would have stopped them. “It isn't their fight anymore.”

That drew frowns and understanding. The snake women knew a good moment to run when they heard it.

“Just us, boys.” Billy got set to roll as if nothing had gone wrong. “Everyone ready to kick ass?”

A loud cheer echoed, drawing female attention. Now that they were no longer being held by the women or the effects of the drugs, the Eagles had returned. Men stood straight, faces determined,

hearts and minds meeting in one goal—to get their people and their leader back, and then to get the hell out of here.

A few of the snake women hesitated, realizing they'd discounted the men but shouldn't have. Between the two groups, they now outnumbered the Major's men, if only by a small margin.

Nuna saw the looks of her girls and shrugged. "If you wish to die this way, I find no dishonor in it."

That sent them back to packing.

Nuna threw the men a satisfied glower. They weren't stealing her women, and if she couldn't have the soft male avoiding her stare, she didn't want to help any of them, for any reason.

"Move out, Eagles."

The team vanished into the darkness, each man following the single reflective light on the back of the jacket ahead of them. It was the flag. All of them glowed faintly for this purpose.

Behind them, the snake women also disappeared into the darkness, but they went west, out of the city. *Let the men keep fighting. We women only want to survive.*

Chapter Twenty-Six
Just Keep Moving

1

“It’s not working.” Hudson was bored and tired of making the drugged woman hurt enough to rise through the fog for a long scream. He didn’t mind torture, but this wasn’t fun. It was baby cuts and twisting points when he wanted to stab.

“Once more and we’ll break for a few minutes,” Garret conceded. *I was so sure.*

Hudson obligingly twisted the blade.

“Nnnooooooooo!”

This hoarse shout of agony was enough to make even Hudson cringe. *Hit a vein with that one. Oops.*

Hudson quickly compressed it and began tying a lace around her wrist so she wouldn’t bleed out yet.

Garret picked up the mike. “In 10 minutes, we’ll start again. Bring my son and we’ll trade. Ten minutes, Mitchel. If she doesn’t bleed out before then.”

Silence came in answer.

Garret shook off the shadow of fate. *I make my own!* He sneered at Hudson. “Go rape something. I’ll call when I need you.” Garret wasn’t happy about Lenore’s treatment, but they had all disliked

Embry, so there hadn't been a true punishment, only words—which were sometimes enough.

In this case, Hudson's spirits were renewed instead of crushed. He'd told Lenore to be waiting for him after the battle, and if she wasn't, he would get the fun of hunting her down.

Garret's office was another storage room filled with boxes and crates. There was a wide desk in the far corner, near a door that led to his personal residence. In that luxuriously decked out room was a single window and door. Garret liked having multiple escape routes. Hudson opened the door to find someone standing there. He stumbled backward, barely stopping himself from swinging.

Cara shoved her way into the room. "He's coming! I saw him."

Cara looked like she'd been running, maybe from the very men who'd supplied the distraction for Adrian's escape. Garret didn't question her presence.

Cara didn't look at the woman in the chair, though she knew who Shannon was. Still mourning the loss of her mate, Cara held no sympathy. If Shannon had been a fighter, it might have made a difference, but she was only a corpse waiting to be buried.

Garret waved Hudson toward the other door. "Be ready."

"Do you feel death here, darling?"

Garret jerked, startled. He turned to find the once stunning blonde staring at him with cold

hatred.

Shannon leaned her head back, taking shallow breaths to control her flipping stomach. “When he gets here, I won’t be the only one to bleed out.”

Garret saw that her tie had come undone and blood was running freely down her arm. He moved to replace it, not wanting Adrian to find her dead. *He has to see it happen.*

Even battered, Shannon was still beautiful. Garret ran a rough finger down her cheek. “Why couldn’t you just be loyal to me?”

She slowly opened her sunken eyes, bracing. “Why couldn’t you let me go to the man I love?”

Instead of a blow, the Major chuckled. “Because he wanted you too, of course. I couldn’t allow him happiness. You never mattered, except as a way to get to him.”

Shannon already knew. She’d come to terms with it a long time ago. “Conner’s with his father now. That’s all I ever wanted.”

“Conner is dying in an alley somewhere from my bullet!”

Shannon screamed, this one carrying an inner pain that Hudson hadn’t been able to draw from her.

Hudson checked the scanner. “Motion sensors are going off, Major.”

Garret went to the screen and saw multiple alarms flashing in silent warning. Three in the rear, one in the front, and six more on their weakest side.

“Back together, are we?” Garret muttered. “Good.”

Cara lingered by the window, tensed for battle. She'd come to salvage what she could for her women, but the Major wasn't in a giving mood right now. She needed leverage.

Bang! Bang!

The gunfire was followed by footsteps thudding up the stairs.

"We've lost the outer perimeter."

The guard that informed them of that placed himself between the Major and the door, but not until he was directed to do so.

Bang!

This shot was louder, deeper, and came from the rear of the building.

"They're in the compound!"

"All men to full alert!"

Radios blared with panic.

The Major didn't calm anyone. If they followed their training, they were still likely to die. Mitchel wasn't one to take prisoners.

More feet stomped hurriedly up the stairs. Garret braced for Adrian's entry. He'd never hated anyone as much.

The door flew open.

Garret saw the person's desperate face an instant before Hudson fired.

Bang!

Bang!

Only one body thumped to the floor.

The Major chuckled as Hudson screamed in denial and fell to the floor by Lenore's corpse. "Talk

about irony.”

2

Kenn grinned at the sight of Adrian marching through the alley. The smile grew when the rest of the mission team appeared behind him, pointing and laughing in relief.

Adrian didn't slow.

His men fell in, ready to help express his displeasure.

As he neared the now unguarded, unlocked back door, Kenn paused. “How do you want to do this?”

Adrian took the extra gun from Kenn's holster and stepped inside. “Kill them all.”

“Yeah!” Kenn laughed as the battle shield descended over his mind. “That works.”

They ran up the stairs together, over bodies that gave confusion, but there wasn't time to stop as Garret's hunters rounded the corner and began firing at them.

“We have a group in the west hall!” one of the hunters shouted into his mike.

Adrian shot him in the head.

Kenn hit the man next to him.

The remaining group of hunters fled down a different hall.

“What the hell...?” Daryl shrugged it off and moved up the lantern-lit stairs on Kenn's heels, wondering where Kyle was.

They moved through wooden halls that were

stripped of carpets, paintings, curtains, and anything else that could have been used to start a fire. In the top corners were dark cameras they'd expected to have to shoot out. Why wasn't Garret watching for them?

Adrian didn't pause when they reached the only closed door. One kick sent it banging against the wall for a short glimpse before it slammed closed.

He slid to the side, images burning into his mind. Three men lined up, with Shannon tied to a chair in front of them. Garret, standing at his desk, gun in hand, behind all of them like the coward he was. Adrian concentrated. *What else did I see?*

"Come on in, Mitchel! It's time we settled this."

Adrian motioned the Eagles to stay clear of the door, not sure if Garret remembered how he used to set the enemy up by shooting through the walls on each side of a door. It was more effective than wasting harmless shots through a peephole.

Adrian slid in front of the door, still working the scene. *What else was in the room?*

Chairs...stacks of books...gun on the floor...a dark puddle *under* the desk. Garret was wounded.

"Looks like you had an accident," Adrian called cheerfully.

"There was a domestic issue as you arrived. It's over now." Garret's answering tone was strained. "Trimmed by a ricochet."

Adrian used his boot to slowly push the door open, spotting the body of a woman he didn't know, and a hunter crouched over her in grief.

Garret kept talking, waiting for Adrian to come into the room. “Lenore wasn’t happy about her rapist not being punished. She chose to give herself justice.”

Adrian thought of the dozen bodies they’d passed on the way up here. “She got her money’s worth. You’re short two full teams, thanks to her aim.”

“Really?” The Major frowned. “I’m sorry we killed her then. That type of shooting is worth an effort.” Garret sighed regretfully. “Much too late now. I only need you, anyway.”

“And Conner,” Adrian reminded.

Garret glanced toward the door, expecting the boy to limp in. When there was no movement, he frowned. “Where is he?”

“Dead.” Adrian glowered bitterly. “Because of the drugs, I couldn’t save him!”

Garret snarled in denial, but it was lost under Shannon’s scream. She lunged from the chair, grabbing the gun Lenore had dropped when Garret shot her. “I hate you!”

Garret ducked as she fired, but the battered woman had counted on his reaction. Her shot went too low, however, hitting the edge of the desk. It took his hat from his head with the ricochet.

Barely able to see, Shannon raised the barrel and fired again.

Bang!

Hudson took the opportunity to back out of the room through the Major’s private door as more

gunshots echoed.

Hudson ran through their fleeing, chaotic compound. *I'm on the wrong side.* Mitchel's men were loyal to him because he cared about their lives. Garret's men stayed from fear or greed, and Hudson recognized the moment. *I've had enough.*

Hudson was dry, devoid of humor and imagination, the Major would have said. Just a crew girl, Lenore had inspired strange feelings in Hudson, ones he'd been careful to hide. And he had been extremely patient waiting for his turn.

Unable to love, Garret had underestimated Hudson's emotional stability, continuing to laugh as Lenore bled out. In that moment, his bond with the Major had snapped.

"Hudson!"

He ignored the call for help. The days of coming when summoned were over.

Hudson stepped over the bodies he was certain had come from Lenore—she'd certainly tried to wipe Garret out—and continued toward the dam. He would set things off early and go out with a bang.

The furious explosives man headed back to the place he'd been happiest, before Lenore was shot and the future went grim. Let the Major and his prey fight it out. What did he care? There was only one thing that would comfort him now. Hudson moved that way with freedom ringing in his heart.

He wasn't bound to the Major anymore! It was a dangerous, powerful feeling that he was almost sorry he wouldn't get a chance to grow bored of it.

3

Daryl fired at the pair of bounty hunters coming up the stairs and ducked behind the wall as they responded in kind.

Another group of men had them pinned down across the hall from Adrian. They were keeping the Major's guards from reaching him, but they couldn't help their leader, either.

"I hate you!"

The voice came from a dim hall that was alive with gunfire.

It's almost over. Daryl fired again as an unlucky hunter popped his head around the corner. *We're almost finished.*

"Look out!"

Daryl threw himself to the floor at Billy's shout. The wall exploded.

Grenade, he thought dizzily, ears ringing.

"Come on!" Billy grabbed his arm.

Daryl helped push himself along, everything distorted and painful to his burning ears.

Billy pushed him down. "Stay down until it wears off!"

Daryl crouched at Billy's feet, clumsily reloading as blood trickled down his neck.

The room they were in was stacked with metal barrels of ammunition the Eagles dug into without grins at the find. There wasn't time for it.

Ping! Pop!

Booomm!

The wall across from them exploded, sending shrapnel through the air.

Daryl grunted as Billy shoved him down again. Something slammed into the brick above him.

“*Die, damn you! Die!*” a woman screamed from somewhere nearby.

Kenn directed the Eagles toward the door. “Let’s clean house while Adrian does the same.”

Savage agreement came as the team reloaded, getting into formation. They would roll through the Major’s compound as if they owned it. When it was over, they would.

Kenn raised a hand, waiting for Daryl to give a shaky nod. “Go! Go! Go!”

4

“Die, damn you! Die!” Shannon screamed at the coward who’d hurt her so much.

Adrian let her pull the trigger. He’d already counted and knew what would happen.

Click!

Shannon flung the empty gun at Garret. “Ahh!”

The Major stood up, remembering to breathe. “You’ll be hunted animals as soon as I call the bunker!”

“You won’t be alive to see it!” Shannon sneered.

Adrian placed a light hand on her arm. “Would you like me to carry the load?”

Shannon's face tightened. "I've got the new sickness, the one they let out during the war. Knowing I killed him will make my last weeks tolerable."

Adrian's heart broke as he slid his knife into her hand.

Trapped, Garret once again became dangerous. "Don't count on that long, Shan!"

"Just as long as you die!" Shannon threw the knife as Garret tossed his hidden weapon.

The knife went into Garret's throat.

"No!" Adrian lunged, but it was too late.

The homemade disc Garret had tossed sent a dozen bullets plunging through the room.

Three of them hit Shannon in the chest and knocked her against the wall.

Adrian ran to her. This time, there were no bugs or flesh charring into lighters. There was only blood pouring from the first woman he'd tried to love.

"Conner!" Shannon shouted.

Adrian leaned close. "He's alive."

Shannon's face relaxed into the semblance of a smile. "Stay with you?"

Adrian clasped her hand. "Always."

Shannon's body arched, death hovering... It ruthlessly snatched what Adrian couldn't replace.

He clutched her close, a part of his soul smoldering in his chest. Three of his females in as many months!

Angela will be next.

"You okay in there, Boss?"

Adrian motioned to the Eagles when Kenn slowly opened the door. “Find out where his personal guard and perimeter patrols are. Then set up a welcoming party.”

The Eagles took in the scene and the grief on Adrian’s face, then went to do as he’d bidden.

5

Cara followed Hudson from a distance. She had slid into Garret’s residence to observe through the open door when Lenore was shot. The Major had obviously underestimated his targets.

Cara wasn’t sure why she was following Hudson, only that if Garret’s main man thought it a good idea to leave, then she should too. Cara had lost her leadership over the snake women. The Major would provide no protection, even if he was lucky enough to survive, which she doubted the new people would allow. Cara didn’t know what to do. She had also underestimated them and lost it all.

Ahead of her, Hudson stopped, stiffening in the unmistakable stance of discovery.

Cara hurriedly moved closer, feet silent as she ran and slithered over the debris. What had Garret’s XO found?

Hudson stared in hatred. *He lied!*

Hudson narrowed in on Conner’s injury, hoping it hurt.

Adrian had goaded Shannon into attacking the

Major. She never would have done it without that final push and Mitchel had known it. He'd forced her to betray her husband. Adrian was just as much an evil genius as Garret.

Hudson slid behind a falling down greenhouse and waited for the trio to go by, plans spitting themselves out rapidly. Maybe this run didn't have to be a complete failure.

Hudson felt that heavy sense of the end lift from his shoulders. The bunker would be perfectly happy to accept the bodies from him instead of the Major. They would rather have them all dead than roaming free anyway, and there would still be a reward.

Hudson spun suddenly, raising his gun. "Come out."

Cara revealed herself reluctantly, eyeing the man with dislike, but no real hatred. Hudson had tolerated her while she was Garret's woman and she'd done the same for him. There was no reason they couldn't work together.

Hudson slowly lowered the gun, aware of Cara staring toward the trio who had missed them in their hurry to reach the compound. Hudson, like Garret, thought the snake mutations were an improvement over females of the past. In this new world, snakes were all that existed in both male and female populations. That was easier to remember with Cara's girls.

"What do you want?"

"Conner," Cara replied promptly.

Hudson stared at her, thinking it would be easier

with two sets of hands. “Only until we reach the bunker. Then he goes inside for the reward.”

“Agreed.”

If she couldn’t kill Hudson by then, she would do what she had with the Major—become the bunker commander’s woman so she could wait nearby for an opportunity to grab the gifted teenager. With Conner at her side, she would survive.

Hudson motioned toward the trio that was almost out of sight. “The drugs should keep them from using their power for at least another 12 hours. Go be friendly. Take them to the Major’s sealed room.”

Cara went without a word, liking the bravado of Hudson’s plan. Hopefully, the new people would make the mistake this time.

Watching her slither along the debris, Hudson pulled the radio from his belt and began clicking the mike.

When he finished, there was an immediate set of clicks in answer. Without knowing Garret’s code or having their mental gifts to rely on, Mitchel and his men would be blind.

6

“They’ve taken over the compound.”

Nuna stopped their march, wanting to see for herself.

The binoculars revealed it to be true. The snake leader battled with herself over the choice she’d

made. *I could have had him!*

“We missed out on a good moment there,” one of the other women stated. “We might have gotten the supplies and escortsss.”

Nuna wasn't listening to the mutters and complaints. She was making a new plan. “It's not over, iss it?” Nuna drew their attention even though it was clear she was talking to herself “We saw the other group. We know there's more fighting to come.” The leader waved her girls back into line. “Get usss to a better vantage point and we'll make a group choice on where we go from here.”

That satisfied the others. The line of snake women began sliding through the moldy trees, hating the way nature felt. They would miss those dank sewers and brutally cold nights underground. Topside was hell.

7

“Let's go. We have loose hunters to round up before burials.”

The team of Eagles left the room behind Adrian. The others in the hall followed. Shannon had taken the Major's life and sacrificed her own.

Shannon had suffered from night sweats. They'd gotten to know each other while he calmed her. Adrian had planned to marry her. At that point, he hadn't been a hunted animal, but a valued tool to be rewarded.

Adrian stood, not letting himself dwell on the

signs of abuse. Her trials were over now. She could rest in triumph.

Adrian moved outside and through the alley with a bleeding heart. He had to tell Conner he'd failed.

The Eagles couldn't have been happier. They were back with Adrian. Being away caused a sense of desolation that each man hated, but also depended on. If the time ever came that they didn't feel this way, it would be time to get out of his army.

Adrian expected to see Conner, on Kyle's back, with Angela leading them. They should be stumbling over debris... Adrian stiffened. *I made a mistake.*

"Which way, Boss?" Kenn didn't like the hesitation or panic he was picking up.

"They should have already been here." Adrian was running through all the places they'd been, the people they'd had contact with.

Kenn was only a step behind Adrian, but unlike the leader, he skipped the things he didn't think mattered and managed to arrive at the same conclusion, at the same time. "Another trap."

Adrian didn't answer, instead waving tired Eagles into a tight perimeter.

"Should we start searching?"

Adrian shook his head, cursing Garret. The sound of Shannon screaming had upset Conner so much that there had been no choice but to come quickly and try to save her life. His mistake had been doing it alone.

“Boss?”

“No. The drugs didn’t stop Angela’s gifts in the cell. She’ll contact us.”

8

Hudson hurried through the dank sewer, mentally counting as his alarm did the same. They had to be on the way out of here when it went off just in case he’d miscalculated the fuse. For the first time in his career, Hudson couldn’t be sure.

He hurried by the stacks of water and food barrels the Major had been storing down here as they were found, knocking over a small tub of rice. Various forms of life immediately flew toward the unexpected food.

Noises echoed through the tunnel; he jogged quicker. *I hate Under Land!* When he handed over the bodies, he planned to ask for an assignment in the west, where underground was so toxic it was forbidden to go there.

Hudson shoved the next creaking door open and moved into the dankness with a grimace. Thanks to the snakes, it always smelled like heavy decay and copper.

“Fresher today,” he muttered, finally reaching the main intersection of the Major’s storage bunker.

“Cara?” Hudson pushed the automatic open button on the heavy steel door with an uneasy feeling. Maybe she hadn’t been able to get them to come down.

He pushed the thick door open with both hands, peering uneasily into the black room.

Thwap!

Hudson clutched at the knife hilt, gasping for air that couldn't get through. He slid to his knees, suffocating and drowning in his own blood.

“Catch the door!”

Conner tossed his hurting body into the closing gap before the door could lock them in darkness again.

Angela shoved Cara's heavy body off her and gave Kyle an approving grin. “Nice throw.”

“You did the dirty work.” Kyle meant it. “Best catfight I've ever heard.”

Angela chuckled, glad of the eyes that had let her find Cara in the chaos. They'd been expecting trouble when she tried to close them inside. Conner had been the one to pull her in. The snake clerk had immediately started fighting.

Angela took the blowgun and a few darts from Cara's belt, then jerked the knife from the woman's chest. She did it without a wave of nausea, showing another level of progress.

Kyle slid an arm around Conner's waist. “Let's get the—”

Beep! Beep! Beep!

The alarm was incredibly loud in the dank sewer. The trio turned, staring at it. The face of the watch on Hudson's bloody wrist flashed in brilliant red warning.

Beep! Beep!

Angela and Kyle tried to decide if it mattered, but Conner knew.

“It’s an alarm. He runs that damn thing on every explosive he sets.”

“Let’s go!” Kyle led the way.

The trio fled, going as quickly as Conner’s injury would allow.

Angela grabbed Kyle’s belt and let herself be hauled along as she concentrated. It had been an effort to use her gifts in the cells. The drugs made everything blurry, hard to find the edges. She grunted, straining. *Get outside! Be ready!*

Angela sagged, temples throbbing with sharp pains that made her moan when they only very slowly eased. The dim light from above them was almost too little to see by, making the trio stay close. Their feet crunched through unseen debris the entire time.

Pain sank into Angela’s head, causing her to trip.

Kyle slung her up onto his tired shoulder. “Go faster if you can, Conner. We have to get to your dad—now!”

“Stop right there!”

The trio froze as a hunter stepped into view, gun trained on Kyle.

“The Major only needs one of you,” the lucky mercenary stated. “No job for you, killer!”

Kyle recognized him as one of the men he’d embarrassed in the tunnels for hurting Conner. He shifted Angela’s weight onto her own feet.

Conner was barely conscious. He slid to the ground as Kyle let go of his waist.

“He wants all of us,” Angela protested weakly, moving a little closer. Once again, she got to be bait.

“I’d never make it back alive,” the hunter correctly assumed. “You can tie each other up or I’ll shoot you both.”

Kyle motioned Angela to do what the man wanted.

Starving, the witch inside lunged forward before either of them could react.

Blinding red light shot out, striking the hunter in the chest. His gun went flying into the mucky debris. Angela stepped closer as he staggered back.

How much do you want? the witch asked.

All of it, Angela answered greedily.

Kyle watched in horror as Angela attacked—with magic.

“No! Stop!”

Angela drew harder.

The hunter sagged, groaning.

Angela stepped back, color rising in her skin.

The man slid to his knees.

Angela lunged forward again, jerking brutally at his life force.

Kyle stepped forward.

Conner grabbed his arm. “You don’t want to do that.”

Angela inhaled, swallowed, absorbed.

The hunter’s body faded to a bluish color that Kyle looked away from.

Snap!

Angela felt the last of his life give and arched in ecstasy as it impaled her.

“Don’t move,” Conner warned lowly. “That’s our bloodlust. It’s hard to fight.”

Kyle saw the red eyes, the pulsing body, and stored it. He and Adrian had a lot to talk about.

Angela came down slowly from the pleasure, terrified to feel no guilt. *What am I becoming?*

Angela pulled the man’s backup weapon from his holster and slowly turned to her people, hair blown back, face sated. She spoke with the erotic double timbre of woman and witch. “*We’ll take point.*”

Neither of them moved as she stepped by.

Angela was glad Conner had known to warn Kyle. One touch was all it would take for her to let the witch do it again. She’d never felt anything like that. All she could compare it to was Adrian’s light and both were completely forbidden.

9

Adrian and the Eagles were already outside the overtaken compound. It gave all of them comfort to see Kyle carrying Conner. When he swung the boy to his feet, there was relief. Men ran to help.

Angela didn’t look at Adrian. She stayed alert, watching for trouble.

Adrian knew instantly what she’d done. The power radiating from her was unmistakable, but it

wasn't a disappointment to Adrian. Once she learned to store and ration the energy that he planned to insist she draw daily, she would be strong enough to resist the temptation of doing it again.

Adrian had never known of anyone who could access their power for at least a full day after being drugged. That took Angela from a powerful defensive tool and placed her directly at the top of their protection. The lifeforce would make her even stronger. Fire had been her last evolution. Based on that, Adrian thought the next would be just as volatile. His own power had peaked during lab tests, but Angela wasn't being given drugs for control or being used up before the witch inside could evolve naturally. Her gifts would grow unchecked.

"Something's wired." Kyle gratefully took his Glock from Adrian as the team reached him. "A bomb of some kind."

"What about the other kids inside the complex?" Kyle asked. "The ones like Conner?"

Adrian looked to Angela.

She shook her head. "Any survivors took off the second we escaped."

Neither of them said that would be how the government bunker found out what happened. They didn't need to.

Angela motioned toward the Major's parking area, where bodies were already being consumed by nature's tiniest armies. "Can we go home now?"

Adrian was still staring at her. "Yes, we—"

Bam! Pop! Boom!

The ground pulsed under them. Everyone ducked, expecting to be blasted into the afterlife. Instead, wind howled through the city, blowing the deserted streets and decaying bodies with an eerie chill.

“Look!”

A twister of smoke rose into the sky east of them.

“It’s the dam.” Conner gawked in shock. “That’s miles from here. Why would—”

Crraacckkk! Wooosshhhh!

Adrian grabbed Angela’s arm and propelled her toward the fence. “Cut the lock. Let’s go!”

The gates swung open to reveal the Major’s personal protection vehicles.

Wooosshhh Crunch!

Adrian took the first UPV, putting Angela into the passenger side. Conner instinctively went toward the rear with the Eagles as Kyle stayed with his boss.

Unlike their falsely modified vehicles, Garret’s vehicles were the real deal and fully stocked. Adrian had assumed they would lose their ride. He’d only let Marc and Kenn change them enough to keep up appearances. They’d also added explosives to take out Garret’s compound if they were parked close enough.

Keys weren’t needed with the automatic start buttons. Adrian rolled them through the gate.

The Major’s transportation even had a working

radio that hummed constantly as Kyle flipped through the channels, trying to reach their camp.

Crunch! Crack! Bam!

“What is that?” Kyle demanded, but really, he knew. He’d been there the night the tank was washed away. He knew that sound.

“Hey! Who is that?” Angela pointed wearily.

“Damn it!” Adrian had spotted the line of shadows running into formation outside the gate. “Garret’s personal guard was on a long patrol. We were waiting out here to greet them when you called.”

Snap! Woosh!

Water came flying down the streets and alleys, crushing its own path through the months of debris. Angela wasn’t sure a shield would hold as she stared at the water lunging for them. It was the spirit of death, made visible.

Adrian pushed the pedal harder, resenting the bulky handling UPV. “Down!”

Angela and Kyle ducked as he came in range of the line of firing bounty hunters.

Bang! Pop!

Slugs pinged off the reinforced steel body but came straight through the thin glass windows.

Adrian yanked the wheel hard, manhandling the UPV toward a narrow alley. He didn’t slow, just rammed into the side of the crumbling brick as he struggled to make the turn.

Parts of the wall fell on top of the UPV...then it was back under control.

Kenn did the same with the UPV on their heels. The team barreled deeper into the alley.

The hunters followed on foot, firing at the tires with a tunnel vision focus that missed the danger. They had their prey trapped. It was time to kill. In that instant, nothing else mattered.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Your Ship

1

“**H**ere it comes!” Angela rolled up her window, but not all the way.

The ground under them changed. A hum vibrated through the floorboard as the alley began to shake.

Piles of debris rattled, slid, fell, and crashed into the ground and each other, creating new piles and dust plumes. Standing structures collapsed. Loud thuds and bangs came from all parts of the city around them. Thick clouds of dust began to rise, carried on the wind. Then the rumbling stopped.

An unnatural silence fell.

Angela started to ask if maybe the water had missed them... The pounding resumed. It was dull, hollow, and thick as it rose up the walls, their legs, and then their bodies, pounding through bones.

A horrendous crack split the air, drowning out everything else. Another noise echoed, this one more dangerous.

The walls of liquid plunged through the broken underground, washing away unsuspecting hunters and survivors alike. It crashed mercilessly through their hiding places, doing its own cleaning.

Drawn by the sounds of the water behind them, the men Hudson had sent out of the city halted their steady march along the convoy's back trail. From where they stood, they had a perfect view of the Major's UPVs and the very man they'd been sent to destroy. The neat roads they'd made in their months here were gone. A debris minefield now lay before them if they wanted to go back.

They didn't. If by some miracle the Major or Hudson had survived, they were on their own now.

Behind this group, another large team of men also kept to their path. The reward for Mitchel was exorbitant, and it would increase when the bunker found out about this defeat. These mercenaries watched the flood in fascination as they left.

Water roared into the city from both sides. Fleeing survivors were washed up against the walls and trucks. Two waves crashed together over the top of the team and filled the alley, submerging both vehicles.

The pressure shoved the trucks together with a muffled bang and then backwards as the stronger wave overpowered the weaker. All that kept the UPVs from washing out into the chaos was two fully cocked steering wheels that encouraged the vehicles to hit walls and be jammed. For the two men holding both their breath and the wheel, it seemed to take months for the force to ease.

For the rest of the team, it was less than a minute.

Water slowly drained from the vehicles. Injured

people were lowered in relief.

Unlocking his arm, Adrian pushed on the pedal and was pleasantly surprised to get a response. He hadn't expected the modifications to extend to the engine, since they hadn't to the windows.

Adrian watched Kenn pull forward to hover on his bumper, then swept the area. The hunters that had survived were on the ground, coughing or already stumbling away. Adrian let them go. *We have other problems.*

The debris and barely visible paths were gone, along with bodies and bones. Everything light had been swept to a new location, covering the old layers of rubble with new. These fossils were entrenched in mud that would eventually harden and encase the city in perfect preservation.

Adrian grimaced as he reached out and adjusted the radio. "Eagle to base."

Silence came.

Pain, thick and moist, slid into his side. Adrian's hands clenched. *Not yet! I have to make it back. I have to...*

His foot eased off the gas, mind going fuzzy.

"Adrian?"

Angela's words came down a loud, distorted tunnel. He pulled himself together enough to bring the UPV to an ungainly stop. He closed his eyes, slumping.

"Where were you hit?"

Adrian jerked as she pried away his jacket, revealing a damp red stain that ran thick and wide

into his waistband.

“Oh, Adrian.”

Kyle came to the window. “What’s the... Oh, shit.”

“Drive.” Adrian began to force himself over.

Angela helped him.

“Shouldn’t we let her—”

“Drive.”

“Drive.”

Kyle did as they both ordered.

Angela went to work, heart a fast tremor of fear. They’d rescued his son. What would they sacrifice for it?

“I was trimmed, that’s it!”

“Okay.” Angela frowned. Adrian was assuming they had a camp to return to, and an experienced doctor there to help. What if he was wrong?

He’s in no position to choose, the witch spoke up reluctantly. Maybe you should think of something.

I don’t want his job!

Who says you do? If you’re wrong, it’s a plan that can go into a file and never be used.

Angela swallowed. *But what if I’m right?*

Then it’s up to you to keep everyone alive! The witch stared back fearfully. That’s what he’s been training you for. Not to make female teams or further camp goals. He chose you for moments like this. If you can’t do it, tell him now while he can give that chore to someone else.

Angela’s heart protested every word, but her

mind fell into planning their salvation against the unknown threat. Angela forced her mental doors to open wide as she considered all the options. This was indeed what he'd chosen her for. She would do it.

Adrian's hand went out to Kyle's arm. "Code Raven is a go."

"You got it, Boss."

Angela looked over with bloodshot blue eyes. "You've honored me."

Adrian waited, holding onto consciousness to be sent out with her coming remark in his thoughts instead of fear.

"And *fuck you* very much for it!"

Adrian chuckled, cramping up. He slowly fell over against her arm.

Angela adjusted him as she talked to Kyle in short, urgent tones that questioned, schemed, planned, and prayed to be wrong.

2

"Here they come! Where's Hudson?!"

Teddy thought fast. Hudson and the Major had to be dead. That's the only way Mitchel had gotten by them. Which meant...

"I claim leadership!" one of the rear men called. None of the Major's crew was stupid.

Teddy waved at the two UPVs they hadn't finished modifying. "The windows are weak, so are the gas tanks."

“And leadership?” another man asked.

“The man who captures or kills Mitchel will lead us,” Teddy answered.

“What about the Major’s son?” another man asked.

Teddy lifted the launcher as the vehicles started up the small hill toward them. “Whoever darts Conner gets to be XO—mine if I make this shot. Mitchel Sr. is in the front of the first UPV.”

Satisfied, the 29 other men also raised their weapons. It was how things worked now. Men needed a leader. That had to be covered before the slugs flew.

“Fire!”

Angela and Kyle spotted the distant outline of the road they needed to take. An instant later, they saw trouble standing between them and home.

“Look out!”

Kyle swerved to miss the incoming missile.

It flew by and hit the UPV behind them. The front end of Kenn’s vehicle rose into the air and then slammed down. It rolled onto its side, flames shooting out.

Kyle began to circle back. *My team is in that truck!*

“Men down! We have men down!” Kenn’s dazed voice blared through the radio.

“Incoming!” Angela pointed.

Armed men in full battle gear rushed toward the flaming vehicle, preparing to open fire.

Angela shoved at Adrian, getting him low enough to be protected by the steel plated doors.

Kyle brought them to a dust billowing stop by the rear of Kenn's UPV.

Kenn climbed from the mangled cab and took shelter under Kyle's truck as bullets flew. He began scrambling toward the rear.

Booommmm!

A second missile rattled the UPV as it went by, missing. Kenn's knees and hands went into high speed.

Eagles poured out of the destroyed vehicle, helping the wounded as they went.

Angela heard their door go up, but she didn't get out to help. She wasn't leaving Adrian. She and Kyle opened fire on the men close enough to interfere with the transfer of passengers, leaning over the blond man as bullets slammed into the cab.

"Shit!" Kyle hit the gas, hoping he got there first. The man with the missile launcher had reloaded.

Everyone held on as the UPV lurched forward, leaving Kenn's vehicle exposed to another shot. It exploded in their mirrors and their hearts.

"Eat this!" Kyle hit the gas, leaning into the ride.

He plowed into the man who'd been about to fire again, then swung wide to chase two others.

Angela leaned out the window, shooting the mercs down as they fled.

Kyle turned the UPV again as more gunfire echoed from the rear. He charged the biggest part of

the group, making sure he and Angela had plenty of targets. He continued circling their fallen truck, keeping the enemy away while Eagles jumped into the back on his wild passes and threw others inside.

The rear door slammed down.

Kyle rolled by the burning wreckage.

Bullets slammed into the side as he brought the UPV around for another sweep of gunfire and crushing wheels. He saw the second missile launcher.

“Shoot him!” Kyle ordered.

Angela paled. “He’s too—”

“Your rifle!”

Angela grabbed it from behind the seat and tried to remember how to breathe and think as terror settled onto her shoulders.

“Push it back. Lock it down.” Adrian’s bleary voice from the floorboard gave comfort and added more pressure.

When Angela fired, she made sure it was good.

Bang! Thump.

Kyle ran over the body, taking bitter satisfaction.

Kyle looked at Angela. “Straight to camp?”

“Might be more of them there already. We’ll finish these first.” Angela reloaded.

Kyle slowed down a bit, now that they were out of range of the enemy. “You have a plan.”

Angela reloaded Kyle’s gun for him. She also made sure Adrian’s weapons were loaded, then put one in his chilly grip.

She motioned toward a thick grove of trees. “Pull us in there and find a place to hide. We’re going to treat them the way we did the wolves in Nebraska. These animals deserve no less.” As he stopped, Angela keyed her radio. “If you can fight, we need you.” Angela looked at Kyle. “I’m not leaving the vehicle.” Meaning Adrian.

Kyle reached over and locked his door, indicating he wasn’t either. “What’s the plan?”

Angela gestured toward the wounded, furious Eagles coming up to surround the front of the truck. “We give the job to his army.”

3

Garret’s men had taken a hit. Only 20 of them walked into the woods, following the tracks of the truck.

The sight of the UPV wedged behind a thick cluster of trees caused the hunters to rush closer, all eager to claim leadership. They surrounded the vehicle, not picking out movement. Edging closer, many of them started searching for tracks to determine which way their prey had fled.

The Major’s men reached the trees...

“Now!”

The female shout was unexpected. It drew them to the cab, where Angela sat up and began pulling the trigger.

The Eagles opened fire from the trees above them.

Angela and Kyle hunkered down, covering Adrian. With their vests now covering the windshield and sharp-eyed guards determined to take out those closest, it was still a rough place to ride out the attack, guaranteed to take the most gunfire.

Angela hit the mike. “Kill them all! No mercy!”

4

“Do we help them?”

“Do you think it’s wise?”

“I’m not sure.”

The conversation came from a different group of men lurking nearby.

The top bounty hunter among the group shrugged. “Show of hands. Challenge them now or stick to the Major’s plan?”

Boyd offered a third choice. “What if we fell back to make a new one? Maybe the Major missed a few things.”

Vince didn’t need to count to know what his men wanted. “Agreed. Fall back.”

The two dozen men slid quietly into the woods and resumed their march toward Mitchel’s base. Behind them, mercenaries screamed for mercy that wasn’t coming.

5

When the gunfire stopped, Angela started to sit

up.

Kyle put a hand on her arm. “Not until the call comes.”

Bang!

“All clear.”

Kyle let go of her wrist, staring at his idol’s slumped body. “It’s your ship now. Make him proud.”

Angela lowered the vest, glad to find Eagles standing outside her door. She and Kyle had both run out of bullets. “We will.”

“All accounted for,” Lee reported tiredly through Kyle’s shattered window. “We got 28.”

Kyle’s displeasure was already on his face. “Garret had them running 6-man teams. That doesn’t add up.”

Angela looked at Lee.

“Still not answering,” Lee stated before she could ask. “We’ll keep trying.”

Just making it up to the front, Kenn saw Adrian.

Angela locked him down. “Not dead. Doesn’t want them to know. We need to go ASAP.”

“Not so fassst.”

Angela looked through the shattered window, staring in the cracked mirror as Nuna stepped from the rear of their UPV. Ray was in her merciless grip.

Kyle was also watching in her mirror.

Angela spent exactly three seconds considering a different option. She didn’t find one. “What is it you want?” Angela motioned to Kenn. *She’s not alone.*

Nuna pulled Ray closer, arm around his neck, knife to his throat. “You.”

That one word had the Eagles moving closer.

“Stay back!” Nuna was prepared to kill Ray. Her eyes were full of it.

Kenn glanced to where Adrian should have been and found Angela’s cold blue eyes giving the expected order. *Do it.*

“Company,” Kyle muttered lowly.

Dozens of snake women moved into view, surrounding the entire team with guns, knives, and hatred.

“We will be paid for our servicesss.” Nuna dragged Ray into the protection of her girls. “We helped you and lost our leader. You will take her place!”

Kyle started to motion the Eagles to open fire, not sure if they would, and heard Kenn give the same order.

Kenn unslung his rifle, grabbing a bare aim and popped off the shot before there was time to think.

Bang!

Nuna teetered unsteadily in astonishment, letting go of Ray, who slumped to the ground. “You shot him!”

The snake woman sank to her knees, bleeding through her scale covered chest. “You shot...”

As Nuna’s body fell over, the small army of snake women fled.

“Let them go.” Angela didn’t look away from the Marine she had finally made peace with. Kenn

was now hers to command.

Kenn lowered the rifle reluctantly. He wasn't sure letting them go was the best idea, but the other Eagles weren't going to open fire on females. Not after all their time in Safe Haven. Every one of them had hesitated.

Kyle stared at Kenn with a horrible, peace-delivering realization. He now understood why Adrian had chosen, and then kept, the abusive man. None of them would have been able to do that unless the women had fired first.

And that's why Angela chose Jennifer for her XO, Kyle realized. She would have fired. That's why we need female Eagles!

The Eagles had rushed to Ray as soon as they knew the women weren't going to continue the fight. Two of them tried to stem the flow of blood from his arm as the others helped load him into the UPV.

"It went straight through!" Lee gestured. "He'll live."

"What's up with the camp?"

Angela couldn't get a clear read on anything. She was too tired. She ignored Kenn's question. "You have to convince the men that the bunker was a lie, that it was personal."

Kenn started to argue, but he saw the V in her chin. "That won't be easy."

Angela locked eyes with him. For this to work, he had to get onboard—right now. "Adrian wants his herd to stay together. If they find out the

government is coming for him, they'll split. You have to make this happen.”

Kenn didn't need to look at those around them to know their expressions were demanding he give what she was asking for. “I'll do my best to cover it.”

Satisfied, she bent down to check on Adrian. “Let's roll.”

The bullet ridden UPV was moving toward the silent camp less than two minutes later.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Mergers and Mayhem

5 Miles Southwest of Little Rock

1

The sight of Eagles standing in that familiar formation in front of Safe Haven was enough to make Angela smile despite her fear for Adrian. “They’re okay.” She was close enough to read them through the exhaustion. “Marc and Charlie were releasing some tension last night and blew the radios.”

Kyle flipped the headlights.

Their men rushed to greet them. Lack of contact had worried everyone.

“Marc stays in charge.” Adrian’s weak words came as camp members rushed toward the caution tape.

“You’ll have to deflect as many of them as you can.”

“We’ll handle it.” Angela shoved against the dented door as alertness came into Adrian’s face. Pain would show up next. “Once I’m out, put your arm around my shoulders and stay still for a minute, give yourself time to get your legs.”

“I will.” Adrian carefully pulled into a sitting position and slid out of the UPV with a low grunt,

doing as she instructed.

“What is it?”

“Are you okay?”

Neil and Zack were instantly concerned and full of questions as they neared the UPV.

Adrian raised his hand, struggling to appear normal as he leaned against the truck. “I’m shot. Marc stays in charge over there. Code Raven over here.”

“How bad is it?”

“Won’t Marc need help?”

Only Kyle didn’t question. Adrian stepped stiffly toward him, face a wall of stone. “We are Code Raven. *You* see to it, no matter what.”

“You know it, Boss.”

Doug paralleled Adrian’s determined stride as he headed for the nearest QZ tent.

Kenn kept quiet, hoping to hear that as soon as he was cleared, he would be in charge of the herd.

“You have to go back,” Adrian ordered.

“What?”

“What?”

Adrian grunted lowly at Kenn and Angela’s simultaneous question.

When it became a grimace of pain, they both glanced away in respect.

Adrian kept moving, concentrating on moving his feet and not the fire in his side and gut. He stopped outside the tent. “Do a perimeter setup, wait for survivors. Handle them as they deserve.” Adrian ducked into the comforting privacy of the dark tent.

Out of sight, his legs folded up to his knees. He slumped forward, thumping against the canvas floor. A tear slipped from the corner of his eye as he fell over. He'd rescued Conner and brought Angela home alive. *I did my duty.*

2

Still recovering from Mitch's alcohol lesson, Marc took in the situation slower than he normally would have, but he still came to the correct conclusion. Adrian was down, Angela was in charge, and the returning men were too jumpy for it to be over.

Marc had known when to expect the team, thanks to Angie and he'd prepared things for it. The QZ, with far too many tents, was fully stocked. There was a shift of guards and gophers standing by, and Li Sing was about to start hot food. That was something most mission teams went without on these runs. Marc had also tried to clear the schedules of those who would greet their returning men. After all the noises Safe Haven had listened to in concern, Marc was sure each member of the team could use extra care.

Marc didn't join them or even wave as Angela stood outside Adrian's tent for a sitrep from the guards. He could see that she was okay, but in this moment, he had a choice to make.

Angela didn't know what he was going to do, so she couldn't protest. From the look of her and the

team, he wasn't positive she would anyway, but Marc wasn't taking the chance. They would never have another Dean and Dillan situation, not while he was here.

Marc caught Neil's eye and gestured for the trooper to come quietly.

The two men met behind the mess trucks. Marc was nervous about bringing in someone so loyal to following the chain of command, but he filled Neil in on his plan.

Neil, who was delighted to be useful to Marc for anything, listened with admiration.

When Marc finished talking, they spent another minute on the details and then went to put the few pieces in place. It only required a schedule switch that would be expected anyway, considering the circumstances. They would be the only ones involved.

3

"Welcome back." Jennifer smiled a bit when Kyle's eyes widened at her official Eagle gear. Marc had personally delivered it this morning.

"You look nice." Kyle smiled in return. *And happier.* He hadn't had time to gather stories and details yet.

"You look beat."

Kyle didn't lie. "I could use some rest."

Jennifer leaned her head against his arm in contentment. "Me, too."

Kyle immediately began making plans.

Jennifer allowed herself to curl an arm through his. “When you’re able, I’m there.”

Kyle’s heart pounded heavily. “You can have my back.”

Jennifer nodded, relaxing the rest of the way. “Deal.”

Kyle shoved away the tempting images and returned to his duty. The QZ was alive with activity.

Near the medical tent, Doug and Peggy were talking. Kyle thought that might become a regular ritual after a run. Those two had made their choice as well.

So has Kenn. The mobster was aware of how happy Tonya appeared as she walked into the QZ to meet her man. In another time, they would have had to wait for a secret reunion, but the guards didn’t blink an eye at having the redhead in here now. Things had certainly changed.

Kenn slowed down as he and Tonya neared Kyle, grinning cheerfully. “Nice job, Reece.”

Kyle surprised them all. “Not bad yourself, Mr. Harrison.”

Kenn laughed, voice lowering. “Guess we know who the real hero was though, don’t we?”

“Yes.” Kyle scanned the tents where the mission team was getting settled. “We all do. Without Conner’s games and runarounds, we would have been killed in the first few hours. Garret had a great trap laid out.”

“Yep.” Kenn directed Tonya out of the path of

vehicles being re-parked but lingered to chat.

Kyle allowed it. Grievances were on hold.

4

“I hear you’re settling in.”

Candy and Hilda found Lee in the flap. Tension sparked.

He’d told her there had to be a separation, that until she proved her worth to the camp, she would be an outcast because of his big mouth telling people she’d cheated. It had now been long enough that Candy wasn’t sure he even wanted her anymore.

Lee stared. During the fire, she’d been one of the last vehicles into the water and he’d hated that. She needed to be protected. After some thought, Lee had realized he held the power to provide it. He had all along.

Hilda quietly took the little boy from the tent, clucking over the hairy lollipop he was trying to put into his mouth.

Candy brushed at herself nervously. Her newly striped hair glared out as a mistake—the chartreuse curls were hanging over her face. She let out a tired sigh. “Hi, Lee.”

He caught the note of fear in those two words, and all the female worries that went along with it.

“Hi, baby.” Lee limped into the tent, thinking she was the prettiest thing he’d ever seen. *I still love her*, he thought, a bit surprised. He’d believed her

affair had killed that rare emotion.

Candy waited for him to speak, not certain of his mood. She wasn't scared of him, but he held the power to hurt her.

"I've missed you."

His words made her lips curve. "Really?"

Lee moved close enough to slide a hand behind her neck. "Yeah, baby."

Candy let him pull her close, surprised and grateful. He didn't kiss her, but she had the sense that he wanted to.

Candy ran her hands through his shaggy black hair as they hugged. "I've got time to trim it before we leave. If you like?"

Lee nodded, surprised again. She'd refused to handle male clients before, and that had included him.

Candy directed him to the barber chair that Adrian had provided and tried not to scold him for all the new injuries she saw on his lean body. She would patch those up and everything would be fine. He would understand that she'd changed.

Lee held his wife's hand for a minute, not speaking, just glad to have made it back. There had been a couple times on this run that he hadn't been sure any of them would.

Candy sighed in pleasure. "Welcome home."

tired mobster still standing outside the medical tent. “At some point, get yourself drunk.”

Kyle grinned, but he didn’t stop searching the darkness. It didn’t feel over. “Thanks. I need it.”

Marc stepped into the tent, full of unease at so many wounded. A couple of the men were awake, but most were still unconscious, including Adrian.

A few tents over, Dog was stable, but by no means out of the woods. Marc’s power had been just strong enough to pull the wolf back from death’s hands, but not strong enough to heal him. Marc was hoping Angie would spend a few minutes with the wolf after she’d gotten some rest.

Angela’s eyes popped open, hand dropping to her gun despite knowing they were all safe now. That told Marc exactly how bad off Adrian really was.

Angela forced herself to stand and stretch. She was sore all over. “How was being in charge?” She hoped to stall the questions.

“A challenge.”

“It’s certainly not what we pictured when we were alone in that bedroom in Nebraska.”

His expression darkened at the memory. Until recently, it had been his favorite. “No, it’s not even close.”

“But is that all bad, because it didn’t work out the way we hoped it would?”

“No, mostly because it did work out,” Marc answered carefully. “If you’d asked me that two months ago, I may have given a different answer.”

Angela's tone hardened. "But not now, right? I have your complete support?"

Marc didn't like the feeling he was getting. "Yes."

"Good. I may need it." She tried to find a smile for him. "What did you come in for, other than wanting to actually check for yourself that I'm okay?"

Marc didn't blink. "Most of the camp is gathered around the tape, waiting for word on Adrian. I'm afraid to try to budge them without some kind of answer."

Angela considered. "...tell them he was awake when you came in. I rushed you out, but he didn't seem that bad to you."

Marc frowned. "Are you sure?"

"Yes. It's what he wants. They'll see him sometime tomorrow, but he'll still be quarantined."

"You got it." Marc left with a curious glance.

Angela swept the men who were awake and listening.

Before she could say anything, Doug held up the arm that wasn't broken. "We'll hold these things for you, the same way we have for him, so long as you're worthy."

Doug's timbre sounded odd to her tired ears, but in her exhaustion, Angela didn't catch the hint. "I'll make sure he knows you were with him and what he wants."

"And we *will* stand with him on it, until he's back or dead."

Angela returned to her chair, not telling Doug she was prepared to use her last forbidden door to save him. “So will I. He’ll be back in charge, where he belongs as soon as I can get him there.”

Her eyes closed.

The men around her exchanged satisfied nods. She didn’t want what was already hers. He’d been right to pick her over the uneasy senior men now roaming the camp and QZ in a selfish daze. Each of them was considering what it would be like to own the mantle of command. They didn’t realize it had already been gifted to someone else.

6

“Why her? She’s only been here for a few months. Nearly every one of us deserves it more based on that!” Tucker was furious.

“Clearly, he didn’t base it on seniority. Would you? ‘Cause that would mean Kenn in charge and right now, Tonya as his XO.” Zack wasn’t about to let that happen.

Jax was stunned. “I thought Marc...”

Zack gave the shift of guards the answer they needed. “Adrian chose the one person few Eagles or camp members will cross, the one most like him.”

“The one with the same goals.” Lee stepped from the shadows. “We will *all* support her, gentlemen. And crush anyone who gets in the way.”

The message was clear.

Lee checked his watch. “She’ll stay with him

until she drops, sleep for a few hours, and then she'll come searching for help. Be ready."

Kyle came from behind them. "From this moment forward, there's an Eagle running things and we don't take shit from anyone. Let's make sure she knows it."

7

"Does that look like a change of command meeting to you?"

"Yup," Boyd agreed. "They gave leadership to a slit."

Vince frowned at his go-to guy. "They put a witch in charge. Always classify them that way. It'll keep you from making the mistakes Hudson and the Major did."

"We saw the Italian carrying her into the cells," Boyd reminded. "She won't have power until dawn at the earliest."

Vince wasn't sure Boyd understood her kind was dangerous with or without power, but he didn't argue the point. "Set up a perimeter and get their patrol schedule down. We'll also have to plan for her guards. The Italian was Mitchel's killer. She'll probably have her own."

Boyd went to the front of the room in the power plant outbuilding where they were sheltering. Their team was waiting patiently to make the Safe Haven people pay for Garret's defeat.

Vince was also reluctantly considering a fourth

option. *I could leave.* That's what he had done in the past when this feeling of doom came. The nagging whisper he'd listened to before was screaming at him now. He might not survive this one. Instinct said to go on a patrol and not come back.

From down the hall, Boyd met that worried gaze. "If you don't think we can do this, say so."

Vince sighed silently. If he said yes, they'd flee but not follow his leadership. If he said no, then he had to stand by it and attack. Vince chose to be honest. "I have doubts. We should be careful on this run."

That was how all of them were feeling. It brought them back together, easing the tension.

"Give us a plan that will work." Boyd gave his support. "That's why the Major chose you over the rest of us."

Vince recognized the manipulation, but it didn't stop the pride. "They're prepared for a lot of bad situations. We'll keep it simple and brief. Study the shifts for a bit, dart the new leader between patrols, bring her back for...negotiations."

"That's good." Boyd thought the new plan would give them an edge. "They think it's over, that they've won. They'll be off-guard."

"*We* say when it's over." Vince scowled, hatred showing. "And it ain't over until someone pays."

silence instead of that humming static, John softly called to the man guarding the flap.

Angela wanted to know who was next in line to be healed or dealt with, but she didn't have the strength to lift her head. She pushed herself to her feet, but her knees tried to fold. She started to sit back down until she'd woken a bit, but strong arms slid under her and lifted gently.

Cradling her close, the thick, musky scent filled her nose in familiar comfort. Angela sighed, letting the darkness claim her. "My Marc..."

Marc tightened his grip, going toward the closest empty tent.

When Kyle pointed him toward the one in the center of the QZ instead, Marc frowned as he obeyed. This was a confirmation he'd known would come, but it wasn't something he wanted to think about yet.

When Marc ducked back outside, it was to give a short nod to her two rookie guards as he slipped into the shadows.

9

"Fire."

Two hunters obeyed.

Vince watched through his binoculars. "...and the sentries are down! Take the shot when it comes."

Boyd was already trained on the shadow, fully in the zone. He fired casually at the body on its side,

confident of the hit.

“Direct contact! Nice. And we have effect. Subject is down. Go! Go!”

Five black clad hunters rushed into Safe Haven’s perimeter without making noise.

The two end men slit the deluxe sleeper up the sides as the middle man did the same to the bottom.

The inner men ducked inside the canvas and quickly jerked a sleeping bag over their prey. They hefted their mark up and over the stockier of their men and ran back out in a hurry, sharing wild grins as they disappeared into the landscape.

Boyd and his commander followed the team to their hole up and observed as their captive was laid gently on the cot in a back room.

The stocky hunter who had done the carrying wore a light frown, panting. “That’s a heavy bitch!”

Vince’s thick brows came together in disapproval. “Assign a watch.” He went to the front of the basement, joining Boyd. “All still and quiet?”

“No.” Boyd extended the night glasses. “The first guard we hit is already stirring.”

“Really?”

“Yup. Which means our girl in there won’t be out much longer either.”

Vince looked down the hall at the three guards, confident those outside were doing their duty. Still, the feeling was there, the one that said to be careful.

Boyd noticed it too. “If you call it, we’ll adapt—kill her and roll out.”

Vince hesitated. He didn't want to make the same mistakes that the Major had. "Yes, do it now and we'll split. I don't like the way this tastes. On the way, we'll set a few surprises and take out half their camp as they load up tomorrow. That'll be our vengeance."

A few minutes later, Boyd met Vince at the door with a syringe that would make it quick and quiet. They went in together, as they had for years.

Boyd moved toward the body while Vince waved his best men around them, those who had demonstrated a tolerance to the special cargo they were used to hauling. Vince didn't expect the woman's mental abilities to be an issue for hours yet, but he wasn't taking the chance.

"Hey, Vince?"

"Yeah?"

"That hot little brunette's the one we wanted, right?"

"Yeah. Why?"

"This isn't a chick."

Vince felt the cool hand of fate slide along his neck. *I should have said no.* He turned to see Boyd pull the sleeping bag off a body that was clearly male. A furious pair of blue eyes marked Vince first.

Marc raised two cold Colts. "That hot little brunette is mine!"

“We can’t find Marc.”

Angela heard Allan’s comment as she walked by and began searching mentally. He’d woken her, told her to sneak out of the tent and leave the area—that he wanted to test something. She’d assumed it was the rookie guards, but she’d been too tired to ask.

“You searched?”

Allan frowned. “Twice. It’s like he took off.”

Kyle scoffed. “You know he wouldn’t do that.”

The two men glanced at Angela and found her staring east.

“You got a fix on him?”

“Yes.” Angela sighed. “So will you, in just a second.”

Bang! Bang! Bang!

“Let’s go help.” Kyle moved that way.

Bang-Bang!

“That was Neil’s gun. He doesn’t need backup.” Angela didn’t draw her weapon. “Come on. We’ll give them an honor escort back to camp.”

11

“How many?”

Neil’s expression was split between respect and excited comedown. He’d provided the outer defense, picking off the men who’d tried to get inside and help. “Twenty-eight.”

Marc scowled. “That’s the same as Angie’s group. We’re four light.”

“From the stories of the mission team, these guys won’t ever stop.” Neil’s excitement was changing into concern.

“There wasn’t supposed to be survivors in my old job.”

Neil heard the need. “I can be ready with a fresh hunting team in half an hour.”

Marc was about to say yes, but they’d run it by Angela first this time. He didn’t get the chance.

“We won’t follow.”

“Don’t shoot.”

Marc picked out three shadows hiding in the nearby brush.

The hunter who’d spoken slowly stood.

The other two did the same, keeping their hands away from their holsters.

“We don’t want any more bloodshed,” the hunter promised, misreading the situation. “We’re done, if you are.”

“I’m not.” Marc’s hands dropped.

Bang-Bang-Bang!

“We’re still short one...there!” Neil pointed to the fleeing hunter.

Marc holstered the Colts and unslung his rifle.

He didn’t miss.

Neil slapped him on the shoulder as they turned toward camp. “Sweet shot.”

“Yes, he does make a fine killer, doesn’t he?” Angela’s cool voice stopped them.

Marc met her glare, fully braced to pay for the choice he’d made. *And I’ll do it again, so be*

warned.

Angela sighed. Right after the war, she'd been foolish enough to believe in second chances for everyone. Now, she understood those had to be earned. "If you're finished here, we'd like to escort your stubborn ass back to where you belong. Under full honors for this and for the animal attack that happened while we were in Little Rock."

Marc grinned happily as the men with Angela congratulated him and Neil.

Angela was pleased and uneasy at the same time. She would never like killing—not by her hand or someone else's—but it was a necessary evil in this world. Like Adrian, she was grateful to have men around her who could do the chore.

Deep weariness settled onto Angela's shoulders. She leaned against Marc's strength as he led them back into the quiet QZ. Their escorts scattered to do work or rest, leaving them alone.

Marc tugged her closer, flying high on the victories. When Angela's matted hair brushed his cheek, that inner Marine lunged forward. *She needs a hot shower.*

Marc steered them that way.

Angela was barely awake, but she didn't protest when he led them toward the campers. Going to bed clean sounded great.

Marc guided her inside and turned back, waving Lee over. "This shower is off limits."

Lee caught the vibe and grinned. "About an

hour?”

Marc didn't answer. Need, hot and heavy, was controlling things now. He closed the door. The sound of the lock clicking echoed loudly to his ears.

Angela didn't notice, busy adjusting the water in the center stall. Her mind was mostly shut down, running on reserve power. Helping Adrian and their wounded men had drained her.

Marc turned on the water in the stall next to her too. He wanted steam.

Angela got a towel and cloth from the shelf and draped them over the door. She stripped her jacket, guns, and boots eagerly.

Behind her, Marc did the same.

Clink!

Dog tag...

Thud!

Heavy boots hitting the camper floor...

Angela turned in surprise.

Marc pulled his shirt over his head and let it fall to the floor. His eyes smoldered as his hands went to the buckle of his jeans.

Angela didn't look away from Marc's body. All those years ago, there had been clothes between them, but he was beautiful to look at.

Try touching, the witch seduced.

Angela blinked and remembered to breathe, struggling to think.

Marc took the few steps that brought her in reach.

Angela held still when his hands went to the

edge of her shirt.

Marc removed her grimy top, not looking at her skin.

Angela relaxed a bit more, not flinching when he unbuttoned her jeans and gently tugged them down.

Marc faltered when she pulled her leg out, female odors and silken skin brushing his knuckles and nose to trigger a rush of need. Her fingers tangling in his hair was perfect torture. Marc rested his cheek against her leg.

Angela was almost naked before him. “I love you.”

Marc kissed her thigh, lingering to shoot sparks through them both. “You’re the air I breathe.”

It was a powerful moment.

Marc rose to his feet and stepped back as she reached around to unsnap her bra. He held himself under tight control as she lowered the straps and revealed the beautiful breasts he’d dreamed about for years.

Angela pulled her socks off using her feet, jiggling enough to make Marc’s hands clench into fists.

Angela flushed, smiling a bit.

Marc knew his limit. He gently guided her into the steaming stall.

Angela slid under the water with a groan. “Mmm. That feels good.”

Marc leered while she wasn’t watching, memorizing the sight of her bare body. *Sexy! Mine.*

Marc stepped into the stall with her and leaned over to tilt the other running showerhead at himself. Aware that she'd wiped her face enough to stare at him the same way he had her, Marc spent a moment enjoying the heat beating on his shoulders.

Angela watched the water run over his hard body with growing desire. She wanted to feel his hands on her.

Victory, the witch gloated. Finish it!

Marc wiped the water from his face and took two rags from the shelf. He wetted and soaped them both before handing one to her. *I'm going to.*

Marc's wash was quick and routine, while Angela's was a detailed scrub that took off the grime she had accumulated in Little Rock. The sight of those soapy breasts gave him a deep ache. When she began washing those long legs, Marc swallowed a groan. *I want her so much!*

Angela twitched lightly when Marc began unbraiding her filthy hair. She smiled tolerantly at herself. *Maybe jumpiness is simply a part of who I am now.*

Marc washed the blood and filth from her hair, keeping her shoulders under the water to prevent her from getting a chill. He used his long fingers to scrub and rub until she was putty in his hands.

Angela groaned. "Nice, Marc."

Marc smirked eagerly as he rinsed her. *You ain't felt nothing yet, Baby-cakes.*

Angela wasn't picking up thoughts, only the thick, sensual vibes of his naked body standing

behind her. It was all so different from anything she'd envisioned.

Marc's hands slid around her as he finished, turning her so they were both under the water.

Angela waited for more. When it didn't come, she allowed herself to relax. Her arms came up to hold him as she rested her cheek against his warm chest.

Marc stood with her patiently, letting the steam do some of the work for him.

Angela snuggled closer, skin perfectly warmed between him and the water. She was pressed along his hip, where the feel of his hardness on her thigh was sensual. Without society's required faces and covers, Angela didn't think she'd ever been so drowsy or comfortable.

And horny, she realized. Her nipples were hard rocks against him and the flesh between her legs was becoming slick. Did he know?

Marc nodded against the top of her head. He pressed a soft kiss to her damp curls. "I smell it."

Angela flushed, tensing self-consciously.

"I'm supposed to. It's how I know your body's ready for mine." Marc took her hand and placed it on that part of him. He immediately sent his hand to do the same for her.

Angela jumped at the quick movement, but Marc gripped her thigh firmly as he slid his thumb over her soft folds in wide circles. With each pass, he narrowed the area until he was gliding through her slickness and brushing the sides of her clit.

Angela closed her eyes, unable to fight the sensations. He wanted to please her. She would let him.

Her hand hadn't moved on him. Marc bucked in her grip. "Help me here, baby. Let's make some magic."

Angela moaned willingly, stroking softly, the way he'd responded to during the moments that had led to this one. The feel of his fingers stuttering on her flesh was incredible. She tightened her grip as lust flared hotter.

Marc shifted them and nudged her back against the wall with her towel draped over it. His thumb flipped the tip of her clit as he stepped between her legs.

Angela arched. "Ooohh..."

Marc kept flipping, gently, hand growing sticky, mind sliding into a sensual daze where only they existed. A quick movement smeared that moisture onto her hand. Marc leaned his head back as she used it to stroke him. *More!*

Lust flowed unblocked. Pleasure bonded the couple. Searing waves of light soaked them each time the other groaned or tightened their grip in ecstasy. For this moment, Safe Haven and all its worries were out there. In here, there was only steam and flames.

Marc moved closer, feeling her body tense as she neared the edge. Keeping his fingers in the same rhythm, he positioned himself to be ready for it, then sent his free hand to her rocky nipple.

Angela arched again. “Oh, Marc!”

Marc’s control almost broke.

Angela felt the mood change, but his fingers didn’t stop. She stroked faster, straining. “Marc...I...”

Marc felt the spasm as her orgasm exploded; her legs start to close. He thrust a hand between them, dislodging hers from his stiff flesh. He grabbed her thigh, holding it in place as his other hand continued to extend her waves of pleasure.

Marc eased forward, pushing through her cum to bump against that pulsing heat. He cupped her hips, tilting for the angle as she gasped in surprise. Her small entrance clenched against him and then opened in welcome.

Marc shuddered. No stopping now. He shoved forward.

Angela tried to pull away as he pushed inside. Marc’s hard hands slid around her wet body, holding her in place. He wanted to stop, to comfort, but the feel of her!

He pulled out and thrust in again, grunting as he slid deeper. *So tight!*

Angela’s hands on his shoulders were grips that raked those jagged nails across his skin with each movement. He trembled as he pushed in farther. *Angie!*

Angela caught his ecstasy and faced her fear the same way she had every other challenge since the war. She spread her legs and tried to relax.

Heat like Marc had never felt rushed through

him. He lowered his mouth to hers, gasping.

Angela grinned as his pleasure began lighting up her nerve endings again, coming to the final understanding that some discomfort was involved in sex, but the good outweighed the bad. Angela wasn't about to deny him the same pleasure he'd given her. "That was amazing." She was still pulsing. "Your turn."

Marc growled, shoving forward to sink himself all the way in. When she shifted uncomfortably, he used his hands to hold her thighs open so he could get that deep once more.

Not yet! the witch protested feverishly. *Not yet!*

Marc couldn't wait. It had been too long. He thrust once more and then jerked out.

Angela watched him, nipples tightening, heat flaring. She'd expected to sleep for a while, but... Marc shuddered, head against her unscarred shoulder as he gasped for air and coated her thighs.

Almost panting from the lack of oxygen, Marc leaned back to look at Angela and found the red eyes of the witch waiting impatiently.

He laughed gruffly. "Whatever...you want."

She pressed a soft kiss to his jaw, loving his rough breathing and twitches. "Just you."

Angela ran a hand along his hip and got a jump from softening flesh. "Does two minutes still apply here?"

"No, but I know how to keep us busy until then." Marc covered her mouth with his and slid back between her long legs.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Close

1

Duty pulled Marc from Angela's hot arms just after a pale dawn that still promised rain. No one came to get him up. He'd crashed in the tent with her, but the alarm in his mind brought him to alertness, saying the camp was stirring.

Marc eased off the air mattress and pulled the blanket up to her shoulders as she snuggled into the warm spot he'd left. He stole a minute, watching her sleep, then pulled on his jacket and boots, and quietly zipped up the tent behind him. He hoped everyone would give her a few more hours, but he knew it was unlikely as he spotted Kyle and Daryl nearby.

They didn't speak to him.

Marc went to the mess, understanding those two were her protection now.

Marc spun to verify it and found both guards standing right outside the flap, backs to it and hands on holsters.

He turned around, not slowing as he went by the noisy medical tent. He gathered himself as best he could, forcing his brain to act like nothing was wrong. It was a chore to conduct normal camp

business, but there were lists, schedules, instructions, and conversations waiting. Marc's head started thumping long before it was finished.

It was almost an hour before he made it to the QZ. He went to Kenn first, avoiding Adrian's bedside. *His deathbed*, Marc's mind whispered.

Marc knew Adrian wasn't better when John met him at the flap. After quick eye contact with the men, a nod to Anne, and a fast glance at the curtains shielding Adrian, they stepped outside.

"The infection set in and his fever started rising. Around dawn, I put up a partition because he was ranting and tossing." John dried his hands on his smock. "I also sedated him."

"Good. Adrian wouldn't want everyone to see him that way."

"No." John sniffed sadly. "I'm hoping the antibiotics will smother the infection, but if not, there's little else I can do for him."

Marc's heart was heavy as he nodded, then headed toward Angela's center tent. *What will we do without Adrian?*

Marc realized he'd finally caught what was going around. Adrian was the reason they'd all come together. Nothing would be the same if he were taken.

He ignored the part of his heart hoping for the man to die.

His radio crackled. "Mitch is waking up."

"Copy." Marc was nearby.

After three full days of drinking at the table from dawn to pass out, Mitch was looking and smelling rough. Every time he'd tried to get up, he had been told to keep drinking, that it was his party.

Marc slid onto the damp bench as their radioman opened bloodshot eyes. "Morning!"

Mitch flinched from the loud word. "Whass?"

Marc motioned Li Sing forward. "How about something to drink? That always helps, right?"

Mitch stared in baleful confusion. He barely remembered passing out here, but Marc's friendliness was bright in his mind.

Marc tilted the cool beer up and let half of it roll down, controlling his gut.

Mitch again chose the whiskey instead of beer.

The two men spent a quiet moment of silence—one drinking, one thinking. Around them, the camp was already going about morning rituals, while in the QZ, there was almost no movement.

Marc waited for Mitch to become alert and then glassy, for the bloom of roses to come into his cheeks. When he saw those signs, Marc switched from friend to teacher. "Adrian wants you gone. On your own."

Marc didn't react to the immediate panic and denials. He told only the truth. "Kevin has your job now, Mitch. You have no value to the boss anymore."

The radioman's head dropped, telling Marc he'd already figured that out for himself. *Good. That makes things easier.* "Matt will stay here."

Mitch began to cry. “Thank you for giving him another chance!”

Marc blinked. There *was* a real person inside there. It was another insight Marc hadn’t agreed with, but Adrian was able to see inside his people and find what would reach them.

That’s why he’s the leader. It’s also why he’s damned. You can’t recognize so deep a secret unless you’ve had the same issues. Adrian has been through this before—all of it.

Marc shook off the eerie thought that followed, *We all have*, and got back to helping Mitch. “He thinks you’ll die out there alone. That’s why no order has come down on you yet. Is that true, Hopkins?”

The whiskey opened Mitch’s mouth. “I survived before. I will now.”

“That’s what I told him.”

Mitch stared in sudden suspicion. “You don’t like me.”

“Like? No. Believe in? That’s different.” Marc leaned forward. “I have a fondness for Matt. I’m going to help Cynthia and Angie straighten him out. I can do the same for you.” Marc sat back. “Or you’re leaving. Today.”

Mitch wanted to take the offer, but he was certain it would be hard. The man inside was shouting, but the alcohol was burning, calling.

“Take your time.” Marc swallowed another long drink of his sweaty beer. “Mmm. I have one or two on average a week, but I always want more.”

Mitch stared, trying to process what that meant.

Marc sighed, aware that he had attention now. He dumped the remaining beer onto the ground near the table. “But I’m a man and *I* make the choices.”

Mitch got the point, but it wasn’t enough.

Marc tossed out one of his own secrets with a sense of relief. “I used to be a drinker, too—a heavy one. It got me in trouble.”

Mitch gaped in surprised. “You’re a alcoholic!”

Marc gave him an embarrassed shrug. “I hate that word, Mitch.”

It made Mitch believe. No one else but a fellow addict would know how dirty that word made them feel. “Me, too.”

Marc stood up, stomach rolling. “Finish that bottle, enjoy it. When it’s gone, either go get a shower and a lot of coffee or say goodbye to your son and get out of this camp. It’s your choice but make it today or I’ll do it for you.”

Marc quickly got out of sight and hearing distance and allowed himself a minute to vomit. His CO had given him a much harsher lesson than the one Mitch was receiving, making him drink from dawn to dawn for three days straight. As a result, he loathed any type of alcohol in the morning. He hadn’t been drunk before dark since right after becoming a Marine.

Kyle, who looked as bleary as she felt.

“Got a minute?” Marc called from nearby.

“Not really.” Angela kept going. “Walk with me.” They had five men in the medical tent with gunshot wounds, one with a high fever of unknown origin, and three with minor bone breaks. It had been a rough mission. Twenty-four confident, well-armed men had gone into that city with her. The same number had come out, but none of them were confident anymore.

Marc fell in step. “What’s the hurry?”

“Adrian’s awake and calling.”

“Good.” Marc forced himself to sound as if he liked being in charge of Adrian’s camp. “I need some things from you.”

“Like what?”

“Don’t know what to tell people about Conner, for starters.”

Angela went to Kevin, who was on duty over the first truck. “I need a 24-hour guard put on Matt, and Cynthia sent in here with me. You’ll need to cover the shifts for each person you move around.”

Kevin’s gaze went straight to the new patch of gray showing from the side of her ponytail.

Angela winced. It was noticeable. *Damn*. She gave Kevin a single head shake.

The Eagle understood she didn’t want her man to know the side effects of using so much magic. Wondering if the sharp guy at her side had missed it, Kevin took out the notebook Adrian had given him not long before they’d gone into that cursed

city. He wrote as he spoke. "I'll have it taken care of."

She sent him a silent request. *How long? I need it before...I need it soon.*

The Eagle immediately vowed to work hard on the mental lessons he was going to be a part of when he reached the next level. "Fifteen minutes."

Angela felt his silent despair and refused to offer false comfort. "Good." She went toward the shower camper next.

"Angie."

She grunted at Marc's growing concern. "Give me some time to get him settled first. For now, he's the only survivor from Little Rock that we were able to bring out with us."

Angela got a chill at seeing Marc write down her words. Why?

Because it means he knows you're my replacement.

Angela scowled at Adrian's weak words in her mind. He sounded bad.

"Are you okay?" Marc was frowning deeply now.

"No, but at least I'm not dying. What else do you need from me?"

"To know how he's going to be able to be in front of the camp, so I can get it ready."

"With our help and good, old-fashioned drugs," Angela tried to joke. "I've got that much covered."

"Why am I still in charge of the camp and not Kenn? Isn't he the XO? *Your* new XO?" Marc

hadn't meant to ask, but he didn't take it back.

Angela hedged, not wanting to do this now. She couldn't spare the time to convince Marc. She was still working on herself. "Because Kenn's still in the QZ."

"Not true." Marc kept his protest low as they neared Doug, the guard on the shower. "He could have been cleared and out of here by now. Adrian didn't want that. Why?"

Angela looked at Doug and the arm she'd put in a cast and sling last night. "Are you sure you should be working already?"

"No." Doug's demeanor was one of grief. "Just couldn't stay in there anymore."

Angela understood. "I need some things, and I need some men to assist me for the next few days. Men I can trust, and who can trust me in return. Is that possible?"

"Yes." Doug's tone was satisfied. "All of us." Doug's gaze flicked to Marc briefly.

Angela gave her approval silently. *With care.*

The big man understood. "Adrian told us to follow you, not Kenn, if anything ever happened to him. He said for us to make Kenn fall in line behind you, where he belongs."

Angela had suspected what Adrian was doing, but never that he'd taken it this far. "I didn't know."

"He didn't see the need to upset everyone unless it was needed, but he was adamant that you would protect our lives better because—"

"Because of my gifts," she tried to finish, a bit

bitterly.

Doug frowned. “Because you value life the way he does. He even said...” Doug stopped, glance flicking to Marc again. He gave her the rest of it silently; the wolfman wasn’t ready to hear it. *He said in another life, you would have been given this duty first, not him, and that he would have been honored to follow you.*

Marc studied them with a feeling of loneliness he hated. Here it was, that only for the boss’s ears shit. *The real boss*, his mind whispered.

Marc walked away from them, drawing Angela’s attention. “Hey? Don’t you still need an answer on Kenn?”

Marc stopped. “I have it now, don’t I? I’m tending the herd until you’re caught up enough to handle both sides of the tape. Kenn’s not even in the picture anymore and no one knows it, not even him.” Marc scowled deeper. “That’s why he set me up in the cage! Adrian needed them all to see that I’m hard enough for this place.”

“Yes.” Angela stiffened her shoulders, doing what she had to. “Say it, Marc.”

“*I’m your XO.*”

“Yes.”

Marc marched toward the big camp, slightly shocked at receiving the position without expecting it. He was also furious at Adrian for giving him this gift when he held such a secret hatred for their leader. “Call me if you need anything, *princess.*”

Angela didn’t have time for his self-righteous

anger. The weight settling onto her shoulders was far heavier than any she'd ever carried. She was in charge of Safe Haven. *This is my camp now.*

Angela straightened her sore shoulders, stretching them out to balance the awful load. When she thought she could handle it, she met Doug's gaze. "I will do everything I can to keep these people alive, and that includes Adrian. I don't want his place."

Doug already knew that. "*You're the boss.*"

Behind Doug, the senior Eagles began stepping out of the shadows, showing their unity. Team leaders and their XOs appeared, giving her their support, their loyalty. Their thoughts rang in her heart and held her up under the weight of the role she'd been given.

He was right to choose you.

We trust you to guard his dream.

Angela let a single tear trace her cheek. She'd come a long way from Cincinnati.

Angela found Neil waiting nearby. She knew what was coming and tried not to let it bother her that the camp was staring at them in small, nervous groups from the tape.

Neil joined her. "Got a few things for you."

Angela blew out a tired breath and started to tell him now wasn't good for her, but he didn't pause.

"You'll wear this at all times and keep it by your head during sleep."

Neil helped her put on Adrian's cleaned radio and belt, then handed her a small cigarette box with

a snap lid. “This is an alarm. Open it for a smoke, and we know to come quietly.”

“I’ve had the course on protecting him.” Angela grunted, heart frozen with pain. “I know what it’s for.” She shoved the alarm into her back pocket, adjusted the headset, and then keyed the mike. She let go just as fast. “What godawful name did you guys pick?”

Neil’s lips twitched in the barest of smirks. “We stuck with his.”

Angela snorted without amusement. “Raven to Kyle. Have someone escort Conner to the medical tent.”

“Copy.”

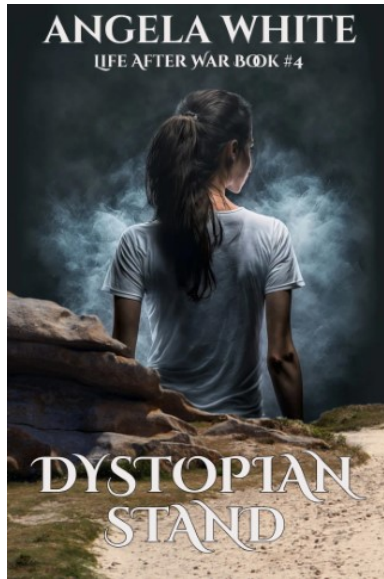
She looked at Neil in annoyance. “Next?”

She reminded him so strongly of Marc on his second day in Safe Haven that Neil smiled despite the heaviness in his heart. “Questions. You provide the answers.”

Angela planted her feet firmly, as she’d seen Adrian do so many times. She found the stance almost comfortable. “Hit me. I can take it now.”

The End of Book 3

What would you like to do now?



[The next book in this series](#)

[Deleted Scenes](#)

[Book 4 Sample](#)

[Go back to the beginning of this book](#)

Deleted Scenes

1

Ignoring the chill, Rick stayed high and still as he spied on the battered brick building. When Marc had spun out of camp with the doctor, Rick had followed in the truck he'd gotten from McCook. That was before the slavers had destroyed it while searching for the radio rigged to lure them there. Cesar's men had killed everyone they found. Rick hadn't come down from his water tower vantage point.

The traitor studied the rest stop and the smoldering carnage through binoculars. Who was in such desperate need of a doctor that Angela's skills couldn't handle it? If it was Adrian, there was still hope despite the carnage.

But it wasn't.

Rick had viewed Marc's expression as he made the walk to the door. The woman was down, and that meant a group of extremely pissed males were in there, eager to kill anything that moved. Still, if Adrian didn't know there was a new threat, he wouldn't rush back, would he?

Rick settled against the slimy tree, being careful not to catch the attention of the Eagles on sniper duty. Once he saw where they were going from here, Rick planned to get busy collecting beans,

bags, and, of course, bullets. He was certain Adrian would leave this area as soon as he could. The cicadas were all over the reeking bodies, birds circling below the layers of grit. Even the big ants were carting off gory chunks through the bushes, proving Adrian's carnivore theory. The thought of that happening to Cesar's body made Rick want to cackle maniacally. He didn't, of course. Unlike Cesar, Rick knew how to make himself wait for the right time.

Movement near the far edge of the ugly scene drew Rick's attention to shadowy forms that appeared and then vanished in the fog. A minute of studying told him it was scavengers—the human kind. The few survivors from Adrian's trap were also lurking near the rest stop. To attack?

Considering their lack of organization in contrast to his careful stillness, they were probably waiting for Adrian's Eagles to be gone so they could clean up the scraps.

Plans quickly reshaped in his mind with little effort on his part. Rick settled in for a snooze. The phone set on vibrate would wake him in a bit, and then he'd get ready to follow the Eagle scouts that were always sent out first. After that, he would come back and talk with the lurking Mexican survivors. He expected to kill at least one of them to prove his point, but they would soon understand that Cesar's replacement was white.

It didn't make the hatred any weaker or change the plans for Safe Haven. Every soul cowering

inside its borders would come under slaver control... and there would never be a better time to strike than now, when they thought they'd won.

2

Rick was the first one to pick through the remains after the Eagles left. He did it with one hand on his gun. Thanks to Safe Haven, he was very, very good with it.

You could have been an Eagle, his powerless witch taunted. *You were supposed to be one of them.*

Rick swallowed the bitterness and allowed it to sink into that ball of rage smoldering in his guts. It wasn't over. Angela's death wouldn't be the only price paid.

Foggy shadows shaped like tall mice drew his attention. The rats were coming.

Rick waited where he was, settled onto the charred hood of Cesar's once golden car to smirk openly at them. His days of hiding were over.

The slavers slowly came toward him. These men had been in the rear of the second convoy, catching up in time to see the slaughter. Helping hadn't been a choice. They'd hidden until it was over, were forced to, Rick guessed. Cesar had run their tanks dry to chase Adrian.

These dozen men had waited for Adrian to leave, hoping to strip whatever was left and flee south. They had no intentions of going to Cesar's camp or even letting anyone know what had

happened...except, there was a witness to be handled. If the white man met up with the others, they would be hunted down. Shirking your duty was unforgivable, even if it meant your life. Rick held a small advantage...unless he was alone. Then, he was dead.

Rick knew. It was in their furtive glances and stiff strides. They'd forgotten who they were dealing with. One reminder might not be enough. The traitor's calm was disarming. "Guess we all got lucky."

Not sure what he wanted, the Mexicans didn't answer. They still hated Rick as much as they always had, but now, there was also a layer of respect. What Safe Haven had done here was the first defeat they'd encountered. These men were reluctant to challenge anyone who had survived there undercover as long as Rick had.

"So...going south from here, I'll bet." Rick jerked a thumb toward the rest stop. "Avoid it when you pick through. He's got it wired. They knew there were survivors."

The deserters swept the shadows, as if expecting to see Adrian and his Eagles rushing toward them.

"Now that they're rollin' again, he'll send half of them to take care of Cesar's camp." Rick's manner grew pointed. "Those who haven't already deserted, anyway."

Tension crackled at his veiled threat, hands tensing, getting set.

Rick slowly stood up and took his smokes from

his front pocket. He inhaled, snapped the lighter shut. “Be a shame if Cesar’s camp got a call about you guys deserting him when he needed you the most. Kinda goes against the code, you know?”

“They won’t survive,” sneered one of the men in the rear of the group. “And neither will you.”

The Mexican drew in a blur.

Rick was faster.

His bullet tore into the Mexican’s throat. He fell forward, hands clasped around the gushing wound.

Rick gestured with the barrel. “Strip him and put it in my share.”

The look the slavers exchanged made Rick chortle happily. “You’ve figured it out. Good. That’ll make things go faster. Let’s start with this: you go when I say so.”

His hard stance dared them to protest the order. He would kill the first one who did.

The shortest of the remaining men stepped forward calmly, but despite his mild manner, Rick knew this was the one among them who had planned to be their leader for the trip back across the border.

“And when will that be, gringo? This land tastes like death.”

Rick hoped to surprise them with half-truths and brutal lies. “Two days. Help me with something, and then you can run like the cowards you are. When I pick my crew, none of you will be on it!”

They didn’t like that.

Rick felt it coming and fired as the would-be

leader drew.

Another body hit the ground with a dull, final thud.

Rick gestured angrily, patience gone. “You will give me what I want!”

None of them was eager to die. The smarter among them began to recognize the new chain of command and bow to it. Rick’s skill with the gun made him the boss.

“Two days, then we’re gone. You have to sleep.”

Rick knew better than to put his gun away until he was sure of control. He delivered that chain with a sneer. “There were other survivors.” He gestured arrogantly. “And they joined me *willingly* to avenge Cesar’s death. They’re waiting one hour for word. After that, they’ll make the call. You get one chance, and then you’ll be hunted down by your own kind.”

Caught by their own cowardice, none of the homesick men considered that he might be bluffing.

Sensing the victory, Rick lowered his gun. “Meet us half a mile east of the Ellsworth Country Club by nightfall. Don’t be late.” Rick turned toward his truck, hand still loose, ready. “Without Cesar to hold them here...or me, that camp will hunt you all the way to hell.”

The traitor picked up the small bag of treasures he’d looted, swung it over his shoulder before delivering a last parting shot. “Cesar was reckless, and it got these men killed. That will never happen

while I lead.”

It was enough to begin a tentative bond, and Rick kept moving, hearing them start to scavenge. They would show up and be a bit more willing to work, thanks to the manipulative techniques he’d learned from studying Adrian. By the time the slavers realized he didn’t mean a word of it, running wouldn’t be an option.

Rick kept his stride sharp and arrogant as he went to his vehicle. *It’s what Adrian would have done.*

Rick liked that thought. Yes, it was, and he had a very good idea of what the blond leader would do now too. For a change, that Eagle had no idea trouble was so close. With Angela at death’s door, there wouldn’t be any warning.

“One mistake, baby,” Rick crooned. “It was all I needed.”

He moved steadily through the moldy area to prepare for the Mexicans’ arrival. They thought he had more men. He would make sure that impression held long enough to finish what Cesar had started.

3

The remaining Mexicans were here. His bluff had worked.

Rick waited in the shadows of the horse farm, ignoring the enormous, frost covered skeletons that littered the edges of the fence. Unlike normal frost, this was a layer of frozen white slime that stuck like

ice chips.

The traitor let out a deceptively defeated grunt as the small group of hostile men approached.

“You need to know two things. First, we’ve decided we only want willing men for the rush.” Rick’s tone said he suspected what they’d agreed on. “No back-shooting that way.”

Observing their reactions, the traitor saw he’d been right.

“The second is that if you at least cover us from the outside and pick off anyone we miss, we’ll cut you in for part of Safe Haven’s supplies.”

There were surprised mutters at the boldness of his plans, and quick glances around the frosty dimness—maybe to verify it wasn’t a trap.

Rick shrugged cruelly. “We’ll be returning the bodies of Adrian and his Eagles in exchange, but the camp won’t know that until it’s too late.” He could have given the Mexicans time to consider it all, but Rick didn’t think Adrian would have, and he acted accordingly. “So, fall in with the plan or get lost. You’re not really needed.”

“Maybe we will—”

“Kill me and do it yourselves?” Rick sneered “My men are all around us. You may get me, but they’ll get *all* of you.”

That was something they hadn’t been paying any attention to, but now that they were, each of them instantly respected Rick more. There were shadowy forms in trees, a glint of a pistol behind an overturned tractor, the edge of a sombrero showing

next to a chicken coop. It was very convincing.

One of the slavers spoke up. "A fair cut?"

Rick snorted, hiding triumph. "Not if you don't take half the risk."

His leer was as cool as the wind. "I'm first man in—biggest share."

Rick let their greed seal their fate.

"I will fight."

"Si!"

"And I."

Rick studied them before agreeing reluctantly. "A provision. If I die during the run, you get nothing. If I'm still alive when it's over, you can split my share."

They all scowled at the unexpected generosity.

"Why would you do that?"

Rick allowed insignificant amounts of the truth to slip out, adding an irresistible lure. "Because Cesar gave me a new life, and they took that, but mostly, because I still want the woman. No one touches her."

There were evil leers now, and nods. Rick was aware they thought he meant Angela. They didn't know it was Samantha, always Samantha's cornflower blue eyes that haunted him.

Deleted Scene #2

“Why would you tell him that? Make that deal for me?” Jennifer was loud and angry. “Don’t you know I’m broken inside?”

“I don’t pity you.”

“You want to be between my legs.”

Kyle only raised a brow. “And?”

Flushing, Jennifer shook her head, remembering the surprise, the trust that had flowed between them when he’d given her the pistol on her hip. They were out for a walk right now, being stared at, and Jennifer was uneasy. His admission of telling Adrian he wanted to claim her hadn’t helped that feeling.

“I’m offering for a lot of reasons.”

“People should get together because they love each other.” Her cheeks darkened. “Not for lust.”

Kyle smiled. “How do you know that I don’t? I’m offering a lot for a man who only wants sex that he can get from nearly any woman here.” He made sure she understood that wasn’t a bluff. “They’re keeping track—waiting for you to push me away, to prove you’re too young to handle being mine.”

Kyle picked them out subtly, eyes tracing the shape of the one who resembled Jennifer the most.

Jennifer turned slowly, counting how many of the females in his line of sight perked up, hoping to catch his attention. He could have one for every day

of the week and none of them would gag in front of him, or fart, or belch, or scratch, or any of the other disgusting things she found herself doing while he was around.

Flustered, Jennifer snorted softly. “God, I’m a cow.”

“You’re beautiful.”

“Why, Kyle?”

“Because I can.”

Getting angry, she put her hand on her hip. “Your enemy had me over and over, and I didn’t always fight. I was the slave of a killer, and I used it to my advantage. In two months, I’m having his kids! Doesn’t that mean anything to you?!”

She was on the edge of tears. Kyle lifted a large hand to lightly brush away the first one to roll down her cheek. “All of those things make you a survivor Jenny, one of us.” Kyle stepped back as the relief and confusion settled in. “Get to know me. Let me prove I’m one of the good guys.”

“What about my babies?” she demanded, not nearly as afraid now as she had been during these negotiations with Cesar. When she’d realized she was going to become a mother, everything had changed.

“You already know. They’ll love me.”

“*Why* would you do this?”

Kyle’s eyes were glowing as he answered. “I get to right a terrible wrong. I get to be a father, something I’ve always wanted...and I get *you*.”

The words were possessive, powerful. Jennifer

was shocked to be flattered instead of terrified.

Kyle got them moving again, aware of how many camp gossips were nearby, trying to eavesdrop.

Spotting Marc, Kyle took a chance. “Got time for coffee later, Marc?”

On his way to the first half of the level tests, Marc ran a quick glance over them and shook his head, tone curt. “No.”

Kyle didn’t need to ask what the problem was. Sighing in resignation, Kyle headed them for the animal area.

Also on his way to watch the tests, Charlie observed the short exchange in surprise. His dad wasn’t supporting Kyle?

“Have you figured it out yet?”

Kyle slowed them down. “What?”

Jennifer noticed the way his glance went over her stomach protectively, before resting on her face. “Why you want me.”

A muscle twitched in Kyle’s jaw. Unlike Cesar, Kyle kept himself cleanshaven. He showered every day and always came to her smelling good. He didn’t wear cologne—that amazing smell was natural.

“Yes.”

Jennifer swallowed. “Is it good? The reason?”

Kyle considered. “Yes, and no.”

Sensing she honestly seemed to need an answer, Kyle directed them toward the trees, where Eagles subtly came closer.

Kyle took her hand, slowly getting her used to his touch, the sound of him. “You’re my light, my way to remain good in a world that is smothering me with evil.”

Jennifer wasn’t expecting such a deep answer—she’d assumed it was sex. She stared at him. “You’re so different, even than the other guards.”

Kyle wasn’t sure how she meant that, but her next words cleared it up.

“It’s why I can trust you, I think. You don’t lie to me, even when it’s ugly or wrong.”

Kyle’s thoughts were blazing with secrets. “Just don’t ask me if you can’t take it.”

Jennifer agreed, smiling a bit. “Okay.”

Kyle was aware of the disapproval from those nearby, but he didn’t care.

“Thank you. For getting us out of there.”

Kyle’s heart eased a little more from the knot it had twisted into upon first finding her in that filthy semi. “It’s my honor.”

Sparks flew, reminding Kyle that despite his altruistic appearance, he really did want to be between her legs—more than anything. He glanced at her in anguish. “I will leave you alone, Jenny. But not until you tell me to.”

A heavy sense of loss settled over her young shoulders. She shivered. “I know. And I know they’ll keep you away if I want it, or even...banish you if I say you’re hurting me. The den mothers made sure I know.”

Kyle was firm. “I want you to tell them if I ever

do.”

Jennifer snorted. “Like I’d do that after all you’ve done for me, for those kids!”

Kyle refused to allow her to sacrifice herself again, but he also used the moment to judge if there might be any caring yet on her part. “I mean it, Jen. I’ve seen men change since the war. They get so wrapped up in what they want that they don’t care for other people’s needs. Treating you that way will get me killed.”

Jennifer was unable to resist, fingers going to his arm. “You won’t.” She lowered her head, but not her hand. “I’ll think about it and try to figure out if it’s what I want.”

Kyle knew he should pull away, but her willing touch held him captive. They entered the vet’s zoo arm-in-arm and smiling.

Jennifer’s memory of the healing was vague, blurred with long moments of pain and short instances of sleep. She knew she’d been burned on the inside and she was grateful. She probably wouldn’t have any other kids, but these would live as long as she kept Kyle close. Angela’s witch had confirmed that he was a man she could trust completely, though he didn’t think of himself that way. Jennifer agreed. The more time she spent with Kyle, the more she realized what a *good* person he actually was.

“Do we report it?”

Zack denied the eager rookie. They were on

duty over this area. “Only if he does something wrong. Adrian thinks it’s a good match.”

“It is for her, but what is he getting out of it?”

Zack didn’t argue the general view of the situation. “Absolution right now. Later?” Zack shrugged. “That’s up to her. Maybe happiness, maybe hell. Too soon to say at this point.”

“Women trouble—it’s all over the camp,” Anderson quipped. “Glad I’m not in that mix.”

Zack didn’t respond. The truth *You’re so rude, not even the whores will hook you up, Andy, so don’t stress over it.* probably wouldn’t help in this case.

The extra weight Zack had been carrying around was gone now. He was well liked—high up in the Eagles and gaining ground. Zack was certain his sons were watching, waiting for him to pick a mate too, but Zack wasn’t interested. Despite the way he had mistreated his wife, he’d loved her. His heart wasn’t ready for the pain of picking a replacement.

Deleted Scene #3

Angela moaned, head tossing on the damp pillow as the dream called, pulled. She didn't want to go, she wanted to remain here in the fog with Marc, but there wasn't a choice. The power inside that fed from the hope and horror around her was growing.

Letting out a defeated whimper, Angela sank into the grayness. There was something she had to show him, something he had to understand.

Adrian stared over the side of the tall cliff, not worried even though he was 10 stories up and the hard stone was slick from the salty sprays of the angry waves below. The ocean roared, seduced as it pulled him closer. If he could just touch it...

“You must be strong.”

Angela's concern cut through his daze. Adrian turned in slow motion.

The water crashed onto the rocks below angrily, protesting her interruption, but Adrian appeared not to notice.

“Why is the water only blue going south? Why isn't all of it red?”

Angela smiled, appearing much like an angel with her white pajamas and flowing black curls. “That is your path. Venture into the red, and death has you.”

“But where does it go?”

She shrugged, realizing the water was trying to demand Adrian's attention from her, calling to him. "It will never willingly let you cross, and yet, that is the way you must go."

"Is there no place left here?"

She shrugged again, timbre a soft, eerie echo. "That has not been revealed."

"What about the blue? Where does it go?"

"That has not been—"

"I need to know!" he shouted over the water's roar. "I can't keep them alive here!"

Adrian's frustration fed the waves. The sprays crashed harder against the rocks.

"Go away! Kill you! Never let you pass!"

He could hear the rage now, the buzzing in his ears. Below them, the red water began lapping the edges of the blue until the entire ocean as far as they could see, was as red. Scarlet drops sprayed them from the crashing waves.

"There's not much time." Angela was fading, floating away from him. "You have to get ready!"

Adrian snapped awake but sank right back down into his dreams as the ocean called and the shadowy form of a sorceress danced for him.

What Did You Think?

I'd love to hear how you feel about this book!

You'll see this request at the end of every title I write because it matters so much to me and to the other readers out there. Please [take this link to the book's page on my website](#), so you can pick the store of your choice for a review. It doesn't have to be long, though it certainly can be if you like. Just tell me, and the world, how you feel about it.

Feedback helps me in many ways, but the biggest is that it drives me to keep producing. I have self-doubt moments just like everyone else. Your review might be what pops me out of a bad place and allows me to keep rolling! And if you ever need some kind words, I'd be happy to do the same for you. The world is often an ugly place, but we can help each other through those hard times with small acts of kindness.

“I have found that it is the small everyday deed of ordinary folks that keep the darkness at bay. Small acts of kindness and love.” -Peter Jackson

Box Sets

Why do you want the box sets?

- Box sets for this series will save you money.
- They take up less room on your device than all of the individual books.
- Many people find it easier to keep track of which book comes next when they are reading box set files.

[Take me to the box sets page for Life After War!](#)

From the Author

Did you enjoy our journey this time? I'm rather fried at the moment and can only hope I've done it justice. The final choice on that is, as always, up to you. I'll be watching the reviews and comments, and resting up to bring you the next leg of Safe Haven's adventure. The Mountains they've been hoping for (and dreading) are coming next.

Will Adrian live? Most of you already know the answer to that. No worries. Safe Haven still has a need for that troubled leader. So does the new guardian, who can't wait to return the camp to his capable hands. Only, there's a problem with that. The camp likes Angela in charge. So do I.

Tiredly sweeping the darkness for the rest of my
Eagles,
Angela

On another personal note, I would also like to thank the great people who beta read for me, hosted me on their sites and blogs, and offered their services to me. It was an honor to work with those Eagles. Thank you, Kim, Carol, Drew, Stacey, Jeanne M, Allison, Charles, Holly, Wendy, Angie H, Crystal, Elizabeth, Kim, John M, Jeff, Wendy, Marleen, Kristi, Harry, Jim, Jacqueline, Diane, Clara, for all your hard work!

Book 4



[Dystopian Stand](#)

1

“**R**aven to Kyle. Have someone escort Conner to the medical tent.”

“Copy.”

She looked at Neil in annoyance. “Next?”

She reminded him so strongly of Marc on his second day in Safe Haven that Neil smiled despite the heaviness in his heart. “Questions. You provide the answers.”

Angela planted her feet firmly, as she’d seen

Adrian do so many times, and found the stance almost comfortable. “Hit me. I can take it now.”

At the moment, Neil had little doubt. The waves of determination rolling from her were strong enough to bolster his own lagging faith. “First is camp security. Stays doubled?”

“Yes.”

“We’re taking in new arrivals, even though we know they might be assassins?”

“Yes. Myself, Charlie, or Jennifer—in that order—will go through them. If we’re all busy, then they wait.”

Neil hoped that would be a standard now. They couldn’t take any more chances, not with the government coming.

Subtly reading those closest to her, Angela opened a fresh layer of concern. “It won’t be just him, Neil. They know about Conner, and about me. One careless slip or forced conversation, and we’re on their radar for Jennifer and Sam as well.”

“They’ll take all of you!” Neil realized, horrified.

“And then kill the others here. It’s what you do when there’s an outbreak.”

“Otherwise, it spreads.”

“Yes, but they don’t understand the dream of freedom doesn’t belong to one man or even an entire camp. It’s a birthright. We’ll never stop fighting.” She glanced around, including the nervously listening Eagles. “They’re not taking anyone from this camp. I’ll die first.”

Neil held out the notebook for her to read the next item on his list.

Where does she stand on the Gov issue?

Angela took his pen and quickly scratched two words.

With Adrian.

Neil slid the notebook into his pocket and waved Zack over. “He’s your personal shadow for the day. If you don’t see him, even for an instant, trigger your alarm.”

Before she could question, Neil motioned to an Eagle in the trees she couldn’t identify from where they stood.

“That’s Shawn. He’s your sniper today—fresh out of Marc’s class and eager to pull the trigger. If you don’t want them shot, stay out of reach of all new people.”

Angela agreed curtly. “What else?”

“Kevin will go over a couple things, and then you’ll be on your own.”

Kevin immediately asked what many were already wondering. “You’ve chosen Marc as your XO?”

“Adrian gave him that place. I didn’t argue.”

Neil hid a smirk at the prepared answer and gestured for Kevin to continue. He was getting a crash course on being an assistant to someone in the chain of command. Neil and Kyle had gotten their lessons from Kenn and hated every minute of it. Kevin’s would be better, though certainly not easier considering the circumstances.

“We realize you’ve had...”

“I realize,” Neil corrected without the malice that had always layered Kenn’s teaching moments. “The slot comes with the blame, as well as the fame.”

Kevin cleared his throat. “I realize you’ve had almost no time to adjust, but the faster you settle three things, the easier this camp will run for you.”

Angela liked it that she wasn’t the only one who was unsure exactly what to do. She answered reasonably. “You tell me, I’ll argue, and we’ll go from there.”

Kevin blinked. “Uh, yeah. Okay.” He cleared his throat again. “Your chain of command, your rules and punishments, and a meeting where you tell the camp those things.”

Angela raised a brow. “What’s the third?”

Kevin made a face. “That was all three.”

Angela was eager to rise to the challenge she’d been gifted with. “Picking and then telling the camp are on the same ticket. The second is getting the camp to approve my choices. What’s the third?”

Neil was impressed. He and Kyle had thrown that in with no real hopes she’d catch it due to their clever wording. “Third is following through—getting it to all work.”

Kevin frowned. “Do you know how you’re going to get their approval?”

Angela peered toward the medical tent, able to feel Adrian hanging on to a temporary alertness so

he could hear her say she had it covered. He was ready to give up.

Yes, the witch confirmed. He brought Conner here and gave you control. He will not keep fighting without a goal...and those who cannot find hope will not survive.

It was a mirror of what the witch had told her back in Ohio. Angela glanced at the men waiting nervously for her answer. “No, I don’t.”

She retreated before they could respond. Of course, she knew how to do it. She had to save Adrian’s life, lead Safe Haven to the mountains, and start settling them inside. During that time, she also had to convince the camp to accept the magic in their midst and help fight the government troops that would come.

Kevin’s face was red as he caught up. “Sorry. I didn’t know they were testing you.”

Angela shrugged. “They got you too, rookie.”

“Yeah.” He grunted. “This is all new. I never thought they’d recommend me for this.”

“Recommend? I get a choice?”

“Sure. Neil said you’d probably let Marc know who you prefer for your...” Kevin paused, unsure what place he’d been shoved into.

Angela filled in the title with grave pride. “Personal assistant to the leader of Safe Haven Refugee Camp.”

Kevin’s mind went to places he knew better than to mourn. Those days would come around again. They were working hard on it even now. “I

won't be mad if you let me go for Kyle or Jeremy, or someone who already knows how the inside stuff works."

From that, Angela understood Kevin had been given the chance at a place all the men would want. He was being rewarded for his steadfast performance in Little Rock, she was sure, but there was a feeling it might be more.

"I mean it. I won't be mad. I don't have enough experience for this."

She grunted. "That makes two of us." Angela ducked into the medical tent and went to Adrian, ignoring all those observing her. There were only Eagles in this tent, plus John, Anne, and Conner. The time for hiding what she was, at least with this group, was over.

Angela raised a hand over Adrian's feverish body; the witch scanned him.

Dying, came the prompt answer. *Poison and infection.*

I have to have Adrian. I can't do this without his guidance.

You know the price?

I do.

And you pay it willingly?

Marc will be Charlie's lifeline?

Yes. Fathers have the same gifts.

And Adrian's right about what he put in the notebook? That...Marc's been lying to himself and everyone else?

Yes.

Then save Adrian. If the need ever comes, Marc will cover Charlie.

As you wish.

Now?

You haven't recovered enough. Another 12 hours.

He may not have that long.

Adrian didn't wake, but she sensed he wasn't so far under she couldn't reach him. How long would it hold?

Angela turned toward the cooler and got a bottle of water. The more she drank, the faster the chemicals would leave her system. She searched herself briefly over the choice to save Adrian and found a strange chill that hadn't been there before. She should be devastated Marc had lied, but she wasn't. She hadn't been even from the instant she'd read that curtly scribbled paragraph.

For personal reasons, I've chosen not to tell her what Marc's hiding. When she runs that blue glow through the filters, does she miss the meaning intentionally? I wonder if she hasn't known all along and allowed him to hide it because she knows what an ugly burden it is to be born this way.

Yes, she did understand the price of power, but that wasn't how it had happened. Until Safe Haven, she hadn't suspected at all. Once here, though, Marc had fit Adrian's leadership profile a bit too closely to be overlooked by the boss man. That had been her first clue—that Adrian found Marc useful enough to take advice and use him in FND work. Then,

she'd noticed Marc's way with the camp women, heard him using it. Moments from their childhood had flashed her to the magic they'd always shared, to how he'd always understood her so well. By the time the glow had happened, it had only been a confirmation that she'd been scared to get before then. That was why she'd never filled up from him. They both would have had to face his lie.

Dribbling water, Angela wiped her mouth and mind clear as John joined her. She had work to do. Speculation and conversation would keep. "Have him ready to go out for evening mess and then get him prepped. Wait as long as you can to call me. I still have drugs in my blood that will interfere."

"Can we get another water truck and two more tents set up? A few of the patients can be switched out to give privacy and space."

Thrilled to be getting a cover story with the request, Angela was able to sound almost cheerful. "You, doctor, can have about anything you want." She hated witnesses.

John grunted, unable to play along. "How about the cure for Cancer?"

Angela viewed him in dismay. "It's back? Already?"

John took off his glasses, rubbing restlessly at the frame. "This is a particularly aggressive type. The chemicals we're absorbing are feeding it, I think."

Angela asked the question that now mattered most to her. “How many people in camp have terminal cancers?”

John didn’t meet her observant stare. “More than a dozen, with twice that many suspected.”

“Oh, my god!” Was this covered in one of Adrian’s notebooks? “That’s like... That’s...”

“Almost a sixth of them.”

Angela turned to stare toward the camp she could hear waking. One in six. There was no way she could help them all.

“He said to tell you not to drown in the bad—to swim through it.”

Angela tried to breathe normally. She wasn’t drowning in pity—she was furious. How dare fate take yet another cut! John’s hand on her arm was a warm comfort she shrugged off. “I’ll work on it. You’ll have him ready?”

“For both appointments.” John slid his glasses on. “You know he’ll be groggy and in pain. They might see through his act.”

Angela sighed, moving for the flap to relay the doctor’s needs to Kevin. “Yes. I also know Adrian would rather be with his people than anywhere else. He’ll pull strength from their joy. They won’t know, but they’ll be the ones who really save him.”

Angela ducked out of the medical flap with guilt and anger fighting for room in her heart. They had five men inside with serious gunshot wounds, one with a high fever of unknown origin, and three with minor bone breaks. It had been a rough mission.

Twenty-four confident, eager men had gone into that city with her. That number had come out, but none of them were the same.

“What should I do?”

Angela let Cynthia stay close as she left the medical tent. “Get the team—you’re in charge on this one. I want the kids’ group working the QZ gate. Have them scan every living thing that gets close to this camp. When there’s a lull, I want them patrolling the perimeter with the senior Eagles. Make it clear they do as they’re told or they return to being camp kids. We want their help, but don’t need it should be the undertone.”

Cynthia left without looking at Kevin.

“We hear from Kenn yet?” Angela asked.

Kevin made a motion to the perimeter man and got a quick response. “He checked in before dawn, but not since.”

“I want him first when he gets home.” Angela gave an order without realizing it. “Make sure I’m here for it.”

“I will.”

Angela spotted Mitch in the coffee line. “That’s different.”

Kevin filled her in on Mitch, the group fistfight, and gave her an update on Dog. Neil had shoved a paper into his hand while he waited at the medical flap for her.

Angela wanted to spend a few minutes thinking about all three reports, but she couldn’t spare the time. The problems with their animal population

would also have to wait. “John needs help in here. Go visit these people and tell them it’s time they used their skills instead of mooching in fear.”

Kevin recorded the names and left. These women had nursing skills, but hadn’t told Adrian? Didn’t they know they would have been priority members? Kevin was still pondering the weakness fear created as he crossed into the main camp.

Angela spotted Marc across the distance. That was another change she wanted to explore, but she headed for the little mess instead, where Li Sing was directing food into the smaller bins. She needed to study the area for a minute. They had to be careful not to let the camp know how injured Adrian was and that required a good illusion.

“Coffee?”

Angela smiled gratefully as Li Sing hurried to push a steaming mug into her hand.

“Sit, eat.”

Angela wasn’t going to, but the smell of freshly baked bread caught her nose and pulled her onto the bench. “Just for a minute.”

Li Sing went to carve a thick slice.

Angela took her notebook out. Around her, the camp and QZ were slowly waking. It was okay to steal a personal minute—something she hadn’t had since before going into Little Rock. Later, it would be impossible.

“Butter?”

Angela tore off a small chunk. “Nope.”

The warm bread was perfect, and she found herself sitting quietly instead of viewing the notes and to-do list she'd made. The sound of the camp coming to life was...magical.

“You look like him. Stop it.”

Angela didn't answer Kyle's half-joke as he came through the netting around the mini-mess.

He filled a tray with enough food and drinks to outfit a small army, and Angela gave him an approving nod as he slipped right back out. Kyle was off duty now. He'd more than earned the break.

Crack!

A number of people flinched at the distant thunder. It was something they hadn't heard in months.

“Yeah, that timing figures.” Angela wasn't bitter. They'd known rain was coming. Adrian would have prepared for it.

As if to mock the assumption, a stiff breeze began rustling the papers in her notebook.

Angela pulled the pen from the holder. Her minute was up.

2

“How is he?”

Chris jumped at the hostile voice, backing away from the food bowl he'd just set down. “Perfect—like there wasn't even a fight.”

Marc scowled. “Maybe there wasn't!”

Chris retreated as Marc came closer. It was easy to guess the man was upset. The vet grabbed for a calming trigger. “How’s Adrian?”

Marc growled.

Chris cowered along the tent wall. *Wrong button!*

Dog was instantly alarmed at the waves in the tent. This wasn’t the master he’d chosen to serve. This was the Marine—who Dog happened to loathe. The wolf wasn’t sure what had occurred after the fight. The last thing he remembered was falling on top of the pile he had already killed, as more of them attacked.

Marc clenched his fists, throwing out a cold warning. “If anyone suspects what I did, you’re who I’ll talk to about it.”

Chris stammered out a promise, but it wasn’t enough for Marc.

“That includes the chain of command—all of it.”

Chris understood, but unlike the Eagles, he wasn’t bonded with Adrian that way. In fact, in another world, he and Marc might even have been some semblance of friends. Considering who this hard man was sleeping with, it wouldn’t happen now. “They’ll think it wasn’t bad, that I took care of it. Keep him in here for a bit to cover.”

Satisfied, Marc delivered a last blast from his anger supply. “Mitch told me he saw you skulking around the night of the sinkhole. I’m checking into that when shit settles down around here. Now get out.”

Chris fled, shaking with fear and anger. Marc thought he could make changes while Adrian was laid up, did he?

“But he didn’t notice he had help.” Chris hadn’t been able to leave the wolf to suffer. Marc’s magic had done wonders, saved the animal, but the vet had also contributed.

Chris hurried toward the animal trailer; mind a furious maze of secrets and scars. “I’ll show him. And when I do, she won’t want him anymore.”

Marc knelt to stroke the wolf, not reacting to Dog’s reluctance. The animal would always sense the difference, but Marc had no choice in how he handled the vet. Adrian’s traditional methods had barely worked on Chris before. This required sterner measures and he’d had to bring the military man inside forward to do it. Marc didn’t like being mean, even to those he mistrusted or didn’t care for. It wasn’t in his nature.

Dog relaxed as the air of menace faded. He enjoyed the rub Marc was delivering. Dog wished he could speak to Marc, as he did some of the others here. He needed to express his gratitude, but more, to warn Marc.

Marc knew Dog was special. He’d watched Adrian put the wolf to work and been glad. He, too, understood what it meant to be needed, to have a place.

“But not this one.” Marc frowned. “The load is too heavy. It’ll use us both up.”

Dog nudged Marc's hands. He switched ears, wishing he could talk to Dog. He wasn't sure what he'd say, other than to ask if the wolf had another name he preferred. After all these years, 'Dog' felt rude. The big animal was much more than that.

Dog strained, not sure if it could be done, but willing to try...

Marc stilled at the new sensation. He knew what it was—someone inexperienced trying to find a line in... Sudden intuition made him drop his mental walls.

Take her and run—now.

Marc drew his gun, even though he connected the deep voice to Dog almost instantly. “Where’s the threat?”

In the medical tent, about to be healed.

Marc winced, holstering. “The first time we’ve spoken and that’s what you pick?”

Dog blew out a damp snort. *A warning to get your mate and go, while you still have her. Isn't that valuable?*

Marc sighed. “It would be, if I didn’t already know.”

Dog glanced up in confusion.

Marc forced the words out. “My time with her is limited. I don’t know why, or what I can do that would possibly change it without hurting all these people, but I know she’ll leave me. At some point, she won’t be satisfied.”

Dog didn’t know what to say, beyond the obvious. *Why would you accept that?*

“I haven’t. I’ll fight for her until I’m dead...or until she says she’s done. When I hear that, I’m gone.”

Why would you go through so much pain for something you have no hope of keeping?

“Love sucks like that, Dog. It doesn’t give you a choice.”

Dog considered. *Like the breeding heats.*

Marc was startled into a smile. “Uh, yeah, I guess. You have no choice, right?”

Dog whined lowly. *I’d hurt you, if you got in the way.*

Marc understood. Some things just pulled a male like that.

What will you do after?

Marc grunted. “No idea. Find a substitute and hurt, take off and roam this dead world, blow my brains out... It’s hard to say at this point.” Marc shook off the depression. “But for right now, I plan to enjoy every second she gives me. I had no idea what I was missing. I thought I did, but Angie willing is...”

Dog whined again, burying his head under a large paw.

Marc laughed. “Sorry.”

Dog rolled over. *I’ll stay out of sight for a while.*

Marc was reminded of his secret, but Dog already knew what he wanted there too.

I would never volunteer such information.

Marc didn’t want to ask, but he had to. “And if she questions you directly on it?”

Dog, who was sure telling Adrian those forbidden things had caused his near-death, made his choice quickly. *I won't answer in any way that would imply I was healed.*

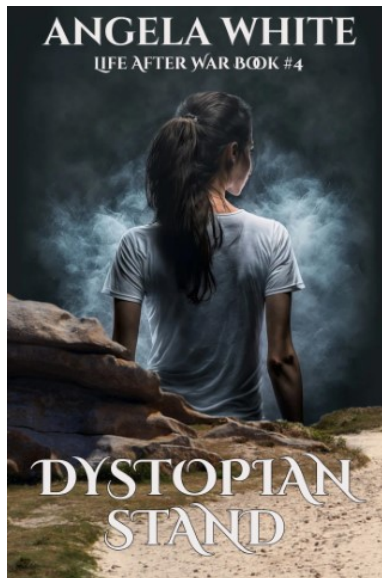
“Can she...” Marc sighed. “Could she pry it out of your mind?”

She won't need to. If I refuse to answer, she'll know it's to protect someone.

“She won't think of me.” Marc hated keeping secrets from her.

What happens when she finds out?

Not if, but when. Marc stood up and left the tent without answering.



[Dystopian Stand](#)