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THE RHYN TRILOGY & WAR OF GODS SERIES

Lizzy Ford

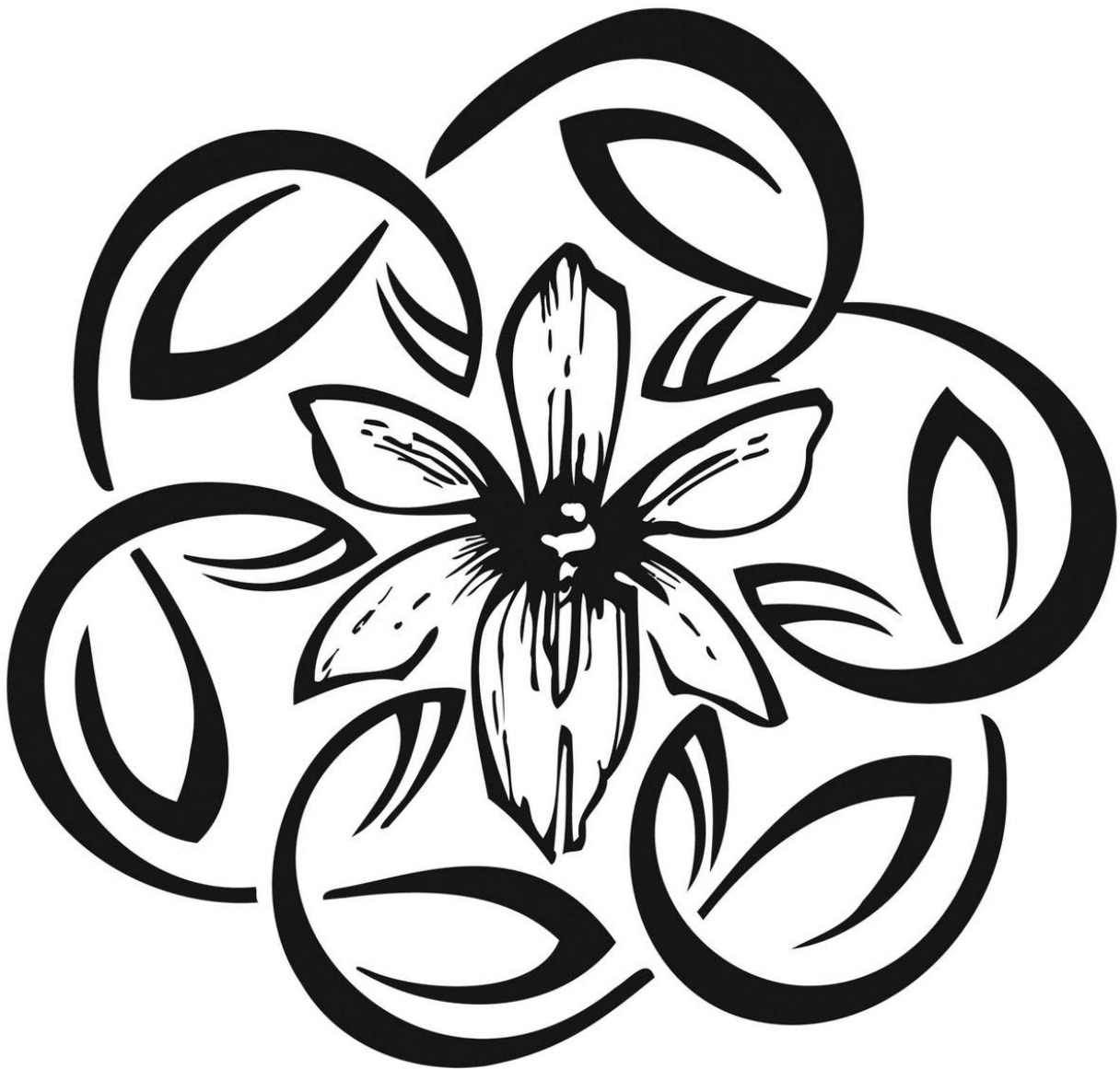


**REBEL
HEART**

Rebel Heart

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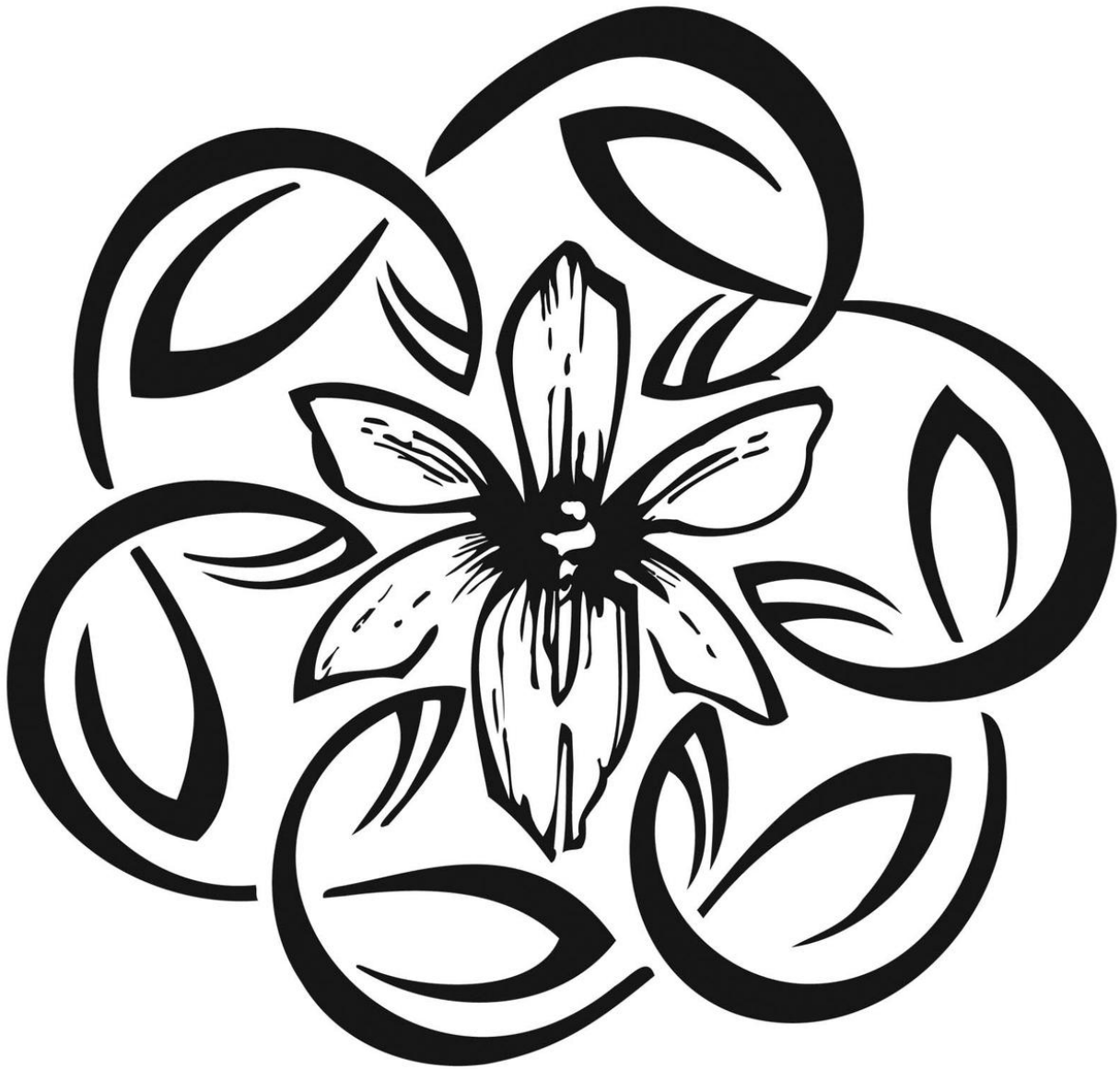
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Chapter One

United States, 2135 AD

LANA CRACKED AN EYE open wide enough to see it was too early for her alarm to sound. The buzzing continued, and she pushed herself up on one elbow. She focused on the dim light of her microcomputer acting as a page marker in the antique book on her nightstand. She touched the subcutaneous communications implant behind her right ear, which activated the communications net, and rolled onto her back.

“Hello?” she murmured.

“Mornin’, sunshine. I need you to get up now.”

“Mr. Tim?” At the familiar voice and stiff order, she struggled into a sitting position.

“Didn’t think I had it in me, did you?” he asked.

“I’m sorry?”

“You’re always saying I’d never survive without you to feed me people’s contact information.”

“This would be the first time you remembered by net number,” she said.

“I remember when it’s important enough.”

Amused, Lana tossed off her coverlet. She padded towards her desk, where the Undersecretary of Domestic Security’s electronic records were maintained within a secured, portable vault the size of her hand.

“Who do you need to contact?” she asked.

“No one yet, but bring my vault with you.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Now.”

Lana suppressed a sigh.

“You know what to do in emergencies?” Mr. Tim’s voice was low and quiet.

“Yes.”

“Then do it. I’m already here and will await you. I’ve asked someone to call you and provide you instructions on how to get here using a few unconventional routes. Avoid the main roads and any monitored road. Please follow his directions.”

The massive shepherd mix dog sleeping on her couch rose and trotted across the small apartment to her. Its nails clicked on the hard flooring. Lana's gaze lingered in its direction, her heart quickening. Something about Mr. Tim's urgent tone told her this wasn't an exercise.

"Sir, how long should I plan on staying?" she asked. "The kennels don't open until—"

"You have a dog?"

"You bought him for me," she reminded him. "Three years ago for my birthday."

"Right," he said with an uneasy chuckle. "Leave him with the neighbor. Bring uniforms, as many as you have clean."

"Yes, sir," she said. "You need me to contact any of your companions or anyone else from the office?"

"You're an angel, Lana. No, thanks. They'll figure it out as soon as they see the news."

Lana frowned.

"Hurry, kid. Oh, and Lana?"

"Yes, sir?"

"Don't contact anyone once we're done talking. I'm pretty sure this network is monitored. The man who will call you next will do so on a secure net. He's an army-type and has strict instructions, so don't be offended if he's less than conversational. Got it?"

"Yes, sir."

"See you soon."

Her hand lingered above the keypad of her wardrobe. Adrenaline hit her as she realized this was not a drill. Something was wrong.

She dressed in a comfortable uniform marking her as a civilian member of the government service before hesitating to choose what uniforms to bring: the summer- or winter-weight uniforms. She snapped the markers indicating her rank—Special Assistant to the Undersecretary of the Domestic Security Service.

She chose three summer-weight uniforms, three winter-weight uniforms, and enough undergarments for two weeks. She tossed in her exercise clothing before swiping a photo-generator from her wardrobe and tucking it into the pockets of her suitcase. Nerves made her movements clumsy while her mind sought some forgotten information about a threat great enough to

rouse the Undersecretary and his staff in the middle of the night. She almost forgot her microcomputer and snagged it as she strode to the door.

She stepped into the night blanketing the neighborhood, struck by the quiet. At two in the morning, she was the only one to stir in the crowded condo community. Moonlight spilled over large buildings with triangular roofs into community squares abutting stacked parking lots. Darkness settled into corners and crevices beyond the moon's touch. She took in the scene, unable to explain the sense of doom settling in her stomach. If an incident occurred, why was no one else in the government service housing community awake?

Even the beggars outside the thick, bulletproof glass of the main gate were quiet, their small fires dark.

Jack, the shepherd mix, nudged her, and she trotted down the stairs and up the steps to her elderly neighbor's condo. Mrs. Watson answered the door with a shotgun over her shoulder, her wrinkled face peering up at Lana.

"Boss call you out again?" she asked.

"Yes. I'm not sure how long it'll be."

"Jack's half mine anyway. He's here more than my grandkids."

Lana smiled and stepped aside. Accustomed to late-night jaunts to the neighbor's, Jack walked into the condo and took up his spot on the couch.

"Thanks, Mrs. Watson," she said.

"Drive safe."

Lana nodded and stepped away. Her personal net buzzed, and she touched the area behind her ear again.

"Hello?"

"I'm calling on behalf of Tim." The masculine voice was low and calm, his speech marked by a Southern drawl.

"I believe you have directions for me?" she asked. She hurried to her greencar, trailed by the self-propelled suitcase.

"I'm going to take you the scenic route," the man said. "If we're cut off, I'll call back immediately. If the network doesn't work, there's a radio in your greencar."

She reached the greencar. Her gaze dropped to the driver's seat, where a small black military radio sat where none had been when she left the car. She looked around her, puzzled. Thus far, Mr. Tim was not following

typical protocol for emergencies. He hadn't issued an emergency order over the nets of those who worked for him, and he'd asked someone in the regular military to contact her rather than calling out his special security forces.

"You there?" the soldier prompted impatiently.

"Yes," she replied. "How bad is it?"

"Be assured that you're in no danger," he said in a clipped tone. "Your call sign for the radio is Angel. Mine is Guardian. The correct channel has been programmed into it. Place your thumb on the pad, and it'll signal me. Follow my instructions no matter what. Understood?"

"Yes."

"Let's go."

The Peak was abuzz with activity when Lana arrived several hours later. During exercises, the government's premier contingency operations compound in the Appalachian Mountains of Tennessee was populated only by maintenance crews and a few relaxed guards. She parked in her assigned spot and emerged from the car, startled by the scores of personnel already present. The gate guards were doubled, armed and wearing tactical gear, the perimeter lit by intense floodlights. Helicopters thumped in the distance while military patrols roared overhead.

The air was charged by the activated electromagnetic field surrounding the compound. Lana snapped her identification chip to her uniform before proceeding to the operations control center with Mr. Tim's portable vault. Alerted to her passage through the perimeter by the microchip implant in her brain, Mr. Tim intercepted her before she reached the command and control hub.

"Good to see you, kid," he said with warmth, drawing her off the sidewalk as two soldiers hurried by. "Guardian do you good?" His accent appeared when he was too stressed to be concerned about emulating the flat, cultured accent of the political elite.

"Yes, sir," she answered. "What's going on?"

The thump of a helicopter drew nearer. Roving searchlights splashed the Undersecretary with brilliant white light. Despite his urgency, Mr. Tim was immaculately dressed, his silvered hair clashing with features rendered

youthful by multiple advanced cosmetic surgeries. Blue eyes were sharp and his handsome façade calm. He shielded his eyes.

“Worst-case scenario,” he said with a contagious half-smile. “That’s my helo coming. You’re staying here. I’m evacuating with the President and others to the West Coast site.”

“Evacuating?” she echoed, fear sliding through her.

“They’re leaving a fool named Arnie in charge here. His second-in-command is General Greene, a war hero worth his pay. You’re officially now detailed to the VP’s staff; however, you’ll remain a permanent member of my staff. I’ve already warned him that you’re still mine, and I have no intention of doing anything more than lending you to him. You’re the future of this ill-run—”

“Sir,” she interrupted. “What’s happening?”

“We’ve been attacked,” he replied. “Most of the eastern seaboard is in shambles. Nukes in New York and Miami and most of the other major cities. Reminiscent of the Civil War fifty years ago, only the PMF is being blamed. We’ve issued warning orders for the populace to avoid the cities, and we’re stopping and quarantining everyone at the Mississippi. We’ve gotta treat as many people as we can who are suffering from radiation poisoning.”

She was silent, shocked.

“Shame,” he whispered, an odd note in his voice. “There will be no peace talks between the PMF and the government now.”

“My god!” she managed at last. “Why would there be after this?”

“They aren’t responsible!” he snapped sharply enough to make her jump. “You’re too smart to assume anything. This isn’t their MO. You know they believe in national unity and rights for the poor. If anything, the strikes look like something that would’ve occurred during the East-West Civil War.”

Startled by his response, she mumbled an apology.

“Tim, helo!” a dark figure shouted from the awaiting shuttle.

“Got it, James. Hold the shuttle!” he called before addressing her again. “Listen, Lana. The country is in chaos right now. The government is crippled. We’ve pulled in some of our deployed forces from the wars to assist, but they will take some time to arrive. We must maintain East Coast operations from here. Assess what damage you can and rebuild the critical infrastructure systems. I know you, and you’re one of the few here I can

trust. I wouldn't have spent years grooming you for this type of event if I didn't believe in you. Understand?"

"Yes, sir."

"Don't trust anyone here. I'll send help for you when I can. I've asked the Guardian to remain in contact with you. I fought side by side with his older brother years ago at the end of the war; I know the type of honor that runs in his family. He specializes in discreet, highly contained domestic counter insurgency and counterterrorism operations. He'll advise you and help you in ways I can't. You can trust him. I do."

She listened, unable to fathom the magnitude of chaos he spoke of.

"Protect those below. Some of the private industry's greatest minds are with the VP in the cliff. The VP you can let rot," he added.

She smiled faintly despite her concern.

"General Greene has spent too long at war overseas to know where Ohio is. I've told him you'll help him."

"Of course, sir, but I—"

"Take care, Lana. I hope to see you again."

His ominous farewell silenced her. She watched him as he walked with confident, quick strides to the awaiting shuttle. The shuttle disappeared behind buildings as it headed towards one of the seven helipads on the compound. Heart pounding hard, she turned to face her destination: the command hub, where all emergency operations and critical infrastructure back-up networks and systems for the East Coast were routed in a time of crisis.

"You there, Angel?" Guardian's voice penetrated her spinning thoughts.

"Yes."

"You all right?"

"I don't know," she admitted.

He was quiet for a moment before he spoke in a softer tone. "I won't let anything happen to you, Angel."

She bit her lip, wondering why the gentle words of a stranger affected her as they did. A gust of pine and jet fuel scented wind whipped by her. She stared at a helicopter as it lifted nimbly into the air, imagining Mr. Tim and other politicians aboard it. Two more helicopters landed at different helipads while the searchlights continued to rove the compound. Members of the elite federal government and military personnel darted between

greencars and buildings, the buzz of radios and shouts adding to the compound's chaos.

"I'm not ready for the end of the world," she whispered.

"I'm glad I thought to create an emergency chocolate stash."

"*Chocolate?*"

"I've got extra," he said. "If our paths cross, it will probably signal the end of the world, but if they do, I'll consider sharing. Guardian out."

Lana shook her head, wondering what kind of man thought of chocolate at such a time.

Chapter Two

Two weeks later

MAJOR BRADY HANSON HELD out a hand to the man dressed in the PMF's gray uniform beside him. His best friend, Dan, tossed him a micro. Brady glanced at it, sweating despite the cool antechamber of their secret communications point. Each trip up the side of the mountain grew harder as chaos erupted along the East Coast and drove refugees through Brady's area of operation.

Brady's arm of the militia, the Appalachia Branch, stretched from northern Georgia up through Virginia and was one of the largest in the PMF, the only thing good to come of the East-West Civil War. The PMF—Poor Man's Front—had started as a protest during the war against the elite that ultimately won and divided the American society between those who lived comfortably—and everyone else.

But his branch of the militia wasn't equipped to help refugees. He could only steer them towards the Underground Railroad, the secretive systems of bunkers and tunnels running beneath major cities that were developed by the PMF during the ten-year war. Meanwhile, his people acted as the eyes on the ground to the regular military, most of which was exiled overseas after the war to prevent the divided political elite from seizing control of it again.

Brady entered the code from his micro onto the keypad beside the metal door in front of him. Dwindling supplies made surviving the day enough of a challenge without scaling a mountain at night. The door opened, and they entered the secret communications site, one of two in the territory he commanded.

Tim, his government contact and the highest-ranking individual in the PMF, was already on screen when Brady entered the comms center. As an influential Undersecretary in the fed command and control structure, Tim had access to all kinds of information that helped Brady's chances of survival.

"You received my latest transmission of the cities that are beyond repair?" Tim asked.

"Last night. They've been infrequent," Brady replied. "The comms have gone up and down, depending on how close we are to the nuked areas."

"I didn't expect the critical infrastructure to disintegrate so fast. Guess I shouldn't be surprised. The eastern part of the country has always had a rather

lackadaisical approach to maintenance,” Tim said.

“As opposed to you Westerners, where life is perfect.”

“Someday, you’ll have to come visit,” Tim said with a hint of his famous smile. “It’s difficult for me to transmit undetected with the comms being down everywhere back east. I’m sorry to keep pulling you here when you have work to do elsewhere.”

“No worries, Tim. You know I always support you. And I appreciate the info you’re sending us,” Brady said. “There’s a lot of shit going on over here. We wouldn’t know the half of it without your intel.”

“There’s a lot more going on than we expected. I’ll do what I can to get you more frequent updates, but I can’t guarantee anything. You try asking Angel?”

“Doubt some poor girl would know anything,” Brady replied. “Should she?”

“She might have some insight. She’s uniquely positioned. Have you talked to her recently?”

“Yes,” Brady said. “She’s fine.”

“Good.” Tim seemed genuinely pleased.

Brady wondered, not for the first time, what Tim’s relationship was to the girl. The politician hadn’t ordered any of his companions or his thirteen sons protected, and she was important enough that Tim asked about her every time they spoke. Whatever their connection, it was none of his business. He was charged with protecting her. And apparently, everyone else this side of the Mississippi as well.

“Your base camp isn’t on the feds’ radar yet,” Tim said. “I think they’re too busy with everything else right now. Even so, you want to be wary of the spread of radiation in the aquifers.”

“I’m not ten, Tim,” Brady said with a small smile. “We carry our own water and testing equipment.”

“Your family and mine would kill me if I let anything happen to you,” Tim said, returning the smile.

“We’ve been balancing both our demanding masters the past few weeks,” Brady said, referring to his PMF militia duties and his official regular military duties. “The regular army’s got us running around between fed strongholds to assess damage to fed facilities and PMF HQ wants us helping refugees. It’s a mess, Tim.”

“How bad is it?”

“Irreparable,” Dan supplied. “We’re surviving because of our position with the PMF and no other reason. No other regular army unit has a chance out here.

We lost comms with the few who came from Ft. Bragg. Something weird is going on.”

Tim frowned. “Define weird.”

“Check your micro,” Brady said. He looked down and sent images to Tim.

Tim looked down. “What the hell?” he muttered.

“Something going on you want to tell us about? Like part two of the East-West War? These men aren’t wearing Western uniforms for their health.”

“The government has been divided since the war, but it didn’t seem possible that this could happen.”

“The good thing is recruitment is up,” Brady said.

“Just be leery of who you trust.” The silver-haired man offered a distracted smile. “Seems like so much death should be avoidable in this day and age. All my charm and diplomacy is hitting a brick wall.”

“War isn’t pretty,” Brady agreed. “We’ll keep sending refugees west.”

“The feds sealed off the Mississippi using the equipment left over from the war fifty years ago. You’d think the plan was to help the survivors, but I’m in a constant battle with others who want to wipe out everything east of the Mississippi and just start over. I figured it was all talk. Looks like some of them might be serious.” Tim looked up from the images on his micro.

“Jesus,” Dan breathed. “Please warn us if that happens.”

“If I find out first, I will.” Tim’s frustration was plain on his face.

Brady shifted uneasily. He’d never seen the politician up against something he couldn’t defeat. Tim looked worn. His friend was keeping secrets.

“I may need you to act quickly in the near future to interfere,” Tim said. “And, I might need a few assassinations called in to keep things from blowing up on your side of the river.”

“You know I’ll do anything you ask,” Brady said. “Just contact me when you need me.”

“Will do. I’m off to another meeting.”

“Take care.”

“You, too.”

Tim’s face disappeared from the screen. Brady glanced at his best friend, who shook his head.

“I can’t see how this could get much worse,” Dan said.

“I’m sure there’s a way,” Brady said.

“At least you got Angel to talk to. It’s about time for your daily chat, isn’t it?”

Brady eyed his friend, who tried hard not to smile. What had started out as a pain-in-the-ass babysitting favor to Tim had turned gradually into something he looked forward to. He checked in daily with the soft-spoken woman he'd nicknamed Angel. He'd known Tim his whole life and knew all of Tim's consorts and children by name, if not by sight.

Tim had never mentioned Angel to him before asking him to take care of her.

"I'll contact the helo," Dan said with a wink and left.

Brady opened his channel. "Checking in."

"Good evening to you, too," Angel replied after a pause.

"You sound beat."

"I am. I started learning to shoot a laser gun today," she said. "I'm not very good."

"All it takes is practice. The way things are going, you need to learn to shoot," he said.

"You really think so?"

Brady frowned. Whoever Angel was, she was sheltered. He'd surmised she was somewhere this side of the Mississippi, but he couldn't understand how she didn't know how bad it was.

"Maybe." He softened his words. "It's a good skill to have."

"Did anyone try to blow you up today?"

He chuckled. "Not yet."

"That's good."

"You'd miss talking to me?"

"Yes," she said simply.

"You're the only one."

"No companion or wife anywhere?"

"They'd be in a million pieces right now if so. Don't know if you noticed, but it's a warzone."

"I am so sorry," she said, sounding distraught. "I didn't even think to ask if you lost anyone."

"I didn't. It was my attempt at humor," he explained, not unaffected by her concern. It had been years since he'd heard a woman's compassion. "Did you lose anyone?"

"No. Well, yes. Maybe."

Brady waited, unusually interested in her answer. He expected her to name off Tim and answer his unasked question about the relationship between the

two of them.

“My dog, Jack. I left him with my neighbor and haven’t been able to reach her.”

“Your dog,” he said. “Dogs are good at surviving on their own. No one else?”

“No. You sound surprised.”

“Just curious.” He heard the beat of a helo approaching. “I’ll keep an eye out for any lost dogs.” As he spoke, he strode from the comms room to the ledge outside. He trotted up a set of shallow stairs chiseled into the mountain to the helipad where Dan waited. “I gotta go, Angel. I’ll contact you later.”

“Good luck.”

“Get some sleep. Guardian out.”

He trotted to join Dan as the helo lowered from the sky. His thoughts were on Angel. Some evenings, he talked with her until she lost the edge of worry in her voice. Other evenings were like this one, where he checked in and went about his business. In both cases, he found himself looking forward to hearing her voice—and making sure she was still alive. He wasn’t sure how he’d break the news to Tim if something happened to her.

The helo hovered near the edge of the plateau. A ladder lowered, and Brady vaulted onto it, followed by Dan. They sat and pulled out laser guns, arming them and waiting as the helo took them down the mountain again to their awaiting teams.

Brady’s focus returned to his mission. They’d identified a small town where the soldiers in Western uniforms had holed themselves. He had no idea who they were, except that sightings of them became regular soon after the nuke attacks on the East Coast.



“I said, security to command! You surface dwellers better not be sleeping, or ___”

In the quite, dark command center, Lana awoke from her doze with a jerk at the peeved female’s voice, the dream of her journey to the Peak fading. She slapped the pad to open the command center’s internal network. The communications screen lit up one wall, displaying one of the genetically altered women in the elite special operations security team. Unlike the regular military, the political elite’s security private forces were made up of children from the upper class to prevent the elite class from becoming polluted by the poor.

The muscular woman, with short blond hair and clad in black tactical gear, stood in a stark white hallway. Green eyes sparkled despite her irritated tone.

“I’m here, I’m here, Elise,” Lana mumbled.

“Lana!” Elise’s voice brightened. “I’m happy it’s you. Greenie got you working nights, too?”

“Yes. Everything okay?”

“Just bored.”

Lana’s body ached from sleeping in chairs. She shook her head to clear it and looked around. The command hub held a dozen workstations, one for each eastern critical infrastructure, and a wall secured behind titanium glass of keypads, buttons, and computer screens that acted as the emergency backup. The Eastern Command Center had served as the headquarters for the Eastern armies during the East-West Civil War. After the war, it remained a central hub.

The other walls of the octagon-shaped command center were occupied by silent, animated screens similar to the one the underground security commander appeared on. Computers hummed, the sound enough to lull Lana to sleep nearly every shift she spent alone in the vault despite the sleep replacement supplements—known as anti-sleepers—she took.

She paced in front of one wall, staring again at the map of the eastern U.S., where the attacks and their kill zones were marked with a running timeline beneath it. The major cities in the East hit by nukes were marked in red with concentric circles that faded to orange, yellow, and finally green as they stretched west. With the exception of a few isolated pockets of green, most of the East Coast was shaded with red, orange, or yellow, while the Midwest was a mix of greens and yellows.

“You’re obsessed,” Elise said. “What is it now?”

“The usual. I’m missing something.”

“You and everyone else around here. You know tonight I had to prevent the VP’s commo guy from using the emergency network to order gin? Someone down here wants martinis.”

Lana sighed. She crossed to the communication master workstation and checked the systems. The emergency network had not been utilized, which meant that by morning one of the high-ranking men hiding underground would be on the phone to General Greene to complain about the lack of gin.

“Water, I can understand. That’s a big deal,” Elise continued. “The network good?”

“Yeah. They didn’t use it. Will I be reading another report about you smacking someone?”

“Nope. Just told the commo guy he wouldn’t ever see the light of day again if he touched the commo pad.”

“I’m glad you’re down there, Elise,” she said. “I’m not sure I could tell the VP to sit down and shut up with the same panache you have.”

“It’s fun. How’s life in the sun? I thought Jim told me you’re seeing survivors at the gates?”

Lana’s smile faded. “Our location isn’t secret anymore,” she responded in a troubled tone. “It’s crazy around here sometimes.”

She was uneasy lingering on the events of the past week. The local populace—some dressed in the Western uniforms she’d seen in her history classes—was making its way towards the compound, lured by the rumors of the government compound and food, water, and medicines. She did not agree with the commander’s orders to kill anyone who stepped within range. Her gaze returned to the map.

“Everyone’s asleep, and I’m bored,” Elise complained. “Tell me why you always stare at that map whenever I call.”

“It just doesn’t make sense to me,” Lana began. She sat again in the uncomfortable chair that had become her alternate bed.

“What doesn’t?”

“We had no advanced warning that this was going to happen. That’s virtually impossible, Elise. The attacks on the coast occurred simultaneously with nukes that would’ve been impossible to hide, let alone smuggle into the country. No one has this capability, even the PMF.”

“I thought you domestic security types were supposed to be watching this kind of thing.”

“We do. We did. I’ve never seen anything indicating the PMF could wipe out the East Coast. It doesn’t fit with their alleged party objectives or any tactics they’ve ever employed.”

“No one else could’ve done it. Unless you know something I don’t?” Elise countered.

Lana said nothing. If not for Mr. Tim’s assertion, she would not have pursued her instincts. Research conducted during quiet nights such as this only bolstered her opinion that the only organization that might have the capabilities still couldn’t have done this. Her years of training led her to a conclusion she

couldn't yet embrace: that the only way to hide the large-scaled planning would require someone on the inside of the government.

Her gaze settled on the animated timeline. All of the attacks occurred between three fifteen in the morning and four thirty. Mr. Tim had called her well before. If he knew something was about to happen, then others within the government did as well. She just couldn't find it.

"I'll be rotating to the surface this afternoon," Elise said. "You with the psycho commander today?"

"Probably," Lana responded, turning away from the map. "General Greene is headed down there this morning. He normally keeps the commander close to him. I'll probably have to stay with Arnie if the general isn't around."

The door behind Lana slid open. She twisted in her seat to face General Greene, one of the three people on the compound authorized by the manic commander to be present in the command hub alone. His clothing was pressed and his appearance spry despite his almost sixty years.

"Elise out." The security commander's image disappeared from the screen.

Lana studied the general. To an outsider, he appeared as confident and fresh as a man just starting a mission after a good night's sleep. She, however, saw the lines of pain and exhaustion under his eyes. His right arm hung limply at his side. He had not used it in over a month.

"How are you feeling, sir?" she asked.

"Another beautiful day," he said. "Any word from the West?"

"No, sir."

"Maybe tomorrow," he said with a shrug. "The commander is officially no longer in command. The doc finally declared him unfit after his last episode."

Lana almost sighed in relief.

"No more lunatic rages or attempts to blast himself to the moon or whatever he was doing last week," General Greene added with a shake of his head. "Unfortunately, Arnie needs a babysitter, someone who can hush up anything he says that he shouldn't. There are only three of us here with access to that level of information, and I'm ordering you to do it."

"He has been very erratic lately," she agreed.

"He's so drugged up by the doc right now, even you should be able to handle him. He'll be replacing Elise as your current roommate for the time being. Anything happen last night?"

Lana grimaced internally at the thought of dealing with the crazy man who should've been running the command center instead of her. Arnie Smith had

fallen off the deep end soon after arriving to the Peak.

“Yes, sir,” she replied. “One of the generators is out. I don’t know that we have the expertise here to repair it at this time. We may be eating out of cans soon. Food stores are getting low up here.” She looked at her notes on her micro. “Also, South Carolina contacted us regarding water for its residents in Charlotte. I authorized the dispersal of two tons of water and twenty cases of rations from the emergency site in Raleigh along with hazmat drivers and twelve vehicles. It will tide them over while they try to repair their water system.”

“How are the power grids holding up?” he asked, gaze shifting to the screens around them.

Lana brought up the energy grids. The geospatial depiction of the country was crisscrossed with glowing colors and lines.

“Not well. Traditional power is mostly out all the way to the Mississippi River. Everything this side of the Mississippi is working on solar energy, but not all the facilities are equipped with energy storage, and because it’s fall, our energy collection is limited. It’s still a mess but better than it was.”

He frowned at the map before him.

“Teams are working to repair what they can,” she added more softly.

“Good enough,” he said. “Take a break for a couple of hours. The medics have your anti-sleepers ready. I don’t think things will get any better for us.”

Lana hesitated then went on with a frown. “Sir, we have another two weeks of supplies up here, if that. The guards have shot another dozen people around the perimeters, and our sensors indicate there is a small camp of some sort housing over a hundred survivors nearby and another one with several hundred at the bottom of the mountain,” she said. “I take it we’ve not heard from the central or west coast sites this week?”

“No, we haven’t.”

She waited for some assurance or direction. When he remained silent, she left.

Lana shivered as she stepped into the cold night. The sky was clear, one of the few clear nights since she arrived to the Peak. Normally, clouds hung around the mountaintop. She breathed the chilled air to clear her thoughts. Black-clad guards roamed the internal perimeter while others manned the walls of the compound. The pulse of the protective field surrounding the compound mixed with the distant howls of coyotes inhabiting the forest.

She hugged herself and treaded to the side of the main road down a small hill to the barracks housing the feds. The road edged a thatch of forest past the water treatment plant and the power plant, and circled the central command hub in which she worked before leading to the main entrance of the compound.

The walk was peaceful, the starry night and thrum of crickets easing her tired mind. She thought of Jack, hoping he was still safe with Mrs. Watson but not optimistic he was. She'd tried to contact Mrs. Watson several times the first week at the Peak before giving up. Her only regret in leaving everything behind was not bringing Jack with her.

A set of soldiers approached on patrol. Lana waved to them in greeting as she reached the barracks. She dreaded entering, wanting a moment of peace before being confined within the spartanly furnished room with the manic Arnie Smith. She turned away, crossed the road, and skirted the darkened helipad resting at the edge of a cliff overlooking an extensive valley.

She perched on one of the boulders lining the cliff edge and tucked her legs beneath her. The cliff's sheer drop created a natural defense against any intruders in addition to providing a view that was breathtaking by day or night. The valley appeared as vast as the sky, both stretching until they met a second range of mountains in the distance.

"Checking in." The Guardian's voice drifted over her personal net.

Pleased to hear from the Guardian, she found herself smiling. She knew little about the stranger who called to check on her every day, not even his real name, but she was always cheered by his familiar voice.

"I'm here," she answered. "You're still alive."

"For now. Fortunately, things look bleaker every day," he replied with amusement. "Isn't it past your bedtime?"

"I know—six hours a day," she said before he chided her as he often did. "I don't think I'll get any real sleep for a long time."

"How are things?"

"We have two weeks of food left and a commander confined to my quarters to ensure he doesn't do anything rash."

He chuckled.

"Is it that much of a mess out there?" she asked.

"Yeah. And we're almost out of supplies."

"You should have mentioned that before. Do you have your coordinates?" She withdrew a microcomputer from her pocket. "I can tell you where the

nearest emergency supply is. I'll release the locks, if you promise to take only what you need and not sell the rest, like the feds in Florida."

"You can do that?"

"Yes."

"What else can you do?" he asked.

"What else do you need?"

"More than you'd like to know," he promised. "For now, food and water will be good. We'll take what we need and nothing more. Sending coordinates."

She reviewed the numbers that popped up on her screen.

"You're not far," she murmured, typing in lock and alarm release codes. "I'm sending the location of the nearest supply center."

"If you control all these stores, why not send people out for food?" he asked.

"It's complicated," she responded, mind on the manic commander and his equally unreasonable decisions.

"Complicated," he repeated. "I won't ask. You go shooting this evening?"

"No. In the morning. My friend Elise is on the special security team. She lets me train with them, and the general is very supportive."

"Good girl."

"The locks will open at zero four twenty-five. The facility will rearm at four forty-nine exactly. You don't want to be trapped inside when it does."

"We'll move quickly."

Lana tucked the microcomputer away, gazing at the valley again.

"How are you?" he questioned.

"I'm well. Healthy, at least. I worry we won't be enough to maintain government ops for much longer. This type of contingency was not one we planned for. I guess I'm scared, but I'm too tired to tell," she answered. "I was thinking today that I wish my dog was with me, so I don't die alone. I had hoped to be married by this point of my life."

"Married? Even with the amendment outlawing divorce? Sounds like madness to me."

"There was a time when the national marriage rate was fairly high," she reminded him. "Before the East-West War. The point of being married is not to get a divorce."

"We see how well that worked. You have to admit that seven of ten marriages ending in divorce is not a very promising statistic. It's one of the few Wartime laws I agreed with. At least companions have the same rights as spouses without the hassle of marriage. That seems like a better deal to me."

“Didn’t you ever hear your grandparents tell stories about how they met and got married?” she pursued.

“Yes. And how they got divorced, my grandfather four times over.”

“My grandparents had better luck,” she admitted. “They met when the classes were divided after the war. My grandfather was from the elite and my grandmother from the manual labor class. He gave up everything to be with her, and they died quite old, holding hands even in the end.”

“You’re from the manual labor class?”

“I am. I guess my grandfather was at one time a friend of Mr. Tim’s. He contacted Mr. Tim when I was four, after my mother died. I never knew my father. Mr. Tim paid for my education and training. He sponsored my entrance into government service. I’ve worked for him since.”

“I never would have guessed,” Guardian said.

“Everyone assumes I was born into this class.”

“You carry yourself like you were. Look, I’m being summoned to hunt some bad men. God willing, I die in battle sometime soon. If not, I’ll make you a promise. Keep my men with food and water, and I’ll marry you if our paths ever cross,” he said. “I don’t starve, and you don’t die alone. Sound like a good plan?”

“I don’t think either of us will live that long, but I’ll agree to your terms,” she replied with a laugh. “Be safe, and don’t be in the facility when the alarm rearms.”

“Will do. Guardian out.”

Lana’s smile remained as she crossed the helipad towards the barracks. She tried not to think of the Guardian dying. He had been with her since the world began its plummet into chaos, and she hoped he remained at the other end of the network until the world righted itself. It was not likely for the paths of a soldier and a member of the political elite to cross paths, but he was the closest thing she had ever had to a friend since leaving her home at the age of four. Mr. Tim kept her too busy to allow her time to have her own life.

Her stomach fluttered at the idea of her Guardian offering to marry her. He was brusque and candid, two traits she hadn’t yet gotten used to. She’d daydreamed of what he looked like. Even if their paths never crossed, his offer still made her feel special in a way she’d never had time to experience with another man.

The net buzzed, and she tapped her implant to open her channel.

“Lana.” General Greene’s gruff voice held a tense note.

“Yes, sir?”

“Are you in the hub?”

“No, sir. You sent me home,” she reminded him.

“Someone’s in the hub, and it’s not me or you. You seen Arnie?”

“No, sir.”

“You may want to make your way back here. I think you’re the only one who knows how to fix anything that madman breaks.”

Her heart dropped to her stomach, and she ran. She reached the command hub to find the general pacing in front while three guards waited a short distance from him. The doorframe was red, indicating it was locked. Out of breath, she waited for the general to speak.

“You feel it?” General Greene asked. “I think he disabled the field.”

She listened for the familiar thrum of energy over her breathing. It was gone.

“It’s the least of my concerns,” the general mumbled, jabbing at the keypad. “But I am concerned about any other systems he decided to disable.”

She pulled out her microcomputer and approached the door. The security system didn’t recognize her thumbprint. She maneuvered through the complex network systems available to her remotely.

“Ready,” she breathed. “I’m disabling the power. We’ll have a few seconds to blast the door without affecting the rest of the networks.”

The general signaled the three guards over and pulled her out of the way. The guards prepared their laser weaponry and waited. The light around the doorframe went dark, and the three opened fire. The screech of metal on metal drove her to cover her ears as she moved farther away. Sparks and blue fire erupted around the door until it glowed red. With a boom and a crunch, it folded in a cloud of smoke.

The guards lowered their weapons.

“You two, drag the commander out and wait here,” General Greene snapped. “Lana, see what’s broken.”

She followed the two through the acrid smoke into the command hub. The commander was slumped over a workstation, out cold. One screen was a flash of colors and shapes. She went to the workstation monitoring the underground systems and saw with relief that the underground lair was functioning as normal. Her eyes strayed to the wall kept behind translucent, titanium-reinforced glass. Arnie knew the importance of the buttons and keypads behind that glass, but the wall looked secured. She dragged the unconscious

commander to the floor and replaced him in the seat before the energy terminal, assessing the damage done.

“We’ll have to post guards with the security system inoperable,” General Greene muttered as he stepped through the hole in the door. “What do we have?”

“I don’t know what he was doing,” she replied, puzzled. “It looks like he was attempting to arm the remaining weapons systems in the East.”

“Madman.”

“He didn’t get far,” she said. “The specialist can fix it in the morning.”

“How are they downstairs?”

“All systems read normal. The only system error is ... five sensors were tripped when the field was disengaged,” she murmured with a frown. “Two different locations. We have a possible infiltration.”

“You stay here. Lock everything. I’ll post a guard. We’re going to have to search the compound.”

Her hands flew over the keypads as she checked the networks for signs of tampering. She moved from station to station. She had a good working knowledge of the systems after her training and the two weeks up here, but she relied on the sector specialists to assess the systems for issues she didn’t know to look for. When she finished, she sat down at the station that was her specialty: communications. An alert popped up on the screen before her as well as on her micro, and she opened it.

Hidden messages detected. Lana had never seen this error message before. Authorizing the computer to open the messages, she received another message, one saying they were encoded. The dates were all from the past week, and she recognized two of the originating net codes as being from Mr. Tim and General Greene.

There was something odd about sending out messages that didn’t go through normal channels. She rubbed her face and considered ignoring her instinct, wanting to give the high-level government members the benefit of the doubt.

Her instincts, however, insisted that she check into one of the messages. Lana programmed her micro quickly to mirror the messages and set it to work decrypting the encoding. She erased the error message.

Coldness seeped into the command hub. Within the hour, guards returned with a sheet of heavy metal to brace the disabled door. Two posted guard outside while two more rigged the repaired door to open and close.

“I rotated out of the dungeon for this?”

Elise's voice pulled Lana from her work. Lana twisted, grimacing when her neck cramped with the simple movement. Sunlight streamed in through the propped door.

"I had a feeling this week would be rough," Elise said with a smile. She sat near the door, weapons slung across her back. "Greenie's got us searching under every rock. Looks like you had a rough night, too."

Elise held out a meal bar, which Lana accepted. She retrieved her microcomputer with the other hand and checked the supply store she granted the Guardian access to. True to his word, he'd removed little from the storage facility. She allowed a tired smile before returning the computer to her pocket. At least there was one good man outside the Peak, despite the constant stream of bad news about how crazy all the survivors were.

"Lana, get your anti-sleepers and meet me in the commander's quarters," General Greene called, poking his head into the hub. "We've got work to do. " Without a word, she obeyed.

Chapter Three

BRADY APPROACHED THE FIVE soldiers in urban gray tactical suits crowded around the small box with a hole still smoking from a hit by a wayward laser bullet. The box was marked with a biohazard symbol on the outside. It was small and black, and yawned open to display a single keypad with a red serial number emblazoned along its side. The world around Brady was eerily quiet after a chaotic battle over the facility. The air was tinged with the scent of burning wood and melted metals, sulfur, and the facility's damp mustiness.

"What is it?" he asked.

"Maybe if we—" one started, pulling off the protective second-skin glove to reach into the box.

"Don't do that!" Brady growled, taking the box. "We don't know what this *thing* is."

He held it up to the light coming from the sole window in the massive basement. The dilapidated, abandoned facility fiercely defended by the soldiers in Western uniforms was not worth their efforts when compared to the buildings in much better shape down the road. There was no running water, no food supplies, no energy whatsoever, just a deteriorating building with a score of insurgents and a small black box.

Uneasily, he looked to the others. His team continued to clear the building and toss flares into corners as they sought out any living insurgents or incendiary devices.

"They were defending it for a reason," another added. "That's the worst fight we've had yet."

"All for this thing," Brady agreed. "We'll take it with us. Fan out and see what else we can salvage from here or if there are any survivors we can talk to about these funky uniforms."

He closed the box. Brady's sharp gaze took in the smoldering remains of an escape ladder leading out of the basement's opposite end. Some had escaped, though not with the treasure they sought to protect. He looked around, unnerved that such fervent men would retreat. His dark gaze returned to the box, and he reached up to the earpiece as he moved away from the others.

“Yes,” the voice at the other end of the network responded.

“Larry, we found something,” he said. “Not sure what it is.”

“Wait one, Brady,” Larry responded then bellowed at the crowd of aides-de-camp Brady knew regularly surrounded him. “Someone grab me an intel guy!”

“Brade, I think we should get outta here,” Dan said. “This place gives me the creeps.”

“Me, too,” Brady said and met the gaze of his closest friend since basic training. “Let’s pull everyone out.”

Dan activated one of the buttons on his command headpiece that sent his rally orders out to the soldiers in the building.

“Brady,” Larry said. “Intel guy.”

“I’m ready,” Brady said, trotting up the stairs to the main floor. He strode towards the entrance behind several others exiting the building.

“Major, this is Lieutenant George.”

“George, I have a small black box about the size of your hand with nothing but a keypad in it. It’s marked with biohazard signs and a serial.”

“Read me the serial, and I’ll see who I can get on the net to tell me what it is.”

Brady complied and closed the connection. He placed the box in his cargo pocket and joined the two teams in the chilly predawn morning. He turned to address Dan, when the sagging building behind them exploded into flames and light. Heat rolled over him as he was flung towards the weed-infested parking lot.

He hit the ground with a grunt, one ear ringing and his face stinging from pelting, hot debris. Surprise was replaced by anger and concern as he vaulted to his feet, intent on ensuring his men were safe.

“Dan!” he shouted.

Groans and curses rose from the grassy area around the blazing facility. Heat pulsed off the building in waves, aided by a soft, cold breeze. Brady hit the rally emitter on his command headpiece. He paced as men rose from the ground and trotted to him, counting as they came. To his relief, he counted all five of his team members. Dan cursed as he trotted from an area to the side of the building.

“Medic!” Brady called.

“Here!”

“Check everyone. Every man here needs to check his gear for tears or other issues!”

“Brade, we’ve got one down,” Dan called, motioning to a soldier carried between two others.

The medic rushed forward. In the near distance, beyond the other dilapidated buildings on the abandoned street, came the sound of small arms laser fire. Flares went up to the east and south. Brady looked from the injured man to the streaks of red in the sky, which were answered by two more streaks to the north. He bristled and checked his weapons. Adrenaline and battle lust reared once again.

Ambush. He met Dan’s gaze and saw the same sense of dread on his counterpart’s face. The dark-haired man frowned at the unspoken exchange.

“Rendezvous threat camp,” Brady said. “Medic, get him ready to go!”

Dan rallied his team and broke towards the east, where the first flares had appeared. Brady turned to his team of five, which were gathered around the downed man.

“Sir, I stopped the bleeding with skin patches, but he’s got metal in three—” the medic started.

“Can he travel?” Brady asked.

“He’s in shock.”

Brady knelt beside the unconscious soldier. His face and neck suffered severe burns while his right side looked as though a Brillo brush had been taken to it. He saw the skin patches, fracture brace, and laser-sealed wounds—evidence of the medic’s quick work—but he also saw the unusual bulge in the wounded soldier’s side. Large pieces of shrapnel were stuck inside.

“What’s near here?” he demanded, twisting to see the team’s scout.

“Nothing for miles in working condition, except the fed buildings down the road. They have a hospital, but—”

“Hospital,” he breathed.

“It’s a *feds* hospital, wrapped in armor and surrounded by one of those biohazard elimination fields and landmines. There’s no going near it,” Jem replied. “They don’t take our kind there, anyway.”

“But it’s up and running?” Brady pressed.

“The only thing running for a hundred miles.”

Brady rose, hope flickering through him. He motioned for his men to stay where they were and jogged out of earshot. He tapped his personal net

implant and murmured “Angel” to direct the implant in his brain to contact her.

“Angel, you there?” he asked.

“Please wait,” came the woman’s response. He did so impatiently, shifting his gear around his body. “I’m here.”

“You of all people could probably help me about now,” he said.

“What’s wrong?” she asked, concern entering her tired voice.

He paused, glancing at the yellow stripe of dawn nudging back the night sky. He wondered often about Angel, the woman with the soft-spoken voice and peculiar perspective of the world. She was a fed, and a powerful one if she held the keys to the government’s secret emerops facilities. Tim trusted her, but Brady was cautious, suspecting she was unwitting of Tim’s activities in the PMF.

“Do you have access to the hospitals?” he asked and braced himself for more bad news.

“Yes,” she responded without hesitation. “Are you hurt?”

“No, but one of my men is down. We’re in a complicated situation, and we need a doctor.”

“Send me your coords.”

He withdrew his computer and did so, grateful for the woman that helped him out of blind faith. The enigmatic Tim’s request for a favor was readily granted after three generations of both their families working together towards the PMF’s goals of national unity. As Easterners, Brady and his brothers continued the legacy their father and grandfather had of serving as the military advisors to the politicians that Tim’s Western family bred. And yet, Tim said nothing of Angel except to *take care of her*.

“I’m sending the coords for the nearest facility. I’ll tell them you’re coming,” she said. “They’ll need to verify who you are. When you arrive, pass them your micro. I’m uploading information to confirm the order for assistance.”

Brady motioned for his men to ready themselves as he listened. His eyes took in their surroundings as more flares went up, this time only a street away in each direction.

“Before I go, you doing all right?” he asked, tucking the computer away and pulling free his weapons. He loosened the knives at his hip and thighs

before drawing on the protective gloves and tugging the protective hood and face combo over his head.

“Just tired,” she replied. “You’re at the border of a restricted area, by the way. Keep to the eastern part of the city to reach the hospital.”

“Thanks,” he said. “Remember. We’re in this together. Call if you need me, but not for the next hour, because I’ve got to make it to the hospital.”

“Thank you,” she said, a smile in her voice.

“Guardian out.”

The medic and another man placed the injured soldier on a portable litter and rose, ready. The others drew weapons and lowered their hoods, looking around with the same unease he felt. Brady started forward, and the others followed, falling into two teams.

A long hour later, the team waited at gunpoint in front of a mega-secured facility. The first gate consisted of a few dozen men better armed than his team atop a thick steel wall with an iron core. Two well-armed guards stood outside the gate, flanking the slender fed in a blue medical uniform.

Sweating and impatient after the slim escape from the ambush, Brady restrained his urge to thump the fed slowly checking Brady’s micro.

He peered past the first gate. The biohazard elimination field was marked by pristine white fencing. Past the fencing was a sandy stretch where the landmines awaited those foolish enough to cross. Beyond the fencing was a second massive gate, where more guards awaited.

He admired the security measures, noting that it was impossible for anyone to reach the landmines, unless the biohazard elimination field was down. The nasty field that dissolved any type of biological entity was one of the government’s latest controversial creations. Brady glanced over his shoulder at his team, whose chests heaved and guns were still at the ready. The medic was kneeling beside the injured man.

“You’re permitted access. The injured may proceed immediately to the emergency station,” the fed said. He looked them over with a raised eyebrow. “We’ll proceed directly to the bio-decontam chamber.”

Brady snatched his computer fast enough to surprise the fed in blue and strode towards the gates. They opened, and he led his team past the layers of security into the facility.

“You have orders for lodging and supplies,” the fed said, hurrying to catch up to him. “Decontam chamber is that way.”

Brady turned in the direction indicated and yanked open the door to a dark room with a glowing red floor. The medic gave him a worried look as he passed, and Brady's gaze went again to the wounded soldier. The decontamination chamber sealed itself. Heat then red light washed over them. Faster than he expected, the door opposite them opened.

"Where's the med station?" Brady snapped. He stepped through to a massive atrium with a marble floor, pillars, and water fountain surrounded by small gardens. The facility was clean and elegant with crisp light emanating from glowing orbs on the walls.

"This way," the fed said, starting down a corridor lined with gilded mirrors and marble statues. "I'm Planey, in charge of security here at the hospital. Your communiqué—"

"Is this real?" one of the men trailing asked in surprise. "Light, water, you have food, too?"

Planey looked from Brady to the soldier before motioning them down another hallway and quickening his step. Two more men in blue appeared, trailed by two in pale red leading a self-propelled gurney. They paused a safe distance from Brady's restless team.

"These doctors will take care of the injured," Planey explained.

Brady stepped aside first, and the others followed his lead. The four men were clean, neatly dressed, and without the signs of lack of sleep or food that Brady's men displayed. Brady watched the feds, irritated at the pockets of elite unaffected by the squalid conditions the non-elite were forced to live in.

He looked over his team, whose mission was to protect both the elite and non-elite. They were hearty, dedicated men, but their gear was damaged, their protective suits sloppily stitched in many places, their boots in need of soles. There were circles under their eyes and strain in their features.

The disparity disturbed him. This was why he'd followed in his father's and grandfather's footsteps in running a militia to challenge the elite's power and affluence while the rest of the people served the elites or went into the regular military, the only two reputable professions. The rest of the population lived on the streets or underground.

"We don't need lodging," he said. "We've got other teams out there who need us. We'll take the supplies and come back for our team member when he's well."

Planey appeared surprised. He held out his arm towards a closed door leading to another corridor.

“Your communiqué indicated you needed chocolate,” he said as they walked. “One of our chefs has been working to make some since the message came in.”

Brady smiled, amused that Angel remembered his affinity for chocolate.

“How did we get in here?” one of his men asked.

“A friend,” Brady replied.

“Your communiqué came directly from the Vice President’s staff,” Planey stated, giving him a long look.

While he shouldn’t have been surprised to find Angel in such a position, Brady was still impressed.

“You’ll have to stay for an hour to await the chocolate,” Planey continued. “We have uniforms and ... showers for you in the meantime.”

Brady checked the time and calculated how long it would take to reach the rendezvous point. With the hour, he may know the condition of his team member.

“We’ll stay for the chocolate,” he decided. “I’d like to take enough supplies for our other team as well.”

Planey led them to the barracks. After a quick shower, Brady dressed in a new protective suit. He replaced his weapons and pulled on new boots, pausing when the net beeped, indicating someone was trying to contact him. He tapped the subcutaneous button before returning to his boots.

“Major Hanson?” a man’s voice asked.

“Yes.”

“This is Lieutenant George with the intel unit assigned to your command.”

“Find anything?”

“Well, yes, in a sense,” the lieutenant said, an odd note in his voice. “You’ll soon receive orders to report to a set of coords with the box. The feds want it back *now*.”

“I have a real mission to execute hunting down insurgents. Can’t it wait?”

“I don’t think so. I don’t know what that thing is, but I would say not to lose it. They went crazy when I read them the serial. Can you reconfirm?”

Brady stretched a muscular arm across the table beside him to tug the box out of his other uniform. He opened it and looked at the small black keypad a quarter the size of his palm. It appeared harmless despite the biohazard warnings. If it was an actual hazard, the sensors built into his uniform would have warned him. He read the numbers aloud again.

“It’s the same,” the lieutenant said. “I’ll have the command submit your new orders.”

“They can send someone else,” Brady replied. “I’m not going to deal with the slimy feds when I can kill bad guys.”

“There isn’t anyone else to go right now, sir,” he responded. “The Twelfth Army is on its way back from Europe. We *had* two teams operational able to conduct a mission requiring well over a dozen teams and no supplies. Major Scroll’s team was hit with an ambush an hour ago. We haven’t heard back from them yet to know if there are any survivors, which means we have one team available: yours.”

The words came as a blow. Brady had worked with Dan for fifteen years. Every mission overseas with the regular military, every PMF mission here. Dan had always been his second-in-command and most importantly, as good a friend as any of Brady’s brothers.

“So the solution is to run away?” Brady snapped.

“The solution is to survive until reinforcements arrive from overseas.”

Brady rose and snatched his weapons, snapping them into place on his body armor. He stuffed the small box of fresh chocolate into his cargo pocket.

“You’re leaving my team with *luck* to survive?” he growled.

“Brade, it’s Larry. Stop harassing the intel guy,” Larry said. “We don’t have the people or supplies to sustain ourselves on the regular army side. Your team is being dispatched on a new mission.”

“Where did Dan last report in?” Brady asked, concern for his closest friend making his chest tighten. “If you won’t help, I’ll go to him.”

“We *can’t* help, Brade. Jesus, look around you! You may be accustomed to scraping by in some third world country, but this is *our* country. We can do nothing here without supplies and without more men to replace those that have died the past few weeks,” Larry said, frustration in his voice. “Regrouping is our only option right now.”

“Sorry, Larry. Give me Dan’s last coords, and I’ll see what I can do.”

“You have a new mission, one that’s got the feds screaming,” Larry reminded him. “If they don’t get it, they’ll start digging. This isn’t a good time to draw attention to your *other* activities.”

Brady waited. Larry—and most other regular army soldiers—either joined or quietly supported the PMF. The people credited the PMF with saving them from the elite’s Civil War while the elites tried hard to stamp out the PMF’s existence.

“Fine,” Larry said with a sigh. “I’ll send his coords. Get that box to the feds; they’re not far. Good luck to you. Larry out.”

Larry was right. Brady had conducted many missions in austere conditions in *other* countries. Of course, no one had ever expected the nuke attacks to happen, even someone involved in the insurgent organization blamed for them. The regular military was in no position to help, not when the bulk of it was overseas.

On impulse, Brady tapped his implant and breathed her name as he continued to ready himself. He didn’t realize how much he relied upon Angel’s soothing voice until he heard her answer. Brady hesitated to respond, feeling as though he should concentrate on supporting her, per Tim’s directions, rather than reach out to her when *he* needed *her*.

“Hey, Angel,” he said at last.

“Did you make it to the hospital?” she asked. Her soft voice was always calm. It stilled his nerves and helped him focus.

“We did,” he confirmed. “You remembered the chocolate.”

She chuckled, a sound he liked but rarely heard.

“Thank you,” he said with warmth. “My friend wouldn’t have made it otherwise.”

“You’re welcome. Is it still bad out?” she asked.

“Depends on how you define bad,” he replied grimly. “This hospital is the only thing in a day’s walk with power. We haven’t seen any civilians in two days, though we’ve had some fierce battles with some sort of insurgency.”

“We underestimated the PMF.”

“I don’t think it’s them,” he said carefully. “The guys we’re facing don’t fit the bill.”

“Really? Why?”

“The guys we’re running into are wearing uniforms from the war era. I think someone wasn’t happy the war ended and has the power and money to reinvigorate it,” he said. He stopped, awaiting her response.

“Interesting,” she said. “I’ve been researching this as well. I’m afraid there aren’t many people willing to look beyond the obvious in this circumstance.”

“What do *you* think?” he responded.

“You’re the second person to ask me for my opinion on something. I’m an analyst and skilled technician. I gather information and present findings, not give my opinions.”

“C’mon, Angel. I’m not a politician. Tell me what you think.”

She hesitated then said, “I think you’re right, but I can’t find proof of it anywhere.”

He almost sighed. While he didn’t understand why Tim wanted this woman protected, he saw her appeal: intelligence, artlessness, and perceptiveness combined with a general good will. No, she was not at all the type of person Tim normally surrounded himself with.

“Are you going out again for more bad guys?”

“Yeah. Still trying to get killed,” he replied.

“Don’t try too hard. I don’t have anyone else to talk to.”

He chuckled.

“The general is paging me. I’d better go,” she said.

“Have a good one,” he responded. “Guardian out.”

Brady strode from the private room into a common area, where two of his four remaining men waited.

“We have a new mission,” he began.

Chapter Four

LANA SMILED AS SHE turned her attention from the conversation to the screens around her. The sector specialists were busy at their workstations while two guards loitered outside the damaged entrance. She sipped from a container of water and turned again to the wall behind the titanium glass, unable to pinpoint how one of the sensitive keypads had made it outside the compound or *when*.

She strode to the wall again, quelling the urge to open it. The procedures for accessing the keypads were strict: only those authorized to do so were allowed to, and then only when no one unauthorized was in the room and the door sealed with the alarm activated.

She rubbed her neck, agitated.

“You figure out how to deal with the supply issue?” General Greene asked from his position at a small planning table in the corner.

She was quiet for a moment. “Sir, it’s not been my experience to provide my opinion. I’m not really qualified.”

“We discussed this already. You’re my advisor. Advise me.”

“Very well,” she said. “We can access the emerops locations around here with Elise’s security forces. I can unlock them remotely, and you can send her in for supplies. But doing so will leave us vulnerable if something else happens.”

“I understand. How does the infrastructure look?”

“In general, we don’t have the people we need to permanently fix the East Coast. We can maintain the systems from here, but almost everyone has fled west.”

“But the systems are up?” he asked skeptically.

She gave a tired smile and responded with gentle sarcasm, “I *have* been working the past few weeks, sir.”

“How are they downstairs?”

“Impatient.”

“Maybe it’s time for Arnie to visit and stay awhile. Will keep him out of our hair.”

“Yes,” she said emphatically.

“He still screaming at people up here?”

She nodded.

“And the keypad?”

“On its way.”

His gaze drifted to the wall of glass. “I’m not convinced this is the only keypad missing from beneath our noses,” he said with a frown. “Take a count this afternoon after the hub’s clear. We’ll seal the vault the best we can.”

“Yes, sir.”

He glanced at his watch and rose. He had daily meetings he forbade her from attending. She waited for him to leave then checked her micro, which was still working on decrypting his encoded messages. She’d never seen it take this long. He was using coding more advanced than any she’d ever seen. It was the sign of someone with a secret he couldn’t risk anyone discovering. This was not a personal message to a companion.

Lana waited until the others in the center left and stood before the titanium-reinforced glass in front of the keypads. She went through the multiple security procedures. At last, the glass slid open. Surrounded by keypads controlling the critical infrastructure nodes for the East Coast, the sensitive keys she needed to inventory were held within a small vault. It slid open, and she gazed at the keys that controlled sensitive military systems.

And the Horsemen. There were twenty keys in the set, code-named Horsemen, after the biblical Horsemen of the Apocalypse. The keys were located all over the world, except for four of them, which were based here in the command center. The Horsemen controlled and activated space weapons with the capability to destroy a country. She’d never spoken of them to anyone, not since being granted access to a file only a handful of people in the country had access to.

All four were there. Puzzled, she freed them one by one, studying them. It wasn’t possible for four of them to be there while one was on its way up the mountain. Lana glanced towards the door and sat at a small table nearby. She set one keypad on her micro, waiting for it to read the serial. The results were even more baffling. She tested the second, third, and fourth.

None of them were the Horsemen! These were lesser keypads to other critical infrastructure functions that someone had swapped out. She rose and crossed to the keypad wall again.

She began testing them quickly with her micro. After a long hour, she found one of the remaining sixteen Horsemen. In the second hour, she found the other fifteen. All of the weapons controllers had been taken from their positions all over the world and placed here, disguised as lesser systems.

The reality of what someone had done made her feel sick. There were three people with access to the keypads, and one was sleeping in the barracks from too much drugs. This—combined with General Greene’s encrypted messages—made her instincts stronger.

Even so, four of the Horsemen—the ones based here—were missing. Lana leaned her elbows on her knees, staring hard at the wall. Four keypads gone with one making its way back to the command center. Where were the other three?

She rubbed the back of her neck, mentally wired despite her fatigue. Four keys capable of destroying a continent—and winning a war—were taken under their noses. They may have been missing before she arrived; no one took accountability of something no one was supposed to have access to. One of those with access was declared unfit; did he have enough scruples left to steal and hide three more keypads?

Her eyes strayed to the Horsemen on the table. The quiet voice of her instincts was at a shout. No matter what was going on, she had to protect the keys capable of destroying the world. Lana reached into her bag and pulled out her personal vault. She opened it and stacked the keys in it.

“Elise to command.”

Lana jerked, afraid she’d been caught, before she realized Elise was calling over the command center’s channels. She leaned forward and slapped the pad, and Elise’s grim face lit up the central screen. She was heavily armed, sweating, and outside the compound.

“I’m here, Elise.”

“Heya,” Elise said, flashing a quick smile. “We need access to the emerops due west. Sending coords.”

“You’re that far out?” Lana asked in surprise. Her gaze flickered to the screen beneath her fingertips, and she typed the alarm disarm codes.

“We need a place to hide for a bit.”

“Why?”

“Let’s say, this isn’t what we expected.”

“It’s open. What isn’t what you expected, Elise?” Lana asked impatiently, standing. She made her way to the desk before the central screen and leaned against it.

“It’s chaos. We left the compound and got ambushed by people we mistook for refugees.” Elise gave a few hand signals to her detail. “You have medical supplies in the depot?”

“Yes. I’ll arm its perimeter as soon as you’re in.”

“Thanks. I’ll check in later. Elise out.”

“Wait, Elise, can’t you tell me what’s going on out there?”

Elise hesitated then said, “Frankly, I don’t know. We can’t figure out who we’re fighting. I swear I saw PMF fighting alongside us earlier against the guys who attacked us. I gotta go, Lana.”

Frowning, Lana remained before the screen even as the blond woman disappeared. Both Elise and the Guardian were grim about the world outside the compound, and neither explained exactly why. Elise’s news of the PMF fighting alongside her forces wasn’t something Lana expected to hear. She crossed her arms, considering.

Just one of the missing keypads was enough to cripple half the country. If well placed, it could wipe out the government. She returned to the communications station.

“This is command center calling for Colonel Larry Jessup,” she said.

“Savannah station, Lieutenant Huss. Wait one, ma’am.”

She returned to her chair, eyes straying to the screen displaying the timeline of the nuke attacks that had plummeted the eastern part of the country into chaos.

“Oh, God,” she whispered. Lana crossed to the screen and touched it, bringing up details of the attacks. She rifled through the data of each one. The timing on all four attacks was the same to the hundredth of a second.

“Ma’am?”

She ignored the voice and stepped back, staring.

“This is Colonel Jessup.”

“Larry, this is Lana at the command center,” she said, forcing her attention back to the communications center. “What’s the location on my keypad?”

“Hold one, ma’am.”

She checked the locator as she waited, seeking out General Greene on the compound. He was touring the perimeter, as he did daily. She sent him a page through his personal net and sat down again.

“It should have reached you by now,” Larry answered. “No word?”

“None.”

“I’ll check their location and contact you. Jessup out.”

“This an emergency?” General Greene asked, his voice muffled over the communications system.

“I’ll come to you, sir,” she replied.

“You got my location.”

She jogged across the compound to the area of one of the breaches. A charred hole still smoked in the compound’s wall. Three bodies were laid out in a row beside it. She stopped, unfamiliar with the sight of death. General Greene addressed well-armed sentinels. Lana neared, forcing her gaze away from the three bodies as she waited. He broke away before she reached him, instead striding towards her. He gripped her arm to turn her away from the scene and set off at a quick march.

“They’re using some fancy equipment. We’re doubling the guards. This better be important, Lana. I’ve got stuff to do,” he said, terse.

“All four are missing. One is on its way back,” she told him. “One we don’t need to worry about.”

He released her once they were away from the scene. “Why don’t we need to worry about one of the keypads?”

“Sir, the attacks on the eastern seaboard were caused by one of the keypads. It’s been used.”

He stopped and faced her, frown deepening. “What’re you saying? That one of ours sold the keypad to the PMF?”

“I don’t know, sir.” She rushed on, “But it’s the only thing that makes sense. The attacks were too powerful for the capabilities of our enemies alone. Think about it, sir. The timing, the sophistication, the expertise needed to launch such an attack. They used our skills against us. There’s no other—

“Stop,” he ordered. “I will not believe that even the madman Arnie could have done something like this. You’re talking about high treason at the VP level at least to access those things.”

“Sir, you asked me to tell you what I think about—”

“Not this. You think about what I tell you to think about,” he snapped.

Surprised, she fell silent.

“Now, focus on locating the other three keypads. Keep me apprised of when the troops bring in the one they found down the mountain. Tear apart the compound if you must. If I hear this nonsense again, I’ll send you outside the walls to deal with this mess personally.”

“Yes, sir,” she murmured, wilting beneath his fierce glare. “I’m sorry, sir.”

“You’re a good girl. Stay a good girl,” he said, softening. “I think you need some sleep. Report back tomorrow morning.”

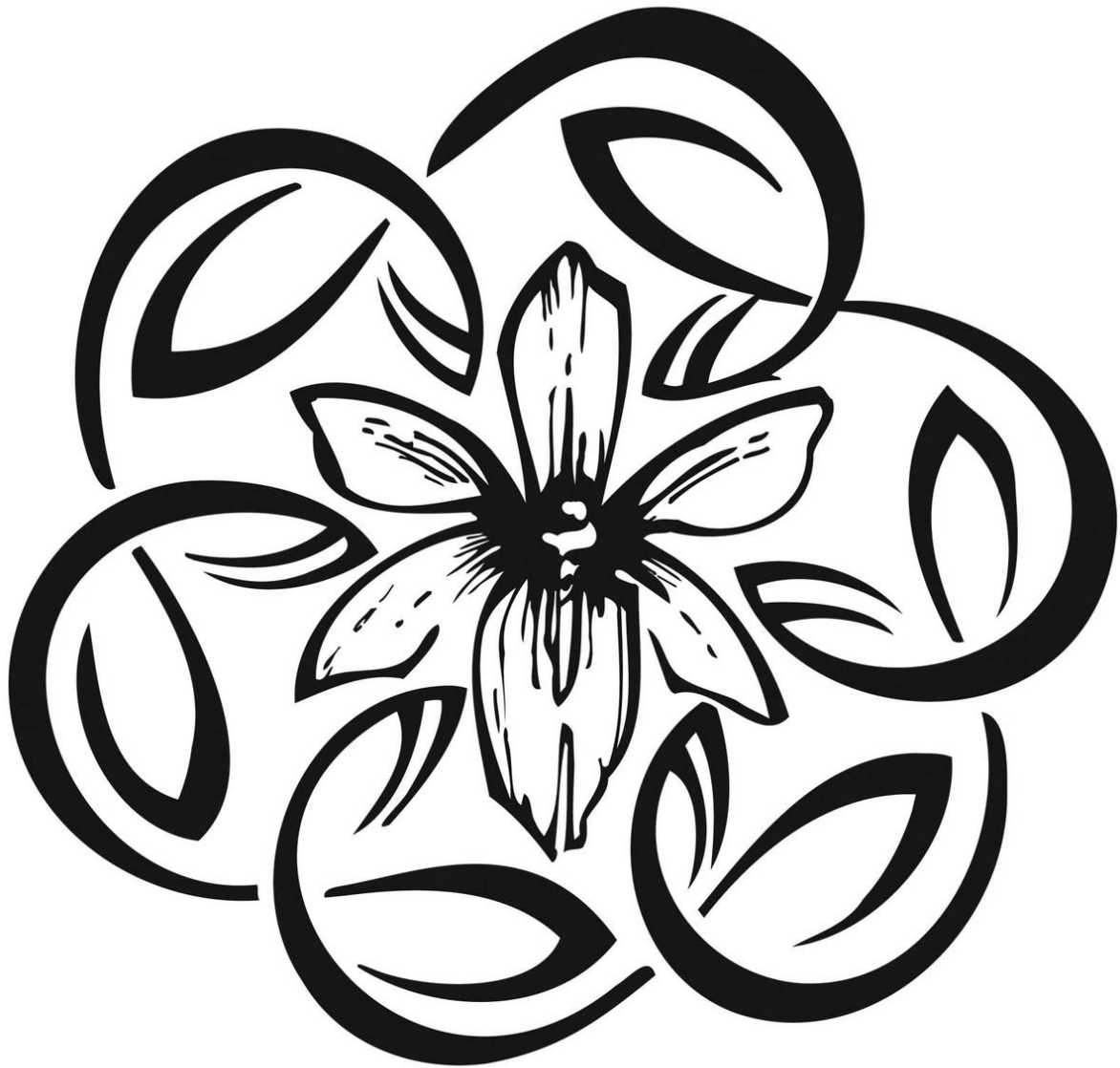
He turned and strode away. Lana watched him, at a loss at what to think of his reaction. She wasn’t wrong. There was no other logical scenario. She

watched General Greene stride towards the command hub.

As good as he had been to her, she didn't doubt his threat. And if he chose to expel her, no one there would defend her, just as no one defended crazy Arnie. Arnie's antics hadn't started until the second week on the compound. General Greene was the first to recommend his removal, and a voice in her mind whispered that maybe Arnie had figured something out he shouldn't have, too.

General Greene hadn't acted surprised about the missing keypads. Lana glanced at her micro, which still worked on breaking through his messages. She had no proof he'd done anything wrong. And who wouldn't recommend Arnie's removal with his increasingly erratic behavior?

She turned away and started towards the barracks. Maybe she did need sleep.



The compound was the eye of a storm. Brady and his men paused after two rigid security inspections and being granted permission to enter. The area beyond the gates and inspections was quiet, with men and women dressed in government uniforms touring the compound like it was any other day and not possibly the last day of the world. Guard dogs trotted forward to sniff him and his men while a doctor in a blue government jumpsuit approached them, eyes pinned to the injured man carried between two others. He was smiling.

In fact, *many* of the people on the compound cast curious or smiling glances towards them. Brady peeled his face mask off and lowered the muzzle of his weapon, unnerved by the unrealistic utopia after the three-day battle up the side

of the mountain. The people were doing whatever it took to survive outside the walls, and they'd run across more men in Western uniforms.

"I'm all right. Check him," Dan grunted as the waiting medic in blue approached. He put pressure on his injured leg with a grimace but gestured towards the unconscious soldier hanging between two others.

Brady took his friend's arm.

"Looks bad," Dan said. He pushed Brady's cheek to see the black-purple bruise ringing his throat from where one of the animals outside the walls had tried to rope and hang him.

"Yeah," Brady whispered hoarsely. It was the loudest word he'd uttered in two days.

"Major Brady, Dan," a gruff voice boomed.

They turned to see the tall five-star general stride towards them, right arm still at his side while his other swung. The gray-haired man had an olive complexion and sharp blue eyes that swept over all of them. He raised a critical eyebrow at the end of his inspection.

"General Theodore Greene," he said, offering his left hand.

Both shook the proffered hand, surprised to be greeted by a man once charged with overseeing the wars abroad.

"It's an honor, sir," Dan managed. "I hadn't heard you returned from overseas."

General Greene motioned them forward, slowing when he saw Dan limp. Brady tugged Dan's mask off, gaze roving the compound. Gray buildings squatted amid neatly kept green lawns and paved walkways. A single road snaked through the compound downhill towards a forest.

At any moment he expected the people around him to whip out lasers and attack. The feds ignored the newcomers after a few looks, content to stroll and chat as if nothing were amiss anywhere.

"You have the box?" General Greene asked as they walked.

"Yes, sir," Dan said, elbowing Brady from his observations. Brady reached into his cargo pocket.

"Wait," the general said at his movement. His lips spread into a grim line. "Wait 'til we're in the command hub."

Brady exchanged a look with Dan. "What is it, sir?" he managed in a whisper.

"What happened to you?"

"Someone tried to string him up. Keeps him quiet, though," Dan quipped.

“It’s a dangerous toy is what it is,” General Greene responded. “You both need to see the docs.”

“We’re fine, sir,” Dan assured him.

“After we’re done, you’ll see the doc, son.”

“Yes, sir.”

Brady hid a smile. He agreed; Dan needed a doctor. His leg was hurt, and only his stubbornness kept him from surrendering to shock. His face was pale and clammy, his wit sharp but his eyes glazed. Brady was as worried about Dan as any of his men.

“You all look like hell. How bad is it out there?” the general asked.

“A warzone,” Dan said. “No supplies, no water, no food, hundreds of thousands of refugees trying to survive on nothing.”

“And our enemies?”

“Mixed in with the rest of the survivors, like any good insurgency. Their numbers are far greater than anything we ever imagined.”

And far better well armed, Brady added silently. The fighters were armed as well as the army and the government’s special protective services and in many cases, with the same equipment.

The general nodded, looking grim but not surprised.

As they neared a pentagon-shaped building, Brady took in the clumsy metal door that didn’t quite fit the frame. The access pad appeared as though it had been shot with a laser gun; it was blackened and melted. He shared another look with Dan. All was not quite as it seemed in the peaceful compound. The laser markings matched similar damage seen on the eastern wall, which they found when they circled the compound.

One of the two guards pulled the heavy door open. The interior of the command hub was darkened, aside from the light of systems and screens on all the walls. It was cool and manned by several people in fed uniforms.

“Turn that off, Lana,” the general ordered in a softer tone as he glanced towards a woman manning the screen on the left. Imaging of the mountain flashed off and was replaced by a screen full of colors and letters Brady didn’t understand.

“Are these the troops?” a blond woman asked, dressed in tactical clothing and sporting advanced weaponry that reminded Brady just how elite the positions in the special protective service were considered. Their recruits came from the elite class, while the regular army came from the poor. Even the

regular military's special forces teams were not as well equipped as the pretty, frowning woman before them.

"Elise, you're taking your men out to the west side for supplies tonight," the general replied.

"Wonderful idea, sir," the blond replied with enough irreverent sarcasm that Brady was taken aback.

"You're in the dungeon next week," the general muttered. "I'd trade you all for two men like these here."

The woman named Elise grimaced but made no response.

"Do you have the keypad?"

Brady whipped around at the familiar voice, staring at the petite brunette before him in surprise. He sought to remember what the general had called her. He knew her as Angel. Her expression was grave, her brown eyes solemn. The woman before him was younger than he expected and cute in an elfin way, with large eyes, a tapered chin, delicate jaw line, and expressive brow. She was neatly dressed with dual ranks, that of Special Assistant to the VP and Special Assistant to Mr. Tim's position. His gaze lingered on the dual ranks, and he almost smiled.

She was at least loyal to Mr. Tim. It was customary to wear the highest rank, and the VP trumped Mr. Tim twice over.

This was no normal government compound, he realized. With the former Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces and the Special Assistant to the VP, not to mention the biofields, electromagnetic fields, and other beefed security measures, the compound at the top of the mountain was a fortress commanded by the President's own right-hand man. A chill swept through him as he realized how significant—and isolated—the command center was.

"Give the woman the keypad," Dan said in amusement, jabbing him in the ribs with an elbow.

Brady blinked, realizing he was staring at her and everyone was staring at him. He hastily reached into his cargo pocket and retrieved the keypad. She snatched it and swept past him, popping it open as she neared a wall covered in a titanium glass screen.

"Happy?" the general called after her.

"Yes, sir."

Brady watched Angel carefully place the keypad into a wall with several others, then secure them behind a thick shield of titanium glass. She lowered the titanium glass and stepped away, tossing the case onto a desk.

“C’mon, boys,” the general said, ushering them towards the doors. “I’ll take you to the docs.”

Brady followed with reluctance, intrigued to meet the woman whose voice had kept him company for several long weeks.

“Lana, walk with us,” the general added.

The brunette obeyed, taking her place at his left. Brady’s attention instinctively shifted to their surroundings as he sought threats among the quiet surroundings of the secured compound.

“Lana is my right hand. Let her know what you and your men need,” the general instructed them. “I gave explicit orders to Savannah that you’d remain with us.”

“Yes, sir,” Dan said, though Brady heard in his voice he was not happy with the decision.

“I won’t subject you to Elise and her insubordinate rabble, but you’ll remain with the other army seniors here as my advisors.”

Angel fiddled with her mini-computer as she walked. She tapped her earpiece, listened intently, and responded with a few words.

“Florida communications are up,” she reported.

Brady opened his mouth to address her before remembering the best he could manage was a croak. Dan glanced towards her.

“What is this, the command center for everything this side of the Mississippi?” Dan joked.

Both Lana and the general turned icy, less-than-impressed looks on him, and for once, Brady was glad he couldn’t speak. He’d been about to ask a similar question. Instead, he watched red creep up Dan’s face. He jabbed him in the arm, entertained by his unflappable friend’s discomfort.

“On second thought, you can join Elise’s men,” the general replied in a clipped tone.

Lana smiled faintly, meeting Brady’s gaze again. Her brow furrowed in guarded curiosity as he stared at her. Brady looked away, aware she didn’t know him from any other man.

But he knew her now, and she was beautiful.

“Do you talk, sir?” she asked him.

“Not much since being strung up by a savage at the bottom of the mountain, ma’am,” Dan replied for him.

Her gaze shifted to the purple ring around Brady’s neck before she returned to her microcomputer.

“Oh,” she breathed, stopping midstride.

“What’s wrong?” the general demanded.

“Arnie,” she replied, paling. “Excuse me, sir.”

“Take Elise.”

She broke into a quick trot. Brady watched her, doubtful the sort of mayhem that occurred on the compound was as dangerous as that they’d encountered on their trip up the mountain. A moment later, Elise darted by with a hand laser in her grip, disappearing between the same buildings.

The general was quiet as he escorted them to one of the squat buildings and inside. The sterile scent tickled Brady’s nostrils. He lowered Dan into a chair outside the doctor’s quarters and was about to sit for a breather when the general slapped him on the arm.

“You all right here, soldier?” he asked Dan gruffly.

Dan nodded.

“Come with me, Major.”

Brady straightened and winked at Dan, who rolled his eyes in response. The general’s stride quickened as he exited the medical facilities towards the direction both women had gone.

“Damn civilians,” the general muttered. “This one’s a piece of work. As loony as they come.”

The general motioned to a greenpod, and they squeezed into the small vehicle. It moved silently and quickly down the winding road through the forest. He heard the shouts before they reached the helipad atop a cliff overlooking a valley.

A man stood near the boulders hedging the cliff, crazed as he flung his arms around and screamed. His face was red, his voice hoarse from shouting. Brady recognized him—he was another high-ranking politician in the President’s cabinet. Brady stepped from the greencar, not expecting the amount of brass and rank on the secluded mountaintop.

Elise was there, one hand aiming the laser at the raging man with the other hand planted on Lana’s shoulder to prevent her from entering the potential line of fire. Two more black-clad protective service members with weapons drawn stood nearby, one a safe distance behind the lunatic and the other near the cliff.

Their weapons weren’t stunners, the laser weapons capable of incapacitating a horse with one glancing shot. They carried weapons meant to kill. Brady moved forward, reaching for his own weapon as he sought to decipher the scene before him.

“Lana, stay back!” Elise snapped, tossing a glance over her shoulder at the brunette trying to wriggle free of her. One of her arms was now wrapped around Angel’s waist.

The man at the center of attention ceased screaming and lowered his head, panting. He wore a sheathed laser at his hip, and his hand was clenched around something small enough to conceal it from view.

The general approached, catching Elise’s eye. He issued a hand command Brady recognized. *Shoot to kill*. Elise nodded in understanding.

“Arnie?” Lana called.

The man at the center of the circle shifted.

“Arnie, it’s me. Can I come stand by you?”

“Hell, no,” Elise snapped.

“Elise, stop!” Lana cried and shoved away.

Elise lowered her laser as Lana blocked her shot and approached the man named Arnie.

“What’s going on?” Brady asked hoarsely, stopping beside Elise.

“If he moves too quickly, take your shot,” Elise replied. “He shot one of my men last week. He’s psycho.”

“Wasn’t he the former Vice Pres—”

“Watch Lana.”

Brady slid away until he had a shot not blocked by the brunette. Lana reached Arnie and spoke to him too quietly to hear. Brady crept as close as he dared. Elise followed his lead. He heard Arnie’s mumble, Lana’s voice, more mumbling in response. Arnie held out his fist to her without opening it.

“Arnie,” General Greene said at last.

The man’s head rose. His eyes were glazed, his pupils large enough to swallow the color of his irises. Drool crusted one corner of his mouth. Lana shifted, and Arnie bolted towards the cliff.

“No!” Lana’s shout broke the tense formation around them. She darted after Arnie and snatched his belt. Elise rushed them, and Brady followed. Arnie tripped, the content of his fist flying free over the boulders to the cliff’s edge. Lana jumped over him and squeezed between two boulders, all but flinging herself towards the object.

Elise grabbed at Arnie, who twisted free and followed Lana. He wrapped his arms around the brunette as she rose with the object in hand. Brady sheathed his weapon and leapt over the boulders, confronting the struggling duo.

Lana squirmed in his bear hug, pushing them closer to the edge. Arnie struggled to grab her wrist. His footing slipped, and Brady's heart dropped as he saw them careen closer to the edge. Arnie snatched the laser weapon at his hip and shoved it against her temple. Her movement stilled.

"Give it to me, Lana!" he shouted.

She squeezed her eyes closed without complying.

"Arnie, you sick bastard, let her go!" Elise shouted, leaping atop the nearest boulder with her laser aimed at him.

"I'll finish what they started in the war!" Arnie shouted.

"Let her go!" the general bellowed.

Lana's eyes opened, and she stared at Brady, emotions flying through the expressive gaze. Arnie waved the laser as Brady crept closer. Light flashed and Lana gave a strangled cry as the laser gun glanced off her wrist. Blood splattered her. Her hand opened reflexively, and Arnie released her to claw at her wrist. Lana twisted away. She fell, and Brady lunged, snatching her belt as the two went over the edge.

Tim's Angel was crying. Arnie clutched at her bloodied hand, too maddened to heed his danger. The belt slipped, and Brady slung an arm around her, pulling her back hard. Arnie's weight dropped, and Lana and Brady landed in a heap.

"Don't drop me, don't drop me, don't drop me!"

His head dropped back against the ground in relief. The woman sprawled atop him shook, her blood smearing his hands. He nudged her off and rolled onto his side. Lana curled into a ball, holding her arm to her chest. He wrapped his arms around her and drew her into his body.

"Don't drop me, don't drop me, don't drop me," she repeated.

He pulled her arm away from her chest. She resisted, clenching her hand hard despite her pain. Her hair smelled like vanilla, her skin of sweat and woman.

"Lana, you fool," Elise scolded, squatting beside them. "God, look at you!"

Elise grabbed her wrist, but Lana resisted again.

"Move, Elise," the general snapped, pushing the guard commander away.

He held out his hand, and Lana held out her wrist. He pried her fingers away, glancing up at her when she gasped in pain. Her fingers opened to reveal a keypad similar to the one Brady delivered.

"Good girl," the general said with a satisfied smile as he took it.

Brady reached into a cargo pocket and pulled free an emergency bandage wrap. He gripped her trembling arm and placed the seal on her wrist. She gasped at the sudden pinch as it snapped into place, and her body went limp.

“So ends that walking tragedy,” Elise said, standing at the cliff’s edge and peering over it.

“He’s at peace now,” General Greene responded. “Major, take Lana to the doc and get what rest you can. You’ll report to Elise tomorrow morning.”

Elise sheathed her weapon with a glance at him. She gave a sigh of disgust and retreated.

“You always give me the misfits, *sir*,” she tossed over her shoulder. “Welcome aboard, Major.”

The general’s jaw clenched, but he said nothing. Brady jostled Lana’s still body in his arms as he rose. He climbed over the boulders. One of Elise’s men was waiting with a gurney. Brady placed her on it and gripped the handle, walking towards the road. Elise fell into step beside him after checking on Lana.

“Stupid civilian,” she muttered, though he heard the concern in her voice.

“Who is she?” he asked.

“She’s the Supreme Operations Specialist here on site. She controls everything, the East Coast infrastructure, the emerops depots, the recovery effort,” Elise replied. “Good woman, disciplined and smart. Greenie pushes her around.”

“He’s the former supreme commander,” Brady said. “It’s his job.”

“You army-types are different.”

“What was so important she flung herself off a cliff to get it?”

Elise gave him a sidelong glance. “Here’s a friendly warning: there are a lot of secrets up here you normal army-types don’t need to know.”

“We’re part of your outfit now,” Brady reminded her.

“That’s what Greenie said.”

She said nothing more, and they strode up the winding road to the medical facilities. Brady lifted Lana gently off the gurney and entered, following Elise through the waiting area into the bay beyond. Dan lay on one bed, asleep.

“Doc!” Elise shouted. “C’mon, Doc!”

Brady set Lana down on a bed and stepped back. She was the opposite of Elise: delicate and sweet, quiet and soft-spoken. He brushed hair away from Lana’s pale face. Whatever the madman Arnie had in his hand had provoked her gentle spirit into action he would not otherwise think her capable of.

She wasn't the kind of woman who would ever belong in his world. Where that thought—or his sudden disappointment—came from, he didn't know.

“Doc!”

“I'm here, Elise,” the same man who greeted them at the gate said with some irritation as he entered through a side door.

“I want updates hourly,” Elise ordered.

“I'll contact you when she wakes,” the doctor replied, unfazed.

Elise turned her attention on Brady. “The barracks are by the helipad by the cliff. Or do you prefer to stay with your friend?”

He nodded.

“All right. Hourly, doc.”

The doctor ignored her, and Elise left.

“Is this a laser wound?” the doctor asked, releasing the seal around Lana's wrist.

“Yeah,” Brady rasped.

“It's never something simple. Everything here is an emergency or nothing at all,” the doctor complained.

Brady watched him clean the wound.

“You're filthy,” the doc said, glancing up at him. “Go back and shower in the nurses' locker room. I can't have you spreading any contaminants you might be carrying. You army-types are worse than Elise's crew. You shouldn't be here at all with all the filth you look like you've rolled in.”

Brady chewed back a retort about how this particular army-type had been battling insurgents to reach them on the Peak. No one here understood that they were surrounded by an enemy even Brady couldn't figure out yet. Unaccustomed to the abrupt treatment, he clenched his jaw and obeyed.

Chapter Five

LANA AWOKE LETHARGIC AND in pain. Her wrist throbbed despite the warmth in her blood caused by the sedative–pain reliever. She gazed at the soft ceiling lighting before tilting her head to see whose quiet voices she heard. The figures were blurry. She raised her injured arm, relieved to see she still had a hand.

With a start, she realized she'd been sleeping. She had too much to do to sleep! She had to find the other keypad. If Arnie smuggled one out of the command center, he may have the remaining keys in his quarters. Lana sat up. The world spun. She shook her head and pushed herself off the bed, hugging her hurt arm to her chest. Nausea washed over her. Her surroundings blurred into light and shadows, and she felt the sickening sense of falling off the cliff again.

“Doc!” The warbled voice was gravelly. A warm embrace caught her mid-fall over the cliff, and the scent of soap and man penetrated her bewildered senses. She sagged against the hard frame.

Hold on, Angel.

She couldn't tell if the voice was aloud or in her head until she remembered that the Guardian was likely dead. He hadn't responded to her calls in over three days. Saddened, she made an effort to stand on her own legs. The grip around her was too tight.

Whoever kept her from falling swept her off her feet and placed her again on the hospital bed. Lana sat as soon as he released her and started to her feet again, only to feel a hand planted in her chest that pushed her onto her back.

Warm brown eyes gazed down at her from a sun-bronzed face. He was vaguely familiar, his gaze intense. His features were chiseled, masculine and firm, his brow low and slashed with two dark eyebrows.

Major Brady, she remembered.

Another form crossed her vision, and she sought to make it out as well. Before her eyes could focus, pain jolted through her. Her heart bolted and her body convulsed. The fuzzy, unfamiliar world around her burst into clarity.

“One more?” the doc asked, peering into her face.

“No!” she managed.

He flashed a smile.

“God, Doc, that hurts like hell,” a male's voice said from nearby.

“Well, Dan, it’s good for you to know I can put you close to death. And bring you back, if I feel like it,” the doctor said, stepping away.

“You’re a sick man, doc.”

“Lana, hon, you okay?” the doctor asked.

Major Brady was staring hard at the doctor, as if ready to pounce if he raised the adrenaline charge gun again. She gazed at the handsome man, unable to shake the sense she knew him somehow. He was large, as were all the genetically engineered, secretive counter-insurgency special forces in the regular army. His shoulders were broad, his chest wide, his stomach flat, his hips lean. He was one large muscle with a direct gaze that made her overly self-conscious.

“Yes,” she replied.

The doc helped her sit. Major Dan, a man with blond hair and dark eyes, sat in the bed across the aisle from her. He flashed a smile. Lana looked from him to Major Brady, with his darker features and hair.

“Doc, I really have too much to do to stay here,” she said. “Can you clear me?”

“Shut up and lay down,” the doc replied.

The man who couldn’t speak above a whisper pushed her down, silently concurring with the doctor. Her gaze dropped to his large hand. His battle suit was rolled to his elbows, revealing roped forearms and a Thomas Jefferson quote tattooed on his inner forearm.

All tyranny needs to gain a foothold is for people of good conscience to remain silent. She glanced up at him again, not expecting someone from the lower class and trained for battle to wear such a classic quote.

He turned away and spoke in his broken voice to the man called Dan. Lena frowned, wondering if the doc’s adrenaline gun had overcharged her and made her hallucinate. She swore she heard the Guardian’s voice again. The doc reappeared, frowning, and armed with another medicine gun.

“Greenie says you have to go back to work. I’ll give you a charge of—”

Fire tore through her, and she gasped, the pain nearly driving her unconscious before it ceased.

“Jesus, doc!” she cried.

Warmth flowed through her, and the pain dissipated.

“It’s better than an apple a day,” the doctor said cheerfully. “It’ll keep you from collapsing for about twelve hours. You gotta tell him you need sleep.”

“I don’t have time,” she replied, feeling worn despite the charge. She rose with effort. Her legs were a little wobbly, and she waited for them to steady her.

“You’ll have to find time. Your chem tests came back all over the place. How many of the anti-sleepers have you been taking?”

She gave him a look.

“That many?” he said, crossing his arms. “I’ll put you on quarters for tomorrow.”

“Thank you, Doc, but I really—”

“You should listen to him.” Brady’s voice was a hoarse whisper.

“Thank you, deep-throat,” the doc said with a look at Major Brady.

The look the major gave him was as intense as one of the doc’s adrenaline shots. She had a feeling the doc would need his own pain meds if he kept taunting the two tense soldiers.

“Come back tomorrow,” the doc ordered. “Here’s your stuff.” He handed her a bag with her micro and her personal vault. Her micro was bright with an alert.

She accepted it and activated her channel on the net, not surprised when she heard the general’s voice.

“You gonna live?” he asked gruffly.

“Yes, sir,” Lana said, lifting the bag to see the alert. The micro was finished decrypting the messages. Her head hurt too much to read, and she lowered the bag.

“We have another issue. Come to the hub.”

“Yes, sir.” She paused to rub her face hard with the meaty parts of her hands. She felt weak and tired. “Doc, I need to pick up my prescription for—”

“Heeeeeeeell no.”

She shook her head and walked out of the bay into the foyer, tucking the micro and vault into her pockets. Elise always had extra anti-sleepers.

Another wave of dizziness washed over her. Lana’s head buzzed, and she staggered, leaning against a wall. She sank down against it when her vision grew narrow. The body heat of someone kneeling beside her made her blink, and she braced herself for the doc shooting her up again.

“Drink,” Brady’s rough voice instructed. She felt the pressure of a cup against her lips.

The cool liquid entered her mouth. She swallowed. Then coughed at the tart aftertaste. She drank more, forcing herself to swallow it. The tunnel vision receded.

“What is this?” she asked, blinking as her gaze cleared.

“Down South, we call this energy water,” he said. He removed the cup. “It’s a mix of high-potency vitamins, electrolytes, and herbs. It’ll help you more than that shit the doc gave you.”

Lana met his gaze, hearing his Southern drawl for the first time. His nearness was comforting, his body warmth making her feel a little less cold.

“You need to learn to shoot,” he added.

“I tried. I’m no good at it.”

“It’s a good skill to have. You could’ve popped that maniac before he dragged you over the cliff.”

It’s a good skill to have. His use of Guardian’s words confused her already drained mind. Maybe all regular army-types thought this way.

“Thank you, Brady,” she said. While the night’s events were still a bit hazy, her memory was clear enough to feel gratitude towards the man crouched beside her. “You saved me.”

“I’m just happy you’re alive,” he said, touching her face in an unexpected display of tenderness

Lana studied his chiseled features, which didn’t seem capable of much emotion at all. His ragged voice held genuine warmth, though, so she took his words at face value. The large soldier made her feel tiny hunched next to the wall. His direct gaze made her overly self-conscious again. She wondered if her hair was as messy as she suspected.

“I’ll walk you out,” he said, standing.

He offered her a hand. Lana accepted it and allowed him to pull her up and steady her with warm hands on her arms. She’d never interacted with the army-types before, but she found herself liking them, if they were all like Guardian and Brady. Brady led her to the door without releasing her hand and opened it for her.

“Thanks,” she murmured, uncertain what to think about the small touches. They made her insides feel even warmer than the doc’s drugs.

“No more cliff diving,” Brady said as she stepped into the night. “And get some rest.”

Lana smiled faintly and nodded, touched by his concern. The door closed behind her. She stood at the bottom of the hill leading towards the command center. It may as well have been a death march! She was sweating from the effort of walking out of the medical facility.

“Greenie sent me.” Elise’s voice came from the darkened parking area. Lana turned and smiled as the security specialist drove towards her in a cart. Her

smile faded at the look on Elise's face.

"What happened?" Lana asked.

Elise pursed her lips, and Lana was surprised to see her eyes water. "Someone wiped out everyone in the mountain."

"What?"

Elise said nothing else, struggling to control her own emotions. Lana's head spun at the news. She thought of Elise's security detail and then of the Vice President, the President's staff, the renowned scholars and businessmen taking refuge there.

They drove to the command center in anxious silence. It was quieter than a graveyard when they pushed their way in. The highest-ranking military members and civilian staff members were crammed into the small center, staring at the scene on the screen before them. Lana made her way through them to the general and followed his gaze. The cameras in the mountain showed a white haze hugging the ceilings and the unmoving bodies of the men and women in the mountain. She covered her mouth, horrified.

"We have a security breach," the general said, his voice unsteady. "Lana, contact the central and western centers."

Elise nudged Lana when she continued to stare. She all but dropped into the comms sector chair and issued mayday calls on the emergency net. Her left hand was numb from the drugs, her right hand trembling as she pushed the buttons. She checked the comms from the mountain and fed the decrypted messages back into the computer. Everything looked quiet, until she checked her micro again and saw that the decryption program had begun popping up the messages that had been repressed in the comms system. Lana was surprised to find that someone else at the Peak within the mountain had issued a similar mayday call.

A few days ago, the day Arnie had locked himself in the hub. It was one of many messages her micro had decoded. There were messages from Mr. Tim mixed in with messages from General Greene.

She glanced up at the screen, feeling uneasy about reading messages the dead man had sent.

General Greene is leading the Western insurgency. More attack imminent. Send help.

The words took her breath away. It had been addressed to the Peace Command Center—the site where peace had been declared and the new government created after the East-West Civil War—in Colorado. She punched

the message closed and forwarded it to her micro before deleting it. Her gaze went to the general, who held tears in his eyes. The meds in her system, the weakness from her injury, the night itself was too much for her to digest fully. She discreetly began to dig through the other messages. With some dread, she hunched her shoulders to keep anyone from looking at her micro and opened those from Mr. Tim. Most were short phrases that looked like orders.

Attack imminent. Prepare, read the earliest one, sent the night he called to warn her. *Peace CC is safest*, read another. To her relief, nothing appeared too off with his messages, except the encryption. General Greene's messages, however, made her sick to her stomach.

Lana read through one detailing the intent to attack using a secret weapon. It didn't take much for her to realize he'd used one of the Horsemen. She stared for a long moment at the net code indicating that the receiver of the general's messages was located in the West Control Center. Elise had said the PMF soldiers were fighting alongside hers, and that they'd seen soldiers in Western uniforms. It wasn't just the injury and meds that made Lana's head spin.

General Greene spoke finally, his voice jarring her out of her thoughts. Lana locked her micro.

"Elise, I need a team to go down and test the air. I want to know what this is, where it came from," the general ordered. "Intel!"

"Sir!"

"Check your systems for threats, anything in the last twenty-four hours that seems out of place."

"Lana."

"Sir?"

"Stay here. Check all the systems and find that damn battalion we were expecting today!"

"Yes, sir."

"Everyone out."

Those in the room obeyed, too stunned to speak on their way out. Lana looked up at the scenes on the screens then at the general. He was peering closely at the people on the screen, as if trying to assess if there were any survivors.

Her instincts were at a clamor. Lana moved away from the comms computer and started systems checks on the others. She locked down all the systems and routed all the controls to her micro.

“Tell me you know where the rest of those keypads are,” General Greene said.

“Sir, I still don’t know where the others are,” she said in a tight voice.

“We gotta find ’em,” he said. “You okay?”

She looked down at her wrist. “I think so.”

“You did good.”

She turned to look at him. He offered a genuine smile she couldn’t bring herself to return. She nodded and looked down.

“If you need a break, take it,” he said. “The doc was pissed with me.”

“I will, sir,” she said.

He left, closing the ill-fitting door behind him. Her gaze went again to the keypads protected behind the titanium glass. She slumped on the infrastructure terminal, awaiting the results of the status checks. She flipped off the scenes from the mountain, unable to look at the destruction.

She felt like crying. Instead, she rose and stared again at the animated timeline, wishing her conclusions were something other than what they were. She looked at her micro and read another of General Greene’s messages. Her eyes watered.

PMF spies warning our Eastern adversaries in the government. Accelerate plans. Government will splinter once the attacks occur. The West won’t lose this war a second time.

One of the systems beeped. Lana tucked the micro in her pocket and crossed to it. It was the perimeter security check. The usual scan she ran came back normal. The administrator scan, which only the President or Vice President could run, came back with half a dozen errors.

In the past forty-eight hours, there had been fifty perimeter breaches, all from the west wall. All during a set time period when the security was disabled by someone in the command center. Her hand shaking, she checked the log to see it had last been accessed by General Greene twenty-five hours ago.

Not only was there a traitor at the Peak, but there were an untold number of insurgents lying in wait. Lana checked the general’s location, not surprised to find him at the west wall. She pinged Elise.

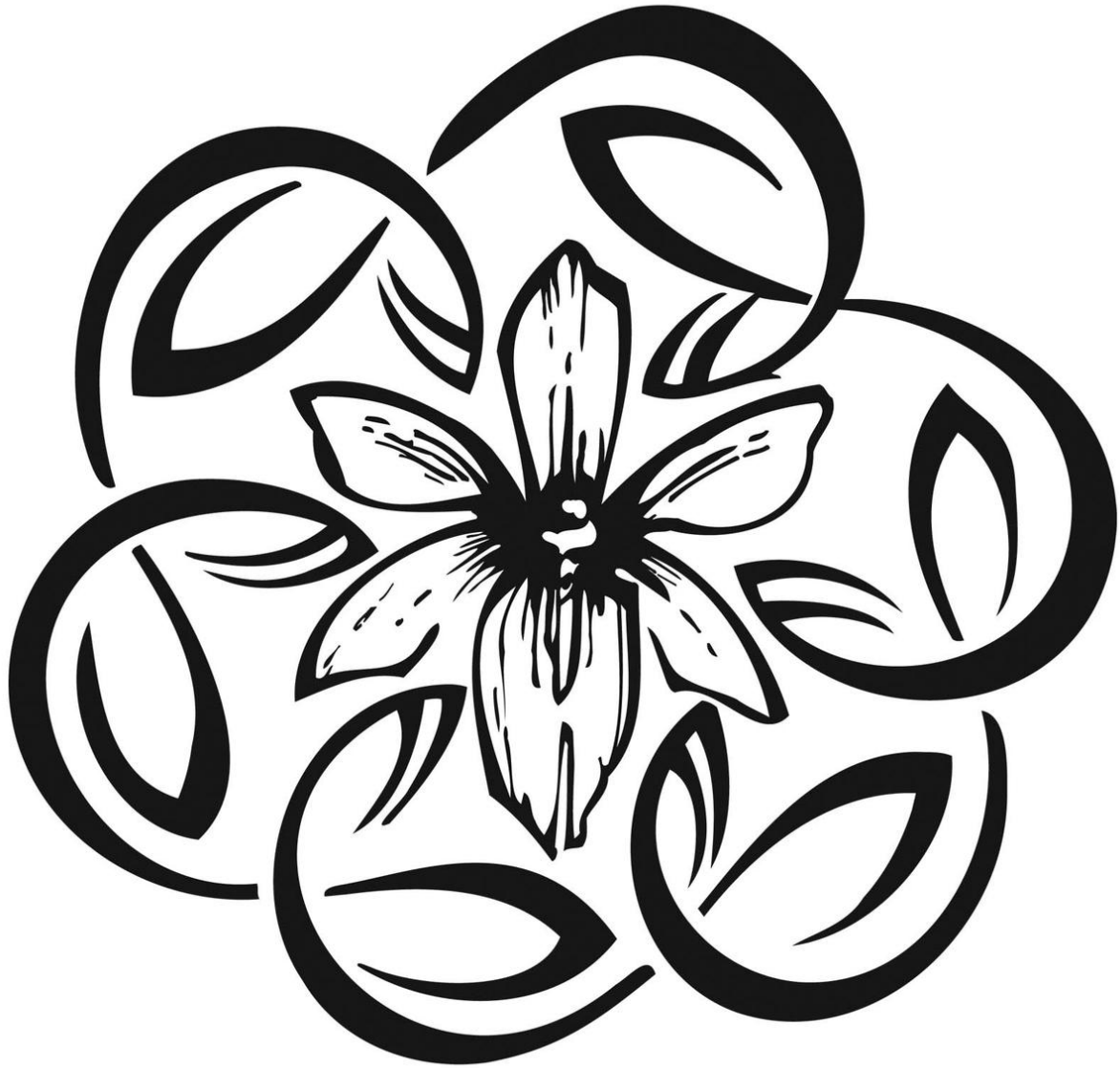
“I’m busy,” Elise barked.

“Can you bring me my anti-sleepers?”

“Give me an hour.”

Lana typed a message to Mr. Tim, telling him she was leaving and heading to the Peace Command Center, which was the first center beyond the

Mississippi River. She moved to the emerops computer, struggling to hold back tears. She issued only a few commands, enough to lock them out to anyone but her. She was getting ready to pass the point of no return.



Brady returned from surveying the supplies in the well-stocked medical facility. He had a mental list of what they should take when they left. Unfortunately, there was nothing to quicken the healing of his neck. He'd heal four times faster than a normal human, but it wasn't fast enough. He returned to the main medical bay, where he'd taken up a bed near Dan's. Their gear was strung across three other beds, much to the doctor's irritation.

“They’re all dead,” the doc said in a tight voice as he entered through the other door. “Antidepressants?” He held up the med-gun.

“What?” Brady asked, wondering if the doctor was already high. “Who’s dead?”

“Everyone. The VP ... everyone.” The doc was slumped on one of the hospital beds. He prepped a med-gun for himself.

“What’re you talking about?” Dan rose and joined Brady.

“Gassed. Everyone hiding inside the mountain. It was supposed to be the safest place on the planet.”

Brady felt both surprise and some relief as the doc qualified his statement about *everyone* being dead. He looked at Dan, and the two shared a thought without speaking. They both reached for their combat suits and weapons.

“Doc, you got a real gun?” Dan asked.

The doc waved his med-gun.

“Something’s not right here,” Brady whispered.

“Yeah, it’s creepy,” Dan agreed.

His thoughts went to the injured woman he was charged with protecting. Whatever was going on, he hoped he had time to prepare his own men to evacuate before worrying about her. The majority of the Appalachia militia was at the base of the mountain.

“Doc, we’re taking supplies,” he said.

The doc was grinning and glassy-eyed after his med-gun shot.

Brady looked at Dan, who rolled his eyes. He strapped on his weapons and strode into the storage area, looking with admiration at the boxes of medical supplies.

“Jem,” he said into his communicator. “Y’all get ready to go and meet us here at the med center.”

“Roger.”

“Think we’re safer at our base camp?” Dan asked quietly, joining him in the storage room.

“I do.”

“When you wanna move?”

“Before dawn.”

Dan nodded and limped away, speaking into his communicator. Brady began to sort what supplies they needed and handed off a list to another soldier.

An hour before dawn, the alarms wailed. Brady froze and straightened from packing supplies, striding into the med center. The doc was asleep on one bed,

his med-gun beside him. The rest of his men were awakened by the alarms.

“Doc!” It was the blond special security woman, Elise, who burst into the med center. “Doc!” She shook him awake. The doc sat groggily.

“What happened?” Brady asked. After watching the madman named Arnie last night, he knew better than to assume anything about the deceptively quiet Peak.

Elise gave him an irritated look, reminding him again of how little respected the *army-types* were.

“Doc, I need some meal bars, anti-sleepers, and pain killers.”

“You’re maxed out,” the doc said.

“Don’t give me any shit, doc! The walls were breached. I need ’em for the spec security guys. All of them.”

“When were the walls breached?” Brady asked.

Elise was agitated at more than him. She glanced at him then around at his men. An odd look crossed her face. She shook her head.

“Dammit, Lana,” she murmured with a look at her watch then barked, “Doc, hurry!”

“Lana’s the little girl who got shot, right?” Dan asked.

“The *missing* little girl who got shot,” Elise replied.

Brady moved forward at her words.

“She’s too naïve ...” Elise drifted off.

“What happened?” he demanded.

“Aside from the whole mountain coming down and the Peak being overrun by God-knows-who?”

There was more. She wiped her face and whirled, following the doc into his office. Brady signaled his men to ready themselves. If what she said were true, the oasis around them was on fire.

“How bad is it?” he asked, following her. “Are you moving your men?”

“We’ll fight until Greenie gives the order to leave. God help me, I hope it’s soon,” Elise responded, stuffing the meds the doc placed on his desk into a tactical bag. “Anti-bacs, too, doc. Greenie’s holed up in the hub trying to figure out what to do.” She slung the bag over her shoulder.

Brady caught her arm. The pretty blond glared at him, but he saw the worry in her gaze.

“*What* happened?” he growled again. “I won’t ask you again.”

A look of incredulity crossed her features, and he doubted any army-type had ever threatened one of the elite class member forces. She wrenched away,

saying, “Lana locked out all the systems and left.”

“Left the compound?” Dan asked, equally surprised.

“Yep. She’s somewhere out west over there,” Elise said with a wave of her hand towards the forest.

“How do you know?” Brady asked, suspicious.

Elise turned away and stormed off, supplies in hand. His instinct told him there was something else going on aside from the insurgents and Lana leaving. Lana didn’t have the mettle to survive the way he knew how. He doubted she’d ever seen blood before she was shot. What would possess her to leave the safety of the compound for the insurgent-infested forest?

“This ain’t right,” he said, his Southern accent plain even to his ears. “Get the teams ready. I have a feeling leaving here is going to be a pain.”

Chapter Six

LANA HAD DONE EXACTLY as Elise directed. She hugged the tree-line down to the side of the mountain then climbed a tree and waited. Daylight brought the sounds of gunfire and rockets on top of the mountain that didn't cease even when night fell again. She checked the status of the systems from her micro and downed dehydrated meal bars and anti-sleepers. The painkillers didn't work, and by noon, she had a pulsing headache and no idea how to change the leaky bandage around her wrist.

She stayed in her tree, waiting for Elise. She'd removed her personal identifiers, hacked into the government's tracking mainframe to deactivate the implant in her brain, and changed into the black tactical uniform Elise brought her over her civilian grays. Elise promised to find her by dusk, and together, they'd go west, to the Peace Command Center.

Dusk came and went. Lana grew uneasy and watched the sky flare with rocket and laser fire from the battle at the Peak. She touched the small vault containing the Horsemen in her cargo pants and sipped water.

The forest below her rustled, and she froze. Someone was down there. Elise didn't give the bird call they'd agreed on, so Lana said nothing. Suddenly, half a dozen well-armed men appeared below her. They headed towards the top of the mountain. Moonlight glinted off their weapons and gear. She watched them go, startled to witness the men in Western uniforms that Elise had claimed to see. Growing anxious, she turned her attention to the sound of the stream Elise had told her to follow if she didn't make it there by dusk.

Lana hugged the tree, willing her friend to appear. She didn't look forward to traveling alone into the valley where she'd last seen a sat image of what looked like a militia. Its size was camouflaged by the surrounding forest and technology.

Another hour passed. She grew cold and her injured arm hurt more and more. She slowly moved from her position and crawled down the tree with effort, the movement sending pain through her tender wrist.

She carried little else than the lockbox, her micro, and enough meal supps and anti-sleepers for two weeks. She had a laser gun, even if she couldn't hit a target two feet in front of her. Elise was going to help her.

If she showed.

Lana's heart skipped a beat, and she pulled out the tracker Elise gave her, starting through the forest towards the stream. She didn't walk far before she

heard the creak and snap of branches. She froze. After a moment of silence, she started forward again.

A dark form dropped in front of her. She gave a startled cry and fell back, barely escaping a hand trying to grab her. Lana scrambled up and ran, careening into another man in dark clothing. She wrenched away, terrified. A backhand sent her reeling. She dropped, her head ringing. She felt someone tie her hands and haul her up. She was slung over someone's shoulder, stuck between awareness and blackness. Panic spun through her, and she didn't know which she feared more: Greenie finding her or the insurgency.

She had no concept of time in the in-between place. They seemed to walk for hours, until the first rays of morning lightened the forest. The world around her changed from forest to what resembled an army encampment with tents and mobile buildings hidden from sight by intricate nettings woven among the trees. The sound of men and movement around her pulled her from the daze.

She was cold and stiff. They entered a tent, and she was thrown to the ground. She landed hard on her left side, pain flaring through her as her wrist twisted. It was enough to make her nauseous. She was hauled to her feet and she blinked, struggling to keep the pain at bay. A slap stung her cheek, and she gasped.

"What do we have here?" the man asked in an accented voice.

There were two men behind him, and they crowded around to see her.

"You don't look like a spec ops soldier," he said, referring to the black uniform Elise insisted she wear. "What's your name?"

They were all three bioengineered soldiers, thick-bodied and towering over her. But they didn't wear military clothing or symbols. The slapper's sleeves were rolled, revealing an intricate tattoo of battle scenes around the letters *PMF*.

Insurgents. Her breath caught, and cold fear trickled through her.

Another slap.

"What's your name, girl?" he demanded.

She stared at him, hand on her cheek where he'd struck her. He took each side of her collar and pulled, the effortless movement ripping the black uniform down the middle. His eyes went from the fed uniform to her face.

She tried to pull away, panic growing at the look that crossed his features.

"We got us a fed bitch."

"I'll tell the boss," one said, ducking out of the tent.

The man before her snatched one arm and flipped out a knife, cutting through her black clothing and tossing it aside. He glared at her, then

unbuttoned his tac gear, pulling his arms free and pushing it down to his waist to reveal the dark T-shirt beneath.

“I hate fed bitches,” the other said. “Elite think they’re so much better than us.”

“So do I.”

Shaking, she tried to pull away, to look away. The man in front of her spun her and gripped her neck with one hand. Her gaze went to the laser gun he’d tossed a short distance away. She felt him slice through her gray uniform with the other and tried to move away. His grip tightened, and she stopped.

“One thing civilian bitches are good for.”

Terror spun through her. He ripped the clothing from her, then sliced through her belt, shoving her over the stack of trunks. Lana shoved herself back, ignoring the pain in her wrist as adrenaline flew threw her.

He slammed her into the trunk, and she gasped, unable to move. Instead, she stretched for the laser gun, grasping it. Distracted, her attacker cut through one legging then the other. When she felt the knife near one ankle, she lashed out at him.

He cursed and wrenched her up, slapping her hard. She fell, head spinning. She aimed and fired. Curses indicated she’d hit him but not killed him. The man smashed his heel onto her already wounded arm. Her head cleared enough for her to see she’d hit one of his arms, which was drenched with blood.

He snatched her legs and dragged her to him. Lana scrambled and fought, tears on her face as she realized what she’d done in leaving the Peak. The insurgent pinned her in place with one foot on her stomach and wrenched off her civilian grays. He snatched her hands and pinned them above her head with one hand, settling his weight atop her as he reached down to undo the buttons of his trousers.

“I’ll give you a reason to scream soon, fed bitch,” he promised.

She crossed her legs at the ankles, and he planted one knee between her thighs, driving them apart. Lana struggled hard without being able to dislodge the muscular man. He pulled a laser gun from his boot and placed it at her temple. She stilled and squeezed her eyes closed, waiting for the inevitable.

The sound of a laser gun went off, and warm blood splattered her. She gasped, waiting to feel the pain certain to come. Suddenly, the man slumped and released her hands. She opened her eyes, staring at his open eyes and still body, at the blood pooling around her. Her gaze moved to the laser gun and then to the familiar man holding it.

Major Brady. Her heart soared, and she almost cried out at being rescued.

He signaled to the other insurgent, who obeyed and moved forward, grabbing the dead man's ankles and hauling him out.

Brady wore PMF gray. He was one of them.

The laser gun was at his side. He stepped towards her, and she inched away. Her gaze went again to the pool of blood, then to the thick swath of red marking the trail of the dead man. She pushed herself away from him as he took another step towards her, a newfound horror creeping through her.



Beyond concerned, Brady crossed to the trembling woman and squatted. She shook like a leaf in a thunderstorm, her warm brown eyes wide and tears streaming down her cheeks. Donovan's blood was on her face and T-shirt, and her wrist was bleeding again. The idea of the idiot raping her infuriated him.

"Aw, hell," Dan said as he appeared in the doorway.

"She's okay," Brady said, not entirely convinced.

As a warrior who spent his adult life at battle, he wasn't really keen on how to comfort a woman who had seen three things she'd likely never witnessed before in the span of five minutes. He doubted she'd ever been in a situation where she'd barely escaped being raped, and he knew she'd never shot anyone or seen anyone's head get blown off in front of her.

Donovan had gotten pretty damn far, he admitted. She was down to her underwear and a T-shirt. A minute more, and he'd have been too late. She huddled against the trunk, too terrified to make a sound. He held out a hand to her, and she withdrew further.

Brady looked at Dan, who shook his head.

"Burn her clothes," he said. "Issue an order to the men. The girl's mine."

As the PMF commander of the Appalachia Branch, his word would hold, especially when his men heard he'd blown off Donovan's head for hurting her. In the paramilitary organization that relied on secrecy and loyalty to survive, the soldiers followed the man they trusted most. He'd gone from one world to the other easily; it was in his blood, the blood of his father and grandfather.

The woman before him had never known any other world but her own. She definitely wouldn't understand a world like this one.

He reached for her, as gentle as possible when she struggled. He picked her up and strode out of the tent and through the camp, ignoring the catcalls of the men around him. He took her to his tent. Though he did live in a tent, he liked to think he lived as comfortable as possible. It resembled a studio apartment with a real bed and dresser, a restroom cordoned off by opaque curtains in one corner, a small study where he kept his war docs, a kitchenette, rugs, and a small living area. He set her down on a rug.

She cowered away from him, favoring her hurt wrist.

"Please don't hurt me."

Her tearful plea made him angry that he hadn't been able to protect her as he should have. Even so, she wasn't going to last long among the roughnecks in his camp if she didn't toughen up a little.

"You have to do what I say," he said. "You understand me?"

She nodded. He prepped bandages for her wrist, a bowl and washcloth, and a smaller version of the doc's med-gun, loading it with enough painkiller to knock her out. She inched away, and he grabbed her arm, pulling her towards him. He gave her the shot first. Her body jerked, but its effects were immediate. She slumped against him.

Brady pulled her into his lap and set to work on cleaning her up and repairing her wrist. He didn't know if she hadn't had time to fix her wound or didn't know how; the wound was on the verge of becoming infected.

"Here's her shit," Dan said, ducking into the tent. He tossed her micro, pills, and a vault half the size of his hand on the pillows near him. "She okay?"

"She's gonna be a mess," Brady said.

"Donovan hurt her?"

"I don't think so."

Dan shook his head and flung himself down across from him, retrieving the sealed vault. He shook it then set it down when it made no noise.

"What is someone like this doing out here?" Brady demanded.

"No idea."

Lana's skin was soft, her body fitting comfortably against his. His blood heated at her familiar scent. He'd found her voice soothing and enjoyed talking to her when he was her Guardian, enough so that he'd looked forward to their paths crossing. He hadn't expected her to be as small or exotically beautiful as she was.

"We found Elise," Dan said.

"She put up a fight?"

"Oh, yeah. Took out two of our guys until I told her we had this one."

"Elise will do well here. This one ..." Brady shook his head at the woman in his lap.

"Like a lamb to the coyotes."

They both studied the unconscious woman. Her shapely body was all but exposed. When he'd gotten Donovan's blood off her, Brady lifted her and placed her in his bed. He stood over her, pensive. It was easier to protect Angel from afar, before she knew what he was or faced the dangers he did daily. Though he took an oath to take care of her, he'd never expected she'd be lying in his bed, helpless against *his* world.

"Post a guard."

"Brade."

He looked up at Dan's curious tone.

“You intend to keep her, don’t you?”

“You remember the girl who got us access to the hospital?”

“*That’s Angel?*” Dan asked, suddenly interested.

“Yep.”

“Wow—bet you never saw this coming. She’s not what I expected at all. I know you said she was smart, but ... little?”

“You can’t tell that by someone’s voice.” Brady snorted and picked up her micro. It didn’t activate at his touch, and he suspected it was locked to everyone but her. He tucked it and the vault into his cargo pocket.

“She might be useful,” he said. “She knows where every emerops point is on the East Coast.”

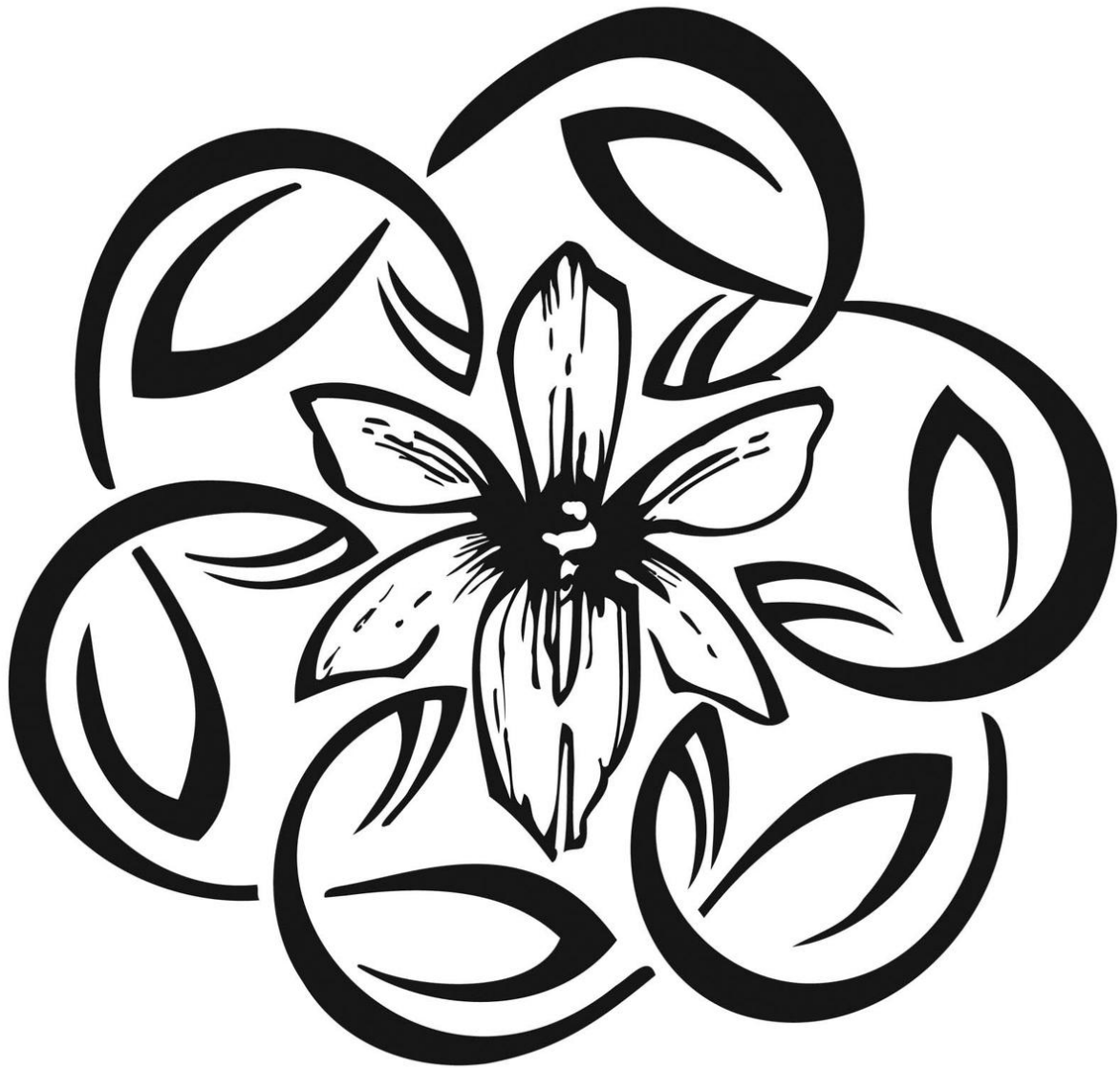
“Just when I start to think you’ve gone soft ...” Dan said and shook his head. “You’re smarter than I give you credit for.”

“Gee, thanks,” Brady said dryly. “When’s the next mission to the Peak?”

“Leaves in an hour.”

He looked one last time at the woman in his bed and left the tent. If he didn’t think he’d scarred her for life, he’d look forward to wooing her to his bed for a different reason. With her sexy little body, full lips, and huge brown eyes ...

In a different world, maybe. He wasn’t sure what it was about this woman that made him think thoughts he normally didn’t in the middle of a warzone. Brady posted two of his most trusted soldiers as guards and geared up for the mission to the Peak.



Lana awoke in the large tent, wrist aching and her face hurting where she'd been struck. She recalled her night with a jolt and sat, expecting men to leap from the shadows to rape her.

She was alone. She looked at her wrist. It had been bandaged again. While the covers smelled like Brady, he was nowhere around. She crept from the bed and looked around. Clothing sat on the nightstand near the bed. She was hungry, tired, and dirty. Memories of almost being raped, of Brady killing someone in front of her ...

Her chest seized, and she dropped to her knees. She still felt that man's rough hands on her body and the sense of helplessness. Brady had killed him

for it. She wanted to think he'd done it to help her, but what kind of a monster could execute another in cold blood?

With a deep breath, she forced herself up. She took a shower, as hot as it would go, and stayed until the hot water ran out. It soothed her head and the aches of her body. Her black uniform was clean and waiting for her. She pulled it on quickly, and studied the marks on her face. One cheekbone was yellow, her lower lip swollen.

Her micro and the vault were missing. Greenie—and those he was working with—would be crazy not to pursue her, once they found out what she did. She'd planned on Elise helping her escape to the west, where she could secure the Horsemen at the Peace Command Center. Her plan had failed before she got off the mountain.

She looked around, overwhelmed by the idea of trying to find a way west on her own. She hadn't brought her ID for fear of being tracked and realized she also didn't have a source of credit to buy *anything*. She definitely didn't know how to survive in the forest.

Desperation crept over her. She was trained to assess, protect, repair, and sustain government systems through any kind of crisis. Yet she didn't know the first thing about life *outside* the command center!

The tent opened, revealing the world outside of it. It was past dark, and the camp was filled with men and tents as far as she could see. Her despair increased; she couldn't escape from a camp this size! Brady, Dan, and another man breezed past her. She quelled her sense of panic, instead moving as far from them as possible to the kitchen and hoping they didn't notice her.

They all wore dark gray tactical suits and were fully armed. Her hands shook of their own accord as her gaze swept over them and their advanced weapons.

There was no intel report on how the PMF had acquired the technology needed to create the genetically altered soldiers that stood before her. From Dan's whiplike body to Brady's feline-like musculature to the stranger's towering frame, there was no mistaking them for normal soldiers. They were all over six feet, all engineered for power, agility, and endurance.

Their quiet talking ceased, and they looked at her. She sucked in a breath. Brady pulled her micro from his cargo pocket and approached her with a controlled, slow gait, much like that of a stalking lion. She backed away until the corner of the kitchen counters trapped her. She felt his body heat and stared at his wide chest.

“Nearest emerops facility,” he whispered in his broken voice. He held out her micro.

Fear fluttered through her, and she shook her head. He planted his hands on either side of her and lowered his face to her level, forcing her to meet his gaze. His dark eyes were as hard as his chiseled face and intense.

“When I give an order, *no one* disobeys me. Do you understand?” he demanded. “Nearest emerops facility. *Now.*”

She jumped at his tone and took the micro in shaking hands. It flickered on for her, and she correlated their coordinates with two touches. She showed it to him.

“Open it at sixteen hundred today and close it at seventeen twenty.”

She set the parameters and waited for the approval screen. When it flashed, she showed him again. He took the micro and turned away from her. She released the breath she’d been holding and watched him, afraid he’d come back for something else.

He gave the coordinates to Dan and replaced the micro in his pocket. His request gave her an idea. She could survive on the ample amounts of supplies the emerops facilities contained if she moved from facility to facility towards the west. She only needed to regain the micro and vault.

The two men left. She prayed for Brady to follow. Instead, he turned and approached her again. She stared at his chest, not looking up until he stopped a couple feet from her.

“You know who we are?”

She shook her head, playing dumb.

“Appalachia Branch of the PMF.”

Her mouth felt dry. She didn’t want to face the futility of her situation, not yet!

“You’re a smart girl. I think you understand how vulnerable you are here. Do as you’re told, and I’ll protect you.” His voice sounded stronger today, and his southern drawl struck her as oddly familiar.

With his commanding air, he was accustomed to being in charge. She took some solace in knowing he had the power to protect her. What he wanted from her was a question she feared to ask. His gaze went to her wrist, and he closed the distance between them, taking it. His gentleness was unexpected as he examined the wrapped injury. She sensed his concern, the same she’d felt at the Peak when he walked her out of the medical bay. His kindness then made her stomach flutter. Now, she didn’t know what to think.

“You know anything about bandages?” he asked.

She shook her head.

“Is that why you hadn’t changed it?”

“Yes.”

“You’re lucky it’s not infected. It was a mess.”

“Do you kill many people?” She couldn’t reconcile the cold-blooded killer who executed a man in front of her with the man concerned over her wrist.

He glanced up at her and released her wrist. “Yeah, I do.”

His factual response chilled her. There was no remorse in his face or tone. Her breath quickened again. He stepped away from her, retreating to the bedroom area.

“There’s food in the cabinets,” he said.

She watched him for a moment then crossed to the nearest cabinet. It was stocked with meal bars. Ravenous, she chose two and started to close the cabinet door, when she saw a small box tucked between the edge of the cabinet and the boxes. It was too delicate for such a place and such a man. Lana tilted it out far enough to see it was a box of chocolates with the nearby fed hospital’s seal on the top. It was the same hospital she’d sent the Guardian to.

An uneasy instinct filled her, the same that warned her about General Greene. Her hand dropped. Brady was more likely to kill Guardian and steal his chocolate than *be* Guardian. She closed the cabinet door, troubled.

The sight of him naked to his waist made her stop. His back was towards her, the expanse of golden skin stretched over bulging muscles startling her. His shoulders were wide, his back wide and tapering to a slender, lean stomach and hips. His arms were huge, his muscles long and lean. His movements were restrained and fluid, effortless like those of a great cat.

She’d never seen a man without a shirt on. The thought struck her as odd. How many women her age had never seen a naked back, let alone a naked *man*? Her thoughts went to the Guardian. She’d fantasized about him once. She imagined he looked much like the man before her, thick and strong.

The idea that the man who’d become her friend looked like this made her feel warm from the inside out. She clenched her meal bars and crossed to the living area, sitting with her back to him.

“There are blankets in the trunk,” he told her. “Do I need to warn you what’ll happen if you try to escape?”

“No,” she said, heart quickening.

The lights went out, and she blinked, looking up at the sound of whirring. A window in the ceiling opened. Moonlight spilled into part of the tent. She sat back in the low couch and ate her meal bars, mind going to the micro in his pocket. She may even be able to track Elise with them, since she knew her ID number.

She waited until she heard his breathing deepen and then rose. She stood over him, staring again at his muscular back. He slept on his stomach, his arms folded beneath his head, and a sheet covering him from the waist down. His cargo pants lay on the bed beside him, and she saw the bulge where her micro was stored.

She crept around the bed and leaned on it gingerly, watching for signs of him waking. With nothing to balance against, she settled her knees on the bed, stopped to make sure he was still asleep, then inched forward until she could reach his pants. She held her breath, slipped her hand into the pocket, and pulled the micro free. It sprang to life at her touch with a *ping* that made her heart leap.

She didn't see the man in the bed move until she felt his hands. She gave a soft cry as she came off her knees. In a blink, she was pinned on top of his warm body, his arms locked around her and his muscular legs wrapped around hers.

Shadows covered half his face, rendering his chiseled features and low brow sinister. Her breathing was hard, his body heat piercing her clothes. His eyes were as dark as the ocean depths, his grip around her body unmovable.

For a long moment, they stared at each other in the moonlight. She sucked in a deep breath.

"You trying to kill me?" he whispered in the Southern drawl that sounded far too familiar for her comfort.

She shook her head, gazing into his dark eyes. He freed one of his arms and reached for the arm she'd hidden behind her back to keep him from seeing what she had. She squirmed in objection, and his body adjusted around hers in response. She'd never been so close to a man. The feeling of his bare body against hers terrified her; he was strong enough to do what Donovan had not!

Unless he's my Guardian. The idea made her more anxious to get away.

"Stop," he ordered as she squirmed.

He wrenched it away, and she sighed.

"I expected a knife or a gun," he said, looking at it in disinterest. He tucked the micro under his pillow, returning his intense gaze to her. "Of course, I saw

what you tried to do to Donovan. You need to learn to shoot. It's a good skill to have right about now."

"What?" she asked, startled by another repeat of the words her Guardian had spoken to her.

"What do I do with you?" he mused, ignoring her. "How badly you want that back?"

Her face flamed with heat, and she strained against him.

"Not badly enough," he surmised. "Go." He released her, and she sprang up, backing away from him.

Her heart pounded, and her body shook. Having never been propositioned before, she didn't know whether to be angry or terrified. The chocolates, the familiar insistence that she learn to protect herself, the Southern drawl.

Lana sank onto the couch, not liking the instinct that told her she was right about him. Her Guardian would never proposition her! He had honor and integrity.

And concern for her well-being, like he showed at the Peak when she hadn't known him from any other army-type. She suddenly felt foolish thinking that Guardian, a man trained to kill, wouldn't kill in cold blood or wouldn't succumb to any other vices. She still found it baffling how different he was in person than over the net.

She also felt grateful he was still alive. She'd missed talking to him since he went silent, probably after he was attacked and his neck injured. The timing now made sense. It hadn't been because he finally got himself killed or because he was through with her. She was embarrassed by her relief that he hadn't truly left her, only revealed who he was. It wasn't her fault he stopped talking to her. He was still alive.

Her Guardian was the only stability she'd known since the world fell apart. Even Mr. Tim had abandoned her after years of mentoring her.

She definitely didn't know what to do about the thrill that went through her at the idea of a night with her Guardian. She'd fantasized about meeting him more than once, even if she knew it was impossible.

And she now knew what price she'd have to pay for her micro. She shuddered, despair creeping through her again. Maybe the man she *thought* was her Guardian really was dead, replaced by Brady, the man he truly was.

Her gaze went towards the bed, where his deep breathing was steady. Fascination and fear trickled through her. She'd always wanted to meet her Guardian.

Just not like this.

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Chapter Seven

BRADY LOOKED UP FROM the radar imaging on the screen before him. Dan entered their command tent and threw down a chunk of blackened metal.

“That’s it,” he said. “That’s all that remains of the command center on the Peak.”

“That’s not our work,” Brady said and lifted the metal. “What happened?”

“Bodies and a whole lot of that. We think General Greene and a few others got away. We intercepted some emergency transmissions but couldn’t get everything because of the electromagnetic field.”

“Our prisoners are the only survivors. And I don’t know they knew anything.”

“Something made them leave,” Dan reminded him. “I think Angel will just cry if you ask her anything. Why don’t we bring in Elise?”

Brady didn’t think Dan was far off. The woman in his tent was something else. He still didn’t fathom what had driven her to leave the Peak in the first place when she clearly couldn’t even make it down the side of the mountain on her own.

He touched the micros in his cargo pocket as he rose, recalling his night. He was a saint for letting her out of his bed the night before. The moment their bodies touched, he could think of little else than how long it had been since he had a woman and how much he’d wanted Angel since soon after he’d started talking to her weeks ago. He doubted Tim would appreciate him making moves on her.

“Elise it is,” he said. “If she doesn’t kill us first.”

“You have no idea how hard it was to tie her to that damn tree,” Dan said. They started away from the tent towards the center of their camp.

While Brady knew Lana was too afraid to leave his tent even if it wasn’t guarded, he’d had to order Elise chained to a tree within view of four guards. The special ops specialist was fearless, genetically engineered to kill, and as lethally trained as any of his men. She glared at them both with a cross between disdain and fury. Brady held up the chunk of steel.

“This is all that’s left of the Peak,” he said.

Her eyes went to it, and he saw confusion in their depths.

“I didn’t order it destroyed. That leaves *your* people.”

Her anger turned to thoughtfulness. Dan pulled the tape from her mouth, and the first words out were curses. Then she shook her head.

“No. The Peak is there. If it’s not, you destroyed it,” she insisted.

Dan showed her his viewer with the images he’d taken the day before. She stared at the screen.

“Not my kind of op,” Brady said. “No one else escaped. Does anyone know about you?”

Understanding crossed her features.

“If you know what happened,” Dan said, “you damn well better tell us.”

“Fuck you,” she snapped. “Why would I tell *you* anything?”

“Because if you don’t, we’ll pop Lana,” Brady said.

Her head whipped around to him. Brady crossed his arms. The moment dragged on.

“Let’s go get her, Dan,” he ordered and turned away. He counted to five before she broke.

“Greenie knew we left,” Elise said.

Dan shot him a look of amusement before they both turned.

“Lana said she needed help getting to the Peace Command Center in Colorado, that Greenie was going to kill her once she found out what she’d done,” Elise continued.

“What she do?”

“I don’t know. She’s my friend. She doesn’t have to say much more than she needed my help,” she said, glaring at them. “Where is she?”

“She’s safe for now.”

“I want to see her.”

“Maybe,” he replied.

“No. Now.”

Brady bristled and strode to her, stopping when he was close enough for their bodies to touch in an unmistakable attempt at intimidation. Elise was much larger than most women, but she was still smaller than him.

“Look around you,” he ordered in a low voice.

She stared at him.

“*Look.*”

Elise did so grudgingly, taking in the PMF insurgents crowded around.

“These men hate you and everything you stand for. You’re not in your world anymore. You better learn fast if you want to survive *my* world, challenging me isn’t the way to go,” he warned. “It’s not just your life you need to worry about. You got it?”

Her jaw clenched, then she yielded with a sigh.

“Please let me see her,” she said, looking up at him.

“If I free you ...”

“I won’t try anything. I swear it.”

He stepped away. Dan touched his thumb to the thumb pads, and her chains fell away. She stretched with a grimace. She cursed, her mutter fading away as she tested her body.

Brady rested one hand on his laser gun until he was sure she wouldn’t try anything. She straightened finally with an angry look at Dan, who smiled in response. Brady wondered what the good-natured man had said to piss her off so much.

Dan led them to Brady’s tent and pushed the tent flap open.

“Elise!”

He didn’t think he’d heard such a happy tone in his life. Lana sprang up from her corner of the couch and flung her arms around Elise.

“Lana, stop it,” Elise groaned, pushing her away. “I hurt everywhere.”

Lana’s face glowed. She pulled Elise to the couch. Elise dropped onto it with another groan. Brady watched them, sensing the depth of their friendship despite Elise’s discomfort. He folded his arms and approached. Lana was braver this day. She studied him with more interest than fear, even if she did push herself into the corner again. Elise glared at him.

“We wanted to talk to you about the Peak,” Dan started, pulling a chair near them.

He showed Lana the same scene he’d shown Elise. Brady watched her face pale. She looked up at him, and he answered the unasked question.

“No, we didn’t.”

“Allegedly,” Elise added under her breath.

Lana clenched her hands.

“They want to know if anyone knew we left. Greenie did, right?” Elise asked.

“Yeah. Greenie,” Lana said.

“Anyone else?” he asked, sitting close to Lana.

“I didn’t tell anyone. Greenie would’ve figured it out. I don’t know who he told,” she answered. She was twisting the edge of her shirt as she spoke. He watched her face, sensing she was hiding a great deal.

“How would he figure it out?” Dan asked.

“I locked out all the terminals, the emergency operations networks for the eastern part of the country, and re-routed the communications systems to my micro.”

“That’s pretty insane!” Dan said with a startled laugh.

“You knew this would happen,” Brady said, pointing to the picture on Dan’s viewer.

She didn’t look at him or the picture.

“Did you know?” Elise asked, surprised.

Lana clenched her hands but didn’t answer. Brady glanced at Dan, his face echoing his own puzzlement.

“Jesus,” Elise breathed. “And you didn’t warn *anyone*? You let everyone die?”

“No, Elise,” Lana said in a hushed voice. “I didn’t know exactly ... I didn’t know when or what or ...” She stopped, knuckles white as she gripped the edge of her T-shirt.

“What *did* you know?” Elise demanded, grabbing her with a shake.

Lana shook her head. Elise released her, sitting back in shock.

“What was it you had to take to the Peace Command Center?” Elise asked in a hushed voice.

“Elise, please don’t!”

“What was worth the lives of the thousand people at the Peak, Lana? Tell me there was something!”

Brady sat back, as surprised as the others. Lana shook her head again. He burned to know the answers to Elise’s questions, not even able to fathom what the answer could be. Lana was a gentle soul; the secret must have been great if she left behind that many people to die!

Her actions suddenly struck him in a different light. She hadn’t been foolish; she’d been desperate. Whatever she found at the Peak had driven her into a forest full of insurgents despite her injury and her lack of familiarity with the forest or the world outside hers. If she left behind a thousand lives, she’d been running for something greater.

“Out,” he ordered.

Dan rose at the command and gripped Elise's arm. The woman was too stunned to resist. Brady leaned back, gazing at Lana. If she'd protected her secret from a thousand people, she wasn't about to reveal it to him. He rubbed the back of his neck. Whatever wiped out the Peak could wipe him out as well.

"Do you have any reason to believe someone is tracking you?" he asked.

"I left my ID at the Peak and disabled my government implant."

"What about your micro?"

"It's untraceable. I checked."

"What about any of the other shit with you?"

She shook her head. He rose, angry and unconvinced she wouldn't bring whatever danger followed him to his backyard. His instincts warned him there was no stopping someone like General Greene, once he set out to find someone. Brady strode out and motioned to one of the guards.

"I need Dan, now."

Within ten minutes, his second-in-command met him in the tent they used as a war room.

"Plan on disassembling our camp within the next forty-eight hours. And, issue an emergency warning order that we're going to send the Appalachia militia to neighboring militias. We'll be a harder target to hit if we're separated," Brady said.

"What are you expecting?" Dan asked.

"I don't know, but it'll be bad," he answered. "I'll give you the coords for the emerops facilities. We can use those for supplies. We're going to dump everything we don't need."

"You think something followed her?" Dan asked in a hushed tone.

"I'm not taking any chances. Whatever wiped out the Peak could wipe *us* out just as easily."

"Wow, Brade. What's really going on?"

Brady shook his head. He didn't know, and he knew the one person who might wasn't about to tell.

"Can you talk to Elise again?" he asked Dan.

"Oh, yeah, that'll be fun." Dan slapped him on the arm and strode out.

Brady watched him, wishing they were closer to one of their secure facilities so he could make a call to Tim. He returned to his tent, deep in

thought. He walked by the woman and paused. She looked up at him from her hurt wrist, pain in her brown eyes.

“Don’t look at me like that,” he warned.

He sat across from her again, studying her. He wished she trusted him as much as she had when he was the Guardian.

“You can send me away,” she said. “I won’t endanger your ... men if I’m not here.”

“True,” he allowed.

“I already have a thousand deaths on my soul,” she whispered. “I don’t want more.”

“You know what I want to do to you when you’re so sad?” he asked, leaning forward.

“What?”

He lifted his chin towards his bed. She flushed. She cleared her throat.

“If nothing else, can I have my things back? Please,” she said without looking at him.

He thought about what Elise said, that she’d been trying to take something west. Maybe it wasn’t a secret after all. Maybe it was something she carried with her.

“I promise, I’ll give you anything for them.”

He rose and crossed to the small safe where he kept what they’d found on her. He brought the small bag to the table. He held up her micro, watching her face. Worry, but no elevated level of distress crossed her features. He lowered it. The moment his hand paused over the vault, she tensed.

“What’s it worth to you?” he asked.

She didn’t respond, but her hands wrung her T-shirt again.

“This is it, isn’t it?” he asked and picked it up.

She paled, eyes glued to the vault.

“This is what you’re taking west.”

It was so small, not even the size of his palm. There was a quadruple lock system on it, requiring not only two thumbprints, but a code, a retinal scan, and another sensor pad he didn’t recognize. He looked at it, wondering how something so small could be so important.

“Anything,” she breathed. “Please put it down, Brady. I’ll give you anything for it.”

He rested it on his knee and looked at her. She met his gaze, emotions skimming through her eyes.

“Anything,” he said. “That’s dangerous for someone as pretty as you.”

“I’d sleep with you, Brady.”

He didn’t expect the calm words. Her gaze was steady. And unafraid. He wondered what changed her from the cowering girl he’d brought home with him yesterday to the almost confident woman seated across from him. Whatever was in the vault, it must be important.

“That’s what you said last night, isn’t it?” she asked. “I promise to sleep with you tonight.”

Amusement filtered through him. He’d known she was sheltered after their long talks. He’d toned down his side of the conversation out of respect for her, not expecting to find her worth talking to and pleased when she was. But now, things had changed. He’d found out his Angel was not only bright, but brave and beautiful. She was in his world now, offering him something he’d allowed himself to fantasize about more than once.

“You know what you’re doing?” he asked.

“I think so. Yes. I do. If it’ll give me what I want.”

“We’ll both get what we want.”

Her face flushed, but she didn’t lose the look of resolution in her features.

“Let me give you a demonstration before you make up your mind,” he said, rising. He crossed to her and sat on the couch beside her. She tensed but didn’t move.

Brady nudged strands of her hair away from her eyes and cupped her face with his other hand. Expecting the sheltered woman would flee at the first kiss, he brushed her lips with his. To his surprise, she leaned into him. Her hands went to his cheeks, and she touched him lightly. Brady didn’t move away as he planned, instead teasing her mouth open.

Lana yielded without any sign of hesitation, returning his kisses with timidity born of both inexperience and hunger.

He’d wanted her since soon after talking to her but never thought it possible. Brady felt his control slip a notch. Their kissing turned to petting, and he pressed her back onto the couch. When he broke contact, Lana pulled his head back to hers, her hands skimming over his shoulders before she undid the top two buttons on his uniform. His own desire lit hot and fast at her eagerness. He helped her without breaking the kiss, their hands fumbling

in their haste to have his clothes off. Brady leaned away only to peel off his undershirt.

Lana stared at his wide chest, taking him in with a look of desire. She touched him timidly, her cool hands branding him as heat coursed through him. Brady kissed her forehead, eyelids, cheeks, and nipped her neck, enjoying the feel of her hands roaming over his chest and back. She groaned softly in response.

“You still sure?” he whispered.

Lana’s eyes opened at his voice. They were cloudy with the same lust he felt.

“I trust you,” she said, touching his face again.

Rather than feel pleasure at her words, they struck him like the cold shower he needed. A pang of morality reared its ugly head. Brady had taken care of this woman from a distance. She deserved more from her Guardian than to be slung over the couch for a quickie. Her first time with him wasn’t going to be the product of coercion; he respected her too much for that. He also knew Tim wouldn’t consider this part of *taking care of her*.

“What’s wrong?” she asked, her voice low with desire.

Sensing he had the upper hand in any case, Brady forced himself away from her. He sat back and rubbed his face, fighting the urge to touch her again and take their relationship to the next level. The Guardian’s relationship, he reminded himself. Lana didn’t know who he was.

Not like this. Regretfully resolved, he rose and fixed his uniform then picked up her belongings.

“Brady, what’s wrong?” Lana asked. Sensing the change in him, she sat up.

“I’ll think about it,” he said, walking towards the back of the tent with her things.

After a stunned silence, she asked. “What’s there to think about?” She followed him and stood several feet away, face flushed with different emotions this time: anger and embarrassment. “Did I do something wrong?”

“Maybe I doubt you’ll keep your word,” he said, admiring the fire in her eyes. “And maybe, I don’t want you tempting me to do something I shouldn’t. You should never offer *carte blanche* to someone who just might take you up on it.”

“Some things are more important than me,” she retorted. “I will keep my promise!”

“One night isn’t enough for this.” He held up the vault again, and desperation crossed her features. “We’ll deal with this later. In the meantime, I’ll keep this locked up.” He strode to the safe, placing the vault within.



Thoughts and emotions scattered, Lana watched him secure the vault in the safe and then leave. Her body shook with need. She meant what she’d said: she did trust him. She would’ve let him do anything to her on the

couch. Her body wanted to feel his bare skin again, and aching desire pooled in her lower belly. She'd never thought desire could conquer her normally rigid self-control. With him, she had nothing to fear. He spoke like a rebel leader, but he touched her like she imagined the Guardian would: with tenderness and restraint.

She wanted to show her Guardian what he'd come to mean to her, before she thought him dead. Because he meant a lot more than she thought he should. Her skin burned from where he'd touched her, and her lips were plumped by his kisses.

Pacing, she tried to reclaim her composure. There were many things about him she couldn't reconcile. The Guardian had some code of honor that seemed at odds with Brady's quick trigger finger. If he wanted to kill her, to rape her, he could have done it with impunity many times over. But the same man who killed in cold blood had reassured her every day for over two weeks that he'd protect her. The man was more complicated than she liked.

And he'd walked away from her, even though she was serious about sleeping with him. Lana paused in her pacing, wondering if she'd done something wrong. Maybe he was only pretending to be interested in her. She'd thought him beyond the duplicity that made up the actions of the elite class. Maybe he feared his punishment would be worse when she told Mr. Tim what he did, for Mr. Tim would surely crush Brady's PMF militia once he found out his friend was a traitor.

"Think of something else, Lana," she ordered herself.

Elise would be horrified. Again. The look on Elise's face when she realized that Lana had known something was wrong at the Peak. She didn't expect it to happen as it did, and the accusation of slaughtering a thousand lives made her feel ill. There was been nothing she could have done, even if she knew when it would happen, even if she trusted her instincts enough to warn people without any proof to back her words!

Her gaze went to the safe where her vault was locked. Brady read her like a satellite image of his house. She'd never learned to lie; in fact, she would never dare lie to Mr. Tim, not with his rigid sense of integrity. She'd never purposely disappoint him. Yet, for the first time in her life, she wished she knew how.

She *needed* her micro and the vault. If someone was able to track her, she needed to flee, fast. The keypads had to be delivered somewhere safe,

though she began to wonder if anyplace really was safe. Greenie had destroyed the Peak from the inside out. Was the Peace Command Center also at risk?

Restless, she rose and paced in front of the safe. She'd already tested the lock and found it to be beyond tampering. He'd all but rejected her deal to sleep with him and wasn't about to hand her equipment over to her. She needed another plan.

She gazed at the safe again. She *must* access its contents! Desperation made her want to cry. She refused, knowing there was too much at stake for her to dwell in her emotions. Her gaze settled on the trunk where Brady kept extra equipment.

She knelt beside it, looking hesitantly at the dangerous weapons within. She doubted she could ever kill anyone, especially her Guardian, after seeing Donovan shot. She moved the guns and knives out of the way, unsettled by the thought of blood. He had a crowd control baton the size of her hand that expanded with a touch to the thumb pad.

She tucked it at her waist and rose, closing the trunk. The safe required the code from a key fob, which was probably in one of his pockets. He wasn't the kind of man to leave it lying somewhere. No, he'd keep it with him.

If she could get the micro and the vault, she could escape. The micro would allow her to map a route west, and she could put on his tactical clothing and mask and leave the tent. Her thoughts came rapidly, and she refused to think twice. She'd escaped Greenie despite all his layers of security; she could escape *him*.

She sat down to plot, not wanting to think what would happen if she failed to deliver the Horsemen somewhere safe or how much her Guardian would despise her once she acted. She touched her lips, unable to shake the desire still running through her body.

The Horsemen were priority. She had to see them safe. Everything else, she'd deal with when the time came.

Chapter Eight

“WE’RE LEAVING IN forty-eight hours.” Brady’s voice awoke her from her uneasy doze a few hours later. Lana straightened in her seat on the couch, eyes following his powerful stride across the tent. He didn’t look at her.

“To where?” she asked.

“Not your concern.”

“Is Elise coming?”

“Yes,” he replied. “Everyone is going.”

She watched him to see if she could see where he kept the key fob she needed to enter the safe. It was near midnight. Her hands felt clammy, her nerves fluttering. He peeled the tac suit down to his waist, revealing a snug T-shirt beneath whose sleeves were tight around bulging biceps. He wore identification tags, and she looked closely without seeing the key fob. He’d changed since their incident on the couch, grown more distant. He was once again the rebel commander and not her Guardian.

“I’ll need the locations of all the emerops facilities in the morning,” he said.

“Very well,” she replied. She went to the kitchen to get a meal bar, nibbling on it as he settled near the trunks containing his gear. His back was to the living area as he pulled off every one of the dozen weapons he wore on his body and lined them up in front of him to start cleaning.

One of his knives had blood on the hilt.

“You killed someone,” she said in a hushed voice.

“That’s what happens when someone tries to kill me,” he said in bemusement.

“Doesn’t it bother you?”

“The choice is between him or me,” he glanced at her. “I don’t expect someone like *you* to understand.”

She frowned.

“Don’t look at me like that,” he said without looking at her. “You killed a thousand people. I might be close, but I think you beat me.”

“I didn’t kill them. I couldn’t have known what was in his head,” she replied, agitated by his harsh words. “Or how far he’d go.”

“Greenie?”

She didn't answer but returned to the couch, perching on the edge. She reached down with one hand to retrieve the baton.

“Not sure I believe someone like you. For all I know, you stole something that'll cause your enemies to destroy my people,” he said. “You knew enough to escape.”

“Someone like me? Your performance on the couch makes me think you're not above taking what you want, either,” she reminded him. Her face flamed with hurt anger. She'd thought the couch incident meant something to him, like it did her. If nothing else, she wanted to correct him about the Peak, to tell him she'd thought she'd been saving everyone on the mountain by taking the very keypads that might kill them in the hands of a traitor. Her mistake was not realizing Greenie had a back-up plan.

“I made a mistake.”

His words stung but bolstered her decision. She rose and approached him, the baton behind her back.

“Elise's still pissed at you. Dan's got her chained to a tree, she's so mad,” Brady said.

Guilt and pity trickled through her as she thought of her friend. Elise had been loyal enough to help her. She didn't deserve to be chained to a tree. Lana raised the baton when she was within arm's reach and held it out.

“You probably won't—”

The pulse that burst from the baton's tip dropped him. Her heart soared, and she dropped it, kneeling beside him. She searched his pockets, surprised when she didn't even find her micros in the cargo pocket where he'd kept them. There was no key fob, either.

“No, no, no!” she whispered, panicking.

She bounced to her feet and searched the dresser she'd already searched earlier. She retraced his steps since he entered, seeking anything she might have missed. She moved his weapons, pushed his heavy body out of the way to see if he hid them beneath one of his muscular thighs.

Nothing.

She stood and stared at the safe. She searched everything again then went to the kitchen, opening all the drawers and cabinets.

Brady groaned. Lana froze, turning to see him moving. He pushed himself up.

She knew Brady was merciless but hoped her Guardian wouldn't kill her for this. Her hands began trembling, and she moved quickly to put one of the chairs in the living room between them. Brady straightened, the baton in hand. He drew a breath and looked at her.

"Next time, crank this up all the way. It'll only drop a man half my size for five minutes. You see this button?" Despite his calm words, his gaze displayed his anger.

She looked where he indicated.

"Swipe your thumb over it once, and it stuns. Twice and it kills. Got it?"

He tossed the baton and approached her, glaring down at her with dark eyes as hard as his chiseled frame. She sucked in a breath and moved away, flinching as he pushed over the chair separating them. He didn't grab her; he didn't need to. He used his body to back her against the wall.

"I'm sorry," she whispered.

"I'm just glad you didn't know how to use it right," he said. "You're looking for this." He held up the key fob in the space between them, close enough for her to grab, if she wanted.

"I have to have the vault," she said, embarrassed by the desperation in her voice.

His gaze moved over her face, resting on her lips.

"Attacking me isn't the right way to get it. I'm the only thing standing between you and whatever hell is chasing you." He moved away, and she released her breath, resting her head against the cabinet in relief. She'd expected him to explode. Her gaze went to the safe again, the despair within her swirling.

"Brady, you said one night wasn't enough," she said. "I'd even ... I'd even consider becoming your ... companion."

He stared at her then chuckled. "You say that like it'd be the worst thing you ever did."

"Well, it wouldn't be far off."

"Women don't normally dread climbing into bed with me. I'm sorry the idea is so repulsive to you."

"Not repulsive," she said. "I don't think I could kill someone, and I've got nothing else to trade. And you're the one who walked away from me earlier."

“I was giving you a chance to reconsider. So you’d give yourself to me indefinitely in exchange for your tech toys?” he asked. She heard a note of hesitation alongside the consideration in his broken voice.

“Yes,” she said, confused about his on-off moods.



Brady’s hormones surged at her proposition. He’d barely managed to walk away from her earlier. He could think of so many things he’d do to her sweet little body. And then he recalled his promise to Tim, and looked away from her.

“I can’t,” he said with regret.

“What do you mean?” she asked, surprise in her voice.

“I’m not willing to consider it.”

“But I’ve seen how you look at me. You could’ve fooled me with how you kissed me.”

“It would be a mistake,” he said.

“Brady, I don’t understand you.” Anger was back in her voice.

Lana approached him and paused within arm’s reach. Brady met her gaze again, taking in the array of emotions crossing her features. The wounded look bothered him most, the same vulnerable expression that had disturbed him twice before. He didn’t want Angel to feel that way, not when it was his duty to take care of her. As the Guardian, he’d been her emotional support, and he’d imagined this look when she discussed how scared she was of what was going on outside the Peak. To see the expression in person both touched and frustrated him.

When he took a step towards her, she reached out to him. He moved closer, her small hand on his arm, until they were toe-to-toe. Her breathing quickened, her body tensed. Her eyes flickered up to him then down again. He reached out with one hand and lifted her chin before crossing his hands behind his back. She looked from his eyes to his lips and moved closer. He lowered his head and caught her lips with his. He kissed her gently, plying her warm lips until she responded. She opened to him once again, reminding him of how she’d yielded to him earlier.

She tasted like honey, and her hot mouth soon became more demanding. She leaned into him, her warm, soft body molding against his. He kept his hands behind his back and tasted her, enjoyed her, tested her without pushing either of them over the edge. She was responsive, hungry and yielding, a combination that lit his blood on fire.

When he withdrew, she weaved against him, face flushed and eyes glazed.

“Go lay down,” he ordered in a husky tone and walked past her. “I need to think.”

He’d had a lot of women throw themselves at him, most of them more interested in the genetically altered body that made him as good in bed as he was in battle. He didn’t normally turn them down, unless he didn’t have the time. Of course, he’d never felt so personally responsible for any of the

women that passed through his life. Most of them were no more than one night stands.

But he couldn't let himself do it, no matter how much he wanted her or how willing she was. He didn't need more emotions to hamper his decision making, and he didn't need Tim to disown him at the end of this mess for exploiting the girl Brady was charged with guarding.

He watched Lana from the corner of his eye, returning to his weapons, this time with his back to the wall and not towards her. His head hurt from the shock of the baton, and he couldn't help hoping she was a better shot than she was figuring out the baton.

Brady's body was hot, his mind racing. He took his time with his weapons, needing to keep his hands occupied so he didn't take her up on her offer. He couldn't take her as his companion, no matter what he felt for her. The world was falling apart around them, and he couldn't risk either of their mental states in a relationship that may not see both of them surviving.

He finished and laid out his clothing and weapons in neat piles for the next day then stood at the bed. Lana was curled into a tight ball on the far end, asleep. As much as he ached to crawl into the bed beside her, he pulled a blanket from a trunk and went to the couch.

The next morning, he woke before dawn and before she did. He toured the progress of the camp before going to the exercise area. He spent an hour on a punching bag before joining a few others sparring. Dan appeared soon after, and they sparred until Dan finally signaled he was finished.

"You okay?" he asked, gaze intent.

"Yeah, good. Let's go again," Brady said, swiping the sweat from his face.

"We've been at it for an hour, and you're still rarin' go to."

Brady straightened from his sparring stance. He was hot and sweaty, but he'd not yet been able to rid himself of the wired energy humming through his blood. He felt like sparring until noon.

"I thought you wanted to hit the comms site today," Dan added. "Save a little in case you run into any bad guys."

Brady gritted his teeth but nodded. Dan was right. He had a four-hour helo and hiking trip ahead of him to their nearest secure comms facility

tucked into natural cave a few ranges over. The way things were going lately, he'd be lucky to make it there and back at all.

"You taking me?" Dan asked.

"Not this time, in case I don't come back."

"Think happy, man."

"You're awfully chipper today," Brady said with a grimace.

They walked into the camp from the designated exercise areas. The camp was being broken down quickly, with pallets already loaded and sealed, awaiting evacuation. Despite his less-than-serious nature, Dan was detail oriented and quick to execute, two traits Brady found priceless over their years together.

"We'll have everything down by tomorrow morning," Dan said, following his gaze to a pallet.

"Good man. As usual, you deliver."

"Yep. I can move the girls tonight so they're not stuck without a tent to sleep in."

"One night wouldn't hurt 'em," Brady grunted.

"It might hurt *me*."

He gave a sidelong look at Dan. "You and Elise?" he asked, surprised. "I thought she'd slit your throat."

"I'm not saying she didn't try," Dan said with a snort. "I put up a fight, but it was useless."

Brady ignored Dan, eyes taking in the progress of their preparations to leave. Dan's estimates were always conservative. It looked as if the camp would be packed up—if not evacuated—before dark.

"Move them to the nearest underground site today."

They entered his tent. Lana looked up from her seat on the couch. Her searching gaze lingered on him. He withdrew the micro and handed it to her.

"Emerops stations," he directed, watching. "Send the coords to Dan."

She chewed her lip but complied. He removed the micro from her hands and took her injured wrist. She'd tried to change the bandage on her own. It was messy and uneven.

"Did you use the anti-bac?" he asked.

She gave him a blank look.

"Damn feds. I'll get it," Dan said, crossing to the kitchen, where one whole cabinet was filled with medical supplies.

Brady pulled a chair beside her. She was studying him again. He glanced up at her, caught by her direct gaze. They gazed at each other for a long moment, and he tried to figure out what was going through her thoughts.

“Incoming!” Dan called, tossing a small package.

Brady caught it and pulled out the medical supplies.

“Cleanser, anti-bac, quick wrap. Don’t use the traditional bandage next time. The quick wrap is easier,” he instructed, holding up each of the products as he spoke. He stripped the bandage and showed her the steps again. “Dan’s going to move you somewhere safe today to one of our permanent sites. I’ll rendezvous with you all late.”

“You always have the good shit!” Dan exclaimed, pulling chocolate out of the cabinet.

“Drop it, Dan. I’ve killed men for less,” he retorted.

Lana looked at him, frowning. Dan ignored his warning and snagged two pieces of the precious few he had remaining.

“It’s supposed to alleviate bad moods,” Dan said to Lana. “Doesn’t work on him though.”

“You, behave,” he ordered the woman, rising. “You, too, Dan.”

“I’ll leave you some.”

Brady shook his head, wanting nothing more than to return to the sparring ring. Instead, he hefted his pack and left for the awaiting helo.

Tim was already on the large screen when Brady entered the comms center several hours later. Brady peeled off the top of his suit, drenched in sweat and splattered with blood.

“Never seen you sweat, son,” Tim said.

Brady grunted in response. The two-hour hike had turned into a six-hour battle when his men tripped over a scout in the lower valley. Brady was burning up, his blood thrumming. Tim, on the other hand, looked as if he’d gotten some sleep since their last talk. He wore a breezy, short-sleeved shirt. The comms room where he sat was large with marble walls and leather chairs, a sign of the upper class’s decadence.

“It’s a little rough back east,” Brady said.

“I’ve been reading the reports from both sides.” Tim frowned, disturbed.

Even without their shared history, there had always been something about Tim that Brady liked. He was ruthless, beyond loyal to the few he trusted, and quick to use his influence to get Brady access to any of the government’s

supplies, technology, intelligence, and anything else Brady requested it. And Tim never asked why.

“You hear about the Peak?” Brady asked. He threw himself into one of the beat-up chairs in the tiny comms center.

“Indeed I did,” Mr. Tim said. “Never saw that coming either, though I hoped ...”

“What?”

“I knew something was wrong there. I hoped we’d find out what—or who—was responsible before it all went up in smoke.”

“I think someone did figure it out, or it wouldn’t have gone up in smoke at all,” Brady replied.

“Possible.”

“Lana’s with me.”

Tim’s gaze sharpened. Brady assessed him, not sure what to think of the sudden guardedness to Tim’s face.

“Is she okay?” he asked.

“Yep.”

“She know you for the Guardian?”

“I haven’t told her. I don’t think she’s figured it out.”

“Keep it that way,” Tim said. “She doesn’t need to connect the dots back to me. She’s a brilliant analyst and one of the few non-PMF members I trust. I’m happy to hear she’s okay.”

Brady was surprised to see a genuine smile on Tim’s face. He’d often wondered what it was that drew Tim to Lana and suspected it was nothing more than what drew him to other women. That the smooth politician genuinely cared for her never crossed Brady’s mind. Tim didn’t show much affection, even to his thirteen sons.

“She won’t say whatever it is she figured out,” he said. “And she’s transporting something. She won’t talk to anyone about it.”

“How big is it?”

“It’s in a vault the size of my hand.”

“It could be anything. I got her access to everything, even shit the President didn’t have access to,” Tim said with a shake of his head. “There are many secrets in the government.”

“I get that,” Brady said dryly. “One of them took out the Peak after we left.”

“Bring her to me. We can meet at the Peace Command Center. I have reason to believe that’s about the only place that hasn’t been infiltrated by those professing allegiance to East or West.”

“Will do. How do you know her anyway?”

Tim flashed a smile. “Her grandfather knew my father a long time ago. Class loyalties run deep, and he called me up about twenty years ago and said he was calling in a favor my dad owed him. He said he had a granddaughter who was special and he didn’t want her to get stuck doing some sort of manual labor. I agreed to enroll her in school. I have thirteen children among my companions, so no one asks questions. I figured I’d open the door and then pawn her off as a companion to someone in the government.”

Brady pulled out his water bottle as he listened.

“He was right. She was brilliant, loyal, sweet. I’ve never been a saint; I saw I could use her, so I put her in college and brought her to work for me. Had her trained in intelligence, emergency operations, technology. She can learn anything. Sent her to half a dozen agencies on rotation. I turned her into something I could use in my office to open more doors for our cause.”

“I didn’t think there was anyone capable of the nukes, if not us,” Brady observed. “You think she knows who did it?”

“I think she knows enough to help me put the final pieces of the puzzle together. Things haven’t been right since the war, but the issues haven’t been out in the open. And, the government chose to pursue the PMF rather than risk another civil war by going after people with a lot of influence and money. The last civil war set us back fifty years.”

“Who would want to start another civil war?” Brady breathed.

“A civil war where both sides have enough dangerous shit to destroy the world twenty times over. How big is the vault she has?”

Brady held up his palm and drew a square around it.

“You think you know what it is?” he asked.

“Not at all. But if she’s not talking, I’d take extreme precautions if I were you,” Tim said, again thoughtful.

“We’re breaking camp and scattering today,” Brady confirmed.

“She’ll probably have an issue with being under the protection of the PMF,” Tim said.

“I have it handled. I explained that she needs to do what I say or else.”

“Gently, Brady,” he chided. “Take her underground, if you must. Keep her safe until I know who’s after her.”

“I’ll take care of her.” Brady promised. “I think it was General Greene.”

“Greene? Not Smith?”

“Smith went crazy and dove off a cliff.”

“What do you mean crazy?” Tim asked, eyes narrowing.

“I mean, totally insane. They said he’d been a basket case for almost two months by the time he jumped. The doc declared him unfit.”

“Greenie wasn’t on our list,” Tim admitted. “He spent too much time overseas.”

“Maybe Arnie found out about Greenie.”

“Maybe. I’ll run his name through a few different people. Can you check in again in a few days?”

“I’ll do my best. It’s a warzone out here,” Brady said. “My time is up. I can’t risk being on this channel too long.”

“Take care of my girl.”

“I will. Brady out.”

The viewer turned off, and he pulled his suit back on. The eight-hour ordeal to get there was worth the ten-minute conversation. At least he’d confirmed that whatever secrets Lana had were well worth hiding. He replaced his weapons around his body.

“Brade.” Dan’s breathless voice came over his net.

“Yeah, Dan.”

“We’re leaving now.” The grim note in Dan’s voice made Brady quicken his movements.

“What happened?” Brady asked.

“I had a gut feeling that we needed to leave. Thank God we did. Someone ordered a strike on us. Most of the camp was gone already and all the important stuff airlifted this morning.”

“You all right?”

“Yeah. The girls are fine,” Dan said.

“I’m on my way to the hard site.” Brady chuckled and strode from the communications center. “Send me your coords.”

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Chapter Nine

“LANA, THAT’S MY GUN arm!” Elise said in irritation.

Lana eased back without breaking contact. Elise and Dan were a good team, relaying hand signals and other silent communications with nothing more than a glance at each other. Lana, on the other hand, couldn’t shake the paralyzing fear that came with knowing they were being stalked by men who wanted them dead.

Dan leaned back into the hollow of the tree in which they’d taken refuge. “This doesn’t look good,” he whispered.

Elise pursed her lips. Lana peered around them to see the five or more armed men about twenty meters away. If the flares going up short distance away were any sign, the five men were part of a larger force between them and their destination. Brady’s men had dropped her, Elise, and Dan—along with two others—into the forest by helicopter two hours before. The forest looked little different from the one they’d just left. If the helo ride hadn’t taken three hours, she would have thought they never left.

Soon after, the men in black mowed down two of Dan’s men, and the three of them were left to fend for themselves.

Dan settled onto his knees and flipped out a tracker. Elise looked over his shoulder. Lana was helpless. She had no micro, no genetically engineered body or weapons to fight off anything that came at them.

Dan handed the tracker to Elise, who tapped the screen, pensive. He touched his earpiece.

“Yep, still here,” he replied. “Me ’n’ the girls and a shitload of bad guys where there shouldn’t be any.” His gaze rested on Lana, and he smiled.

She hugged her knees to her chest to keep from shaking. Not only were they surrounded by adversaries, it was cold. Dan had given her a jacket, but their slow crawl through the forest had left her soaked and shivering.

“Elise is plotting them,” Dan said, gaze again on the tracker. “We think there are fifteen.”

“Ish,” Elise added. “Fifteen-ish.”

“Send our coords, too, so they don’t blow us up,” Dan directed in a hushed voice.

Lana never thought she'd end up in the middle of a forest, defended by the PMF against those who seemed to want to start a second East-West civil war.

"Can you shoot, Lana?" Dan asked.

"Not straight. Been trying to teach her for weeks," Elise answered without looking up. "She closes her eyes when she fires."

"So, no, that won't work," Dan said to the person on the other end of his conversation. There was another pause. "Then that's what we'll do."

They looked at her, and she suspected they were silently cursing the defenseless civilian.

"Stay here. They're calling in a strike. Elise and I will take out the rest," Dan said.

Lana nodded, afraid to ask what happened if the plan didn't work. He patted her arm then moved to crouch beside Elise, waiting.

The screech of incoming missiles was audible long before they hit, but the laser strikes were silent. She plugged her ears, watching as the missiles distracted the men into one direction while the laser strike knocked them dead. The ground shook beneath them as the weapons hit the ground. The scent of burnt metal and flesh soon followed, then chaos as Elise and Dan moved away from her, each going in the opposite direction under the cover of smoke.

Lana stretched onto her stomach, watching them from the safety of the tree. The strikes were enough to disarray, if not kill, most of the men. More laser fire lit the area where Elise had gone.

She sucked in a breath, heart racing. Another man dropped, this time from Dan's direction. She couldn't tell how many there were, not with the smoke and darkness. She heard the sounds of a physical scuffle and another shot from Dan's direction. The adversaries were regrouping, with one barking orders to those remaining. She watched dark shapes mill and drop as the smoke cleared until they wised up and took refuge in the forest.

One charged her hiding place, and she scrambled back, pressing herself against the tree. She held her breath, listening as he prepped his weapon. Another shot pierced the tense darkness, then there was a flurry of movement. The man inches from her fired into the melee, along with the laser guns of several more. She couldn't tell what was happening, but it

seemed like there were a lot more guns in the fight than there had been a minute ago.

The gunman rested back on his heels to load a new laser charge pack. The gunfight gave another burst of life before winding down. She froze, willing the man not to look left, or he'd see her.

She heard Elise's whistle. She couldn't respond without drawing the man's attention. Elise whistled again. More gunfire sounded. The man beside Lana rocked back suddenly, pounding his gun on the ground as it jammed. He looked up.

Their eyes met. Lana's heart stopped, and she opened her mouth to shout for Elise. He slapped his hand over her mouth and wrenched her up, the laser gun at her head. He wrapped a thick arm around her throat and dragged her from the forest. Dark corpses littered the small clearing.

"You have until the count of five to put down your weapons!" he bellowed. "One."

She strained against him. His grip tightened, and she stilled. Two more of his men moved cautiously from the forest, looking for Elise or Dan to appear.

"Two!"

"I'm here," Brady's growl came from the fog. Lana made out his form as he emerged from the bushes.

"Where are the others?" the man holding her demanded.

"Just me."

"Weapons down!"

Brady raised his gun instead, aiming it at the man holding her.

"You get one warning," he said in a tone far more lethal than he'd ever used with her.

"You're outnumbered, idiot," one of the others snapped.

One shot rang out, followed by two more. The man at her back dropped, followed immediately by the other two. Dan and Elise rose from the bushes and lowered their weapons. Lana shoved away from the dead man, horrified. Brady gripped her arm, pulling her quickly through the forest. Dan ran ahead of them, Elise behind, and they flew down a deer path to a creek, then darted across rocks to the other bank.

Cold water soaked Lana's boots as Dan kept them on the creek's edge for a few hundred meters before veering into the surrounding forest. They

stopped at a rock wall. Dan hopped onto a boulder and placed his hand on the wall. The keypad lit up, and light spilled from a door that opened slowly.

“Dan, go,” Brady ordered, releasing her. Dan and Elise ducked into the dark entrance. Brady turned away and started towards the forest. Lana caught his arm, alarmed.

“Brady!”

He faced her, and she realized how stupid it was to expect he’d do anything else but return to the fight.

“Thank you,” she managed. “Be careful.”

Brady gazed at her intently. Heart hammering, Lana rose to her tiptoes and gave him a light kiss on the lips. He snatched her, though instead of pushing her away, he wrapped his arms around her and kissed her, deep and hard. She returned the kiss, thrilled by his passion and her own mounting hunger.

“Lana!” Elise called from the hallway.

Brady released her suddenly, and Lana wobbled. She watched him disappear into the dark forest, her body thrumming with desire.

“Come on,” Elise said.

Breathless, Lana obeyed and joined them in the tunnel. Dan led them into a narrow hall and to another locked door. He opened it. Lana turned as the door behind them closed. Brady remained outside. Elise nudged her, and she trailed Dan as he strode down another hall. He led them through the maze until they emerged into a yawning cave lit by lanterns then continued into another set of halls. He stopped at one and pressed his thumb to the keypad.

“Lana, I’m gonna leave you here. He’ll probably be pissed at me, so don’t get comfortable,” Dan said, waving her in.

Lana entered, in shock from the night. The suite was small and comfortable with a small living area, utility area with lockers, and a door leading to a bedroom with its own bathroom. She stood shaking for a moment. Woodenly, she peeled off her wet clothes and climbed into a hot shower. The water stung her skin, and she grimaced as her attacker’s blood ran down the drain.

For once, she almost understood Brady’s ability to kill without regret. If she had a laser gun, she just might have pulled the trigger. She didn’t know

how he could take the chance of hitting her, though! What kind of man risked the person he was trying to protect?

Overwhelmed, she closed her eyes, enjoying the heat. She turned off the shower and rifled through the room's contents. The dresser contained neatly folded boxers and T-shirts but nothing else. She pulled on a set and dropped into the bed, exhausted.

A while later, the sound of movement outside the bedroom door pulled her from her sleep. She roused herself and opened the door from the bedroom to the living area.

Brady had piled his weapons on the couch and stripped down to a pair of pants and nothing else. Her breath caught at the sight of his wide, muscular chest, and the pants that dropped dangerously low on his hips. Her blood quickened, and she felt too hot.

He pulled on a T-shirt, unaware she was in the doorway.

"Are you that good of a shot or were you lucky?" she asked. She wanted to look away from his perfect body but found she couldn't. Instead, she found herself recalling what almost happened.

"I'm that good." His declaration was unhesitant, like his response to killing people.

They were just normal events of his world, a world very unlike her own. Lana couldn't help thinking they were far too different. And that he'd saved her life again. And she wanted more than a kiss next time.

"Are you okay?" he asked in a softer tone. "He didn't hurt you?"

"If I had a gun, I might have almost thought of killing him," she admitted.

"Good thing you didn't have one," he said, amused. "I told you I'd protect you. We're in this together. No one threatens what's mine." He sat down to pull off his boots.

She said nothing, not sure what to think of his words. The idea of belonging to her Guardian was thrilling. The idea of belonging to a remorseless insurgent leader was terrifying. He'd said the same words the Guardian did. He said the words with the same assurance he said everything.

Yet, he'd refused her offer to become his companion. The way he kissed her and the way his gaze lingered on her every time they spoke was more

than enough to convince her he was attracted to her. She wondered what kept him back and what exactly he wanted. He'd asked for nothing.

"You're staring at me. What?" Brady asked, without looking up.

"I'm trying to figure you out."

"There's nothing much to me. I'm a soldier."

"Traitor to your country."

"You're smart enough to know better. The PMF will be the only thing that holds this country together. You just don't want to admit what's going on around you."

"That makes two of us," she mused.

Brady glanced over his shoulder at her.

"I was thinking about how you kissed me," she said. "It was ... ah ... anyway, Brady, I feel like I know you already."

He bristled. Instead of answering, he rose and faced her. Lana stepped out of the doorway as he approached, assuming he meant to ignore her and head to the bedroom to rest. Brady paused in front of her, meeting her gaze.

"What do you think?" he asked.

"I wouldn't have asked if I thought otherwise," she replied.

He kissed her in response, as intense as he had been at the entrance of the underground base. She sensed his restraint break. His hands roamed her body, and she returned his hot kisses, wanting him with the same lust she felt from him. Her question slid away from her mind as he maneuvered her into the bedroom and lowered her onto the bed. Lana pulled him on top of her, certain he wouldn't walk away this time.

Brady made love to her with passion and tenderness, a combination that made her fall even harder for the side of him that had kept her company for weeks and protected her. He held her afterwards until she drifted into a doze. She awoke beneath the sheets of his bed, warm and comfortable. Her skin smelled of him, and she smiled.

Brady stirred across the room. He was getting dressed in his uniform.

"Gotta fight bad guys." His voice held a tight note, one she couldn't place. He didn't look at her.

"Are you all right?" she asked, pushing herself up.

"Yeah." He was distant again.

Lana pulled the blankets up as well, feeling exposed rather than comfortable at his sudden change.

“You’re not upset about what happened are you?” she asked.

“I needed a woman,” he said dismissively, as if she was a common prostitute.

Lana studied his back as he moved. She sensed there was something behind his words. He was trying to push her away again, as he had before. Only this time, he’d gone too far with her to completely walk away. She wondered what it was that kept him at war with himself and tried not to let his words affect her.

“Are you taking me as your companion?” she asked.

“Not in the middle of a war.”

“You never answered my question. Do I know you from somewhere?”

Brady’s movement paused then resumed. He whipped open the door to the living area and began placing his weapons around his body. Lana eased out of bed and put on her clothing before joining him.

“Do I?” she prodded at his silence.

“No.”

Disappointment spiraled through her. Her Guardian slept with her then lied to her. Confusion and anger stirred again. Why would he lie about knowing her? He’d been so sweet to her just a hour before. It was plain he regretted it. He still didn’t look at her, and she couldn’t help feeling hurt.

“I’m going on a mission. Will be back in the morning,” Brady said and strode to the door. “I don’t need to tell you not to leave, do I?”

“No,” she whispered. Lana watched him leave and rubbed her face, exhausted. She wasn’t certain what to think right now. Her body still thrummed with desire for him. It was scrambling her logic and had completely decimated her self-control where he was concerned.

Frustrated, she headed to the small bedroom and dropped into the bed. She wrapped her arms around a pillow that smelled like him and stared at the wall, distraught by the feelings of both anger and need for the complicated man. What had started as admiration and respect for the Guardian was turning into something more, and she didn’t know what to do about it.

Lana slept until Elise woke her for breakfast by beating on her door in the morning. Someone had cleaned her clothing and draped it over the couch. Lana changed quickly, her body sore from the night with her Guardian. She wrenched the door open.

“It’s about time,” Elise complained. “And for the record, you’re not supposed to get caught when the bad guys come for you.”

Lana frowned, looking Elise over from head to foot. The elite fed soldier was dressed in PMF gray.

“Elise,” she said in disapproval.

“Someone has to protect you,” Elise replied with a smile. “Let’s get some food.”

“It doesn’t bother you?” Lana pressed. “Wearing their colors? Betraying your country?”

“That’s the harshest thing I’ve ever heard leave your mouth. Good girl!”

Elise strode away. Lana followed. They grabbed food from the small cafeteria that was devoid of people at the late hour of morning. Lana hadn’t expected to sleep in so long but was grateful Elise had thought to leave her alone for the full night. Elise straddled a chair, and Lana sat across from her.

“Elise—” she started.

“I don’t see things as simply as you,” Elise said. “This isn’t a case of good guy, bad guy. I agree with Dan—someone in the government wants to start another civil war. What do you think?”

Lana listened, nibbling a pastry. It was impossible for her to think anything different. Her thoughts went from Brady to Greenie and the communications she’d forwarded to her micro. She itched to have her micro again, to look at the logs and hack into whatever she could to find the answers.

She flushed despite herself. She’d paid her one night with Brady and still didn’t have her micro or the vault. He seemed immune to most emotions remotely human. What more did he want from her?

“Well? You’re the analyst,” Elise prompted. “I’m a grunt because I couldn’t pass the fed tests, you know.”

“You don’t give yourself enough credit, Elise,” Lana chided. “I don’t have any empirical evidence to suggest—”

“Don’t use that fed speak on me,” Elise said with an exasperated sigh. “I asked what you *think*, not what you know.”

“I don’t think the PMF did it,” Lana said at last.

“That was painful. Remind me never to ask your opinion on what I’m wearing.”

Lana half-listened, thoughts on Greenie and the Horsemen. The weight of those secrets robbed her of her appetite and made her feel tired again, even after a full night of rest.

“I think someone in the government was working with some very powerful partners who had the funding, operational planning, and corrupt government officials in high enough places to execute,” she said.

“Is that close to what I said?” Elise grinned.

Lana nodded.

“Awesome.”

“I still don’t consider the PMF an ally.”

“If you want to stay alive, you better learn to adapt,” Elise advised. “Something we learned in *my* training: survive then worry about fighting another day.”

“We come from two different worlds.”

“I have a feeling this will be permanent.”

Lana agreed silently. Even if she reached the Peace Command Center, the world wouldn’t right itself. She’d hoped her burden would end there, and the secrets she kept could be turned over to someone who could fix things. She suddenly found these thoughts foolish.

She wished to talk to Guardian again, to hear his take on the world. He’d been her only friend. Her thoughts turned dark as her mind wandered to Brady. Their relationship had changed to one far more dangerous, less open.

“Elise, can I use your micro?” Lana asked suddenly, surprised to see the elite soldier had it at her waist.

“Later. We got something to do first,” Elise said, standing. “I’m going to teach you some self-defense. The next time someone grabs you, you can take care of him. This afternoon, we’re learning some basic survival shit, since it’s clear you don’t know any of it. All your fancy training won’t ...”

Lana half-listened to Elise’s lecture, thinking about how she could hack into her micro with Elise’s. She followed her friend to a portion of the underground site converted into a massive gym and training facility. A dozen or so of the PMF soldiers were present. Elise breezed by them, unaffected. Lana couldn’t help but feel self-conscious at the lingering looks

they gave her. She didn't have Elise's physique; she was clearly not one of the genetically altered warriors.

Elise peeled off her shirt to reveal a snug undershirt that outlined the shape of her muscular upper body.

"We'll start with how to break some general holds," Elise said.

"Brady said to help if you need it," a deep male voice said.

Lana turned to look at the speaker and craned her neck back. He was bigger than Brady by a head and one and a half times as wide. She felt like a flower next to a tree and stared, hoping Elise didn't take his offer seriously.

"Great!" Elise said with enthusiasm. "Put her in a choke hold."

Lana paled, expecting her day wasn't about to get any easier.

Chapter Ten

BRADY SURVEYED THE MESS before him, admiring the ability of the bio-elimination field to destroy on touch. The fed's facility had been armed as well as the hospital, and one of his commo guys intercepted the call for help only an hour before. Even so, Brady and his team had arrived too late.

Nothing remained. Rather, no *one* remained.

"They left everything in storage. Didn't take a damn thing," Dan reported from his position inside the building.

Brady rested his laser gun on his shoulder, taking in the undisturbed minefield and pieces of bodies remaining after several of the intruders tried to cross the bio-elim field before it was disabled. The fed building smoldered before him, the scent of metal and burning plastic thick in the air.

"No survivors out here," he said. "Looks like they were here to kill, not loot."

"Some good shit back here, though."

"The feds always have the best shit," Brady said.

"You thinking what I'm thinking?" Dan asked.

"That this was a fed-on-fed attack?"

"No one else uses this ammunition except for us, and this wasn't one of our ops. It's military grade."

Brady walked the area between the double walls, looking for anything or anyone in a large enough piece to provide clues as to what was going on. The compound was a nuclear power plant. The reactor area, the storage and logistical areas, and the hazardous waste areas appeared untouched. Just the barracks and office areas had been attacked.

Whoever attacked didn't want survivors or to destroy a perfectly functional facility. Someone would be coming back to take over the facility, he assessed.

"I hate being too near this stuff," he muttered. "Won't know if there's an issue 'til you're dead."

"Or your dick falls off. We'll loot fast," Dan promised.

Brady pushed chunks of body parts blown out of the minefield and knelt to retrieve a thumb keypad. He didn't understand the significance of the seemingly benign keypads. This one was similar to the other his team found,

only there was no biohazard sign, and the serial was in blue. He'd spent days fighting to reach the Peak with the first one, and Lana had nearly gone off a cliff for another one.

He'd tried hard not to think of her or their night. He'd betrayed his own sense of responsibility, not to mention his promise to Tim. God, but she was worth it! She'd proven as lively in bed as she was timid outside of it. Her heart was in everything she did, and she'd loved him back with both tenderness and passion.

Brady forced his thoughts to his mission. He tucked the keypad into his pocket. Lana would know what it was, even if he didn't. He rose, unsettled by the scene around him.

His conversation with Tim returned, and he stayed the urge to call Lana as he had when he was simply the Guardian. Her voice still brought him comfort, but he'd just fucked up that relationship. The chances of them both surviving—or of Tim not finding out—were low. Not to mention lying to her had been harder than he thought. He'd wanted to admit the truth, in hopes she'd talk to him—and trust him—as she had the Guardian. Then he slept with her and walked away again. She didn't deserve that. No normal woman would deal with what he put her through.

As much as he hated to admit it, he still missed talking to her. He missed his friend. He contemplated the stray thought as he moved around the facility.

"There are a few other fed facilities around here," Dan said. "We've heard mayday calls from several of them."

"I have an idea why. There's one between us and the hard site. Let's take a look."

"What're you thinking?" Dan asked.

"I'm thinking someone is destroying the fed buildings in case a certain fed is hiding there."

"Greenie looking for Lana."

They loaded one of the transports with the supplies and sent it towards the hard site with a security force. He kept Dan and two others with him.

"You need some of this?" Dan asked with a long look at him. He tossed him a bar of chocolate he'd stolen from the supplies.

"I need a box full," Brady said.

Dan knew him well enough not to ask anything else, and they set off on foot.

“I sent Elise and Benny to teach Lana some self-defense,” Brady said as they struck off in comfortable silence.

“Benny? Christ, she’ll be in tears,” Dan said with a shake of his head.

“She’s gotta learn,” Brady said firmly.

The sight of her with a gun to her head the day before made his blood boil as much as the thought of her in his bed. She was helpless in his world, and the helpless didn’t normally last long.

“Go easy on her,” Dan advised. “She’s smart but brainwashed by the feds. She’ll come around.”

“I found another of those keypads,” Brady said, ignoring Dan’s words.

“The ones they went loony over last time?”

“It’s a little different. They never did say what they were.”

“I’d say they were probably important. Lana might know.”

Brady gave him a look.

“All right. Maybe when she stops crying every time you look at her, you can ask her.”

Brady hid a smile. She’d proven how willing she was to become his companion, a surprise considering she really did seem fragile in his world. Every moment he spent with her, he felt like he was getting farther and farther away from his ability to walk away without either of them getting hurt. Eventually, she’d find out who he was. Eventually, things would come to a head. But as a man who lived day-to-day, tomorrow was a concept he wasn’t always comfortable with.

They walked parallel to an abandoned highway for a couple of hours until they reached the second fed site. They saw the smoke half an hour before they arrived and approached with caution. Brady’s scouts reported nothing, and they emerged from the cover of nearby buildings.

This was a communications facility, heavily guarded. The tower was in pieces, the building at its base a gaping crater. They tested the bio-elim field before passing through. As with the other site, there were pieces of people but nothing else.

“This is creepy,” Dan voiced his concerns. “Looks like systematic extermination of an enemy’s strongholds.”

“Exactly what this is. The start to another civil war. Let’s not linger.”

They moved on, taking circuitous routes back to the underground entrance in case they were being watched. He dropped his gear in his suite, curious not to find Lana within. Dan met him in the hall, and they went to the cafeteria together.

“Hey, Elise,” Dan said, tapping the button behind his hear to access his personal net. “Where you guys at?”

Brady got his food as the two talked, seating himself before he looked to Dan again.

“They’re in the gym,” Dan said. He was trying hard not to smile.

“Is she crying?” Brady asked.

“Don’t think so,” Dan said. “I guess she wouldn’t play this morning at all but changed her mind this afternoon. She was afraid of Benny until Lon told her to pretend like he was you. Sounds like she lost some of that timid field mousiness.”

“Whatever works.” He looked up to find Dan studying him closely.

“You’re damn cranky today. Wanna spar? Maybe with Benny?” Dan asked. “He can beat this funk out of you.”

“Maybe later,” Brady replied grudgingly. He didn’t think his abruptness any more clipped than usual, but Dan would know the difference. “I want to look at the logs for the past few days to see if any of the scouts have reported any other fed buildings going up in flames. I need to ask Lana about the keypad we found, too.”

He received a page over his personal net.

B: We need to talk immediately. -T.

His mood grew worse.

“I may have to go to the comms site,” he said with a frown. “It’s not good when the big guy calls you. I’ll risk a quick communication from here to see what the urgency is.”

“Not a good sign,” Dan agreed. “I’ll arrange the transportation.”

Restless, Brady returned to his suite. Lana was in the kitchenette, drinking water after her day with Elise. Her face was flushed, her eyes sparkling from the exertion. She wore sparring clothing consisting of snug pants and T-shirt that hugged her shape in all the right places. The scent of her musk and sweat made him look longer than he intended to. His resolve to keep his distance wavered as he thought about pulling her into bed with him again.

There was something else in her eyes that made his blood pound harder. She was *angry* at him. The raw emotion was more of a turn-on than he expected.

If he were smart, he would have turned around and walked out until Benny beat the fire out of his body. Instead, he sat down on the couch and pulled the keypad free from his pocket.

“Wanna tell me what this is?” he asked, pretending he didn’t see the anger on her face.

“I won’t know without my micro,” she replied in a clipped tone.

He pulled her micro free from his cargo pocket and set it on the coffee table beside the keypad. She looked at him hard for a moment before crossing the room to sit on the chair across from him. She was tense, and Brady wondered what happened while he was gone.

Lana flipped on her micro and placed the keypad on top of it. He looked past her into the kitchen to see what she’d been doing. On the kitchenette counter sat her bottle of water—and a micro. It was of fed issue, not army or PMF. Silently, he cursed the blond warrior he suspected gave it to Lana. He should’ve known better than not to warn Dan what Lana could do if she got a hold of a micro, even if it was Elise’s.

“It’s a local energy grid controller,” Lana said. “But it’s damaged. I can’t pull the data off.” She turned off her micro and rose, striding into the bedroom. A few seconds later, he heard the shower.

Leery of the change in her, Brady tucked the two away and crossed to the kitchen. Elise’s micro was locked out. There was no way to see what she’d been doing. Too soon, he found out. His personal net vibrated, indicating someone was trying to contact him. Brady tapped it open.

“You paged me?” Tim asked.

Brady froze. “No. I got a page from you, though.”

“Well, someone ... it was her, wasn’t it,” Tim said with a sigh. “I had to get her training in hacking fed systems.”

“Yeah,” Brady agreed, eyes going to Elise’s micro. “Tim, she needs to know. I don’t like lying to her. I don’t think it’s worth trying to snow her anymore. And maybe she’ll tell you what she won’t tell me about what she’s carrying west.”

“Unfortunately, I think you might be right. Bring her to the comms site. I’ll be waiting on this end,” Tim directed in resignation. “I’d hoped to have

this conversation with her in person, if at all.”

“Will do. Brady out.”

Brady stared at the door to his bedroom, torn between relief and regret. He hadn't wanted to lie to her about Guardian or Tim. At the same time, Tim was about to bring the rest of her world crashing down around her. He doubted she'd rush into the arms of the Guardian again. Brady wiped his face, preparing himself for a confrontation. He sat down in a chair, waiting.

Lana emerged at last. She crossed her arms when she saw him and wouldn't meet his eyes.

“Looks like it's time for us to talk,” he started.

“I don't want to talk. I understand what I need to.”

“I don't think you do.”

“You and Tim are PMF. He sent you to protect me. You were my Guardian.”

Were. The word stung, irritating him.

“I did what I had to,” Brady replied. “I will make no apologies for that.”

“As I said, I understand,” she said. “You lied to me and used me. Both of you.”

“Lana,” Brady said, rising. It was all he could say. He knew this day would come. He'd done the right thing in protecting her, even if the wounded look on her face made him feel both inadequate and frustrated. “We need to go somewhere. Are you ready?”

“Whatever you say,” she said softly.

Brady bit back what he wanted to say and motioned towards the door. His hope that she'd trust the Guardian even if she hadn't trusted him faded. Her silent treatment and quiet anger lasted through the long helo ride back to the secret comms center. He waved the helo away and led her to the hidden entrance.

Tim was already on the viewer. Lana froze for a moment then started forward jerkily. Brady closed the door behind him, watching. There was an awkward pause, and he saw her reach for a chair with trembling hands. He crossed his arms, unable to quell his sudden desire to wrap his arms around her and promise her he'd find a way to make things right.



Mr. Tim was as Lana remembered him. He looked like he was on vacation rather than facing the end of the world. She'd been trying to reconcile his connection to the PMF since discovering the link between him and Brady earlier that day. Everything—the net call that brought her to the Peak, the encrypted messages she'd read, Brady's protection—had fallen into place. Brady hadn't just been lying to her about being the Guardian. She'd been trying to avoid the crushing sense of betrayal building in her breast.

“I imagine I owe you an explanation,” Mr. Tim said.

“Yes, sir,” she said.

“I am third generation PMF, like Brady. Our families have fought side by side for over fifty years. Our purpose isn’t what’s in the government modified documentation; we fight to unify the country and return the rights stolen by the government to the people.”

“You used me.” She couldn’t help the words.

“You were one of the PMF’s best sources. I got you access to as much as I could, and I let you do what you do best. Everything you did for me I sent to the PMF,” Mr. Tim said. “When an attack was imminent, I called Brady and made him swear to take care of you. Then I called you and brought you to the Peak.”

Lana listened. Similar to Brady, there was no remorse in his admittance, and her throat tightened.

“Brady is one of the best and brightest soldiers the PMF has, as well as a personal friend. You’ve been like a daughter to me, Lana, and I placed you in the best hands I could.” His words were gentle.

“I don’t think fathers use their daughters as you did,” she whispered.

“You know better. You were exposed to the upper-class circles long enough to know that even betraying you I’ve been kinder than most. The government is splintering, Lana,” he continued. “Another civil war has started, but we can fix it before things get even worse. I need you to tell me what you found out.”

She shook her head and clenched her hands together, torn between fury and sorrow.

“Lana, you know enough about the PMF to know they’re the only force—perhaps in the world—with the ability to survive the government tearing itself apart. We’ve all but taken over the military and have people in all levels of government. We’re the only ones who can influence the outcome of this.”

What he said made sense—it always did, even when he was lying to people. She knew when he lied; she’d spent twenty years with him. He wasn’t lying.

Right now, she didn’t want the politics. She wanted to know why he’d hurt her. Her throat was too tight for her to ask.

“Lana, I need you to tell me what you know.”

“I need a minute,” she managed.

There was a pause. “Very well. I’ll call back in a few.”

She waited until the viewer flashed off before slumping. She pressed the meat of her palms to her eyes. If someone told her a few months before she’d be here, now, hearing *this*, she’d have thought them insane!

Yet the worst part was that she knew he was right. The PMF was the only party standing while the government tore itself apart. If anyone had the resources to make things right, the PMF could.

“You want me to leave?” Brady asked.

“You betrayed me, too,” she said without looking at him. She wanted to hate him but couldn’t. The Guardian had been her closest friend. Even knowing who he really was, she wanted her friend back. “You’ve been there for me since this all started. Why couldn’t you tell me?”

“I care more that you’re alive than what you think of me,” he said firmly. “It was safer for you if you didn’t know who I was. It was safer for Tim.”

“I’ve known you were my Guardian for a few days. I didn’t know about all this.” She waved at the screen.

“You knew about me before you slept with me?” he asked.

“Of course. You think I’d sleep with someone I didn’t care about?”

Brady squatted in front of her.

“My heart broke when I thought you’d died!” she said with more emotion than she intended. “And all you’ve done is lie to me. Is any part of you capable of caring for me, or was everything about the Guardian a lie?”

“I am who I am,” Brady said. “You fell for the Guardian. You fell for me. And yes, I do care for you, more than I want to.”

“It didn’t stop you from betraying me. What was your plan?” Tears of anger and hurt spilled down her cheeks. “To let me think the Guardian was dead forever?”

He was quiet for a moment, before saying, “Your Guardian is here with you now.”

“I don’t know what to think. I don’t know him. I don’t know you. I can’t trust anyone.”

“You’re angry,” he countered. “You know you can trust me.”

The viewer beeped, and she wiped her face again.

“I’m ready,” she said, refusing to meet his gaze. “Let’s get this over with.”

“For what it’s worth, I’m sorry I hurt you,” Brady said quietly.

Lana blinked back more tears. When she said nothing in response, Brady opened the channel.

Mr. Tim appeared, gaze moving from her to Brady. She saw the considering look he gave Brady before he looked again to her. She straightened in her seat, not sure if she was about to do the right thing or not. With a deep breath, she started speaking.

“I found encrypted correspondence from Greene and your orders to Brady to find me, before the nuke attacks. Greene was in contact with different people in the West Coast Center. Arnie found out about Greene and sent out a few messages to the Peace Command Center to warn people. Greene gassed everyone in the mountain and intended to take over the Peak and use it as a base of operations for his people to use as they took over the eastern half of the US.” She looked down at her hands again.

“What are you trying to take west?” Brady prodded at her silence.

“Are you familiar with the Horsemen?” she asked

Mr. Tim paled. “No one should know about that program.”

“You got me access to everything,” she reminded him with some bitterness. “Greene was pulling in the Horsemen. I don’t know how he did it; he’d have to have people at each of the sites worldwide.”

“What are the Horsemen?” Brady asked.

She gazed at Mr. Tim, waiting for him to explain. He shifted in his seat and rubbed his mouth, a rare sign of his nervousness.

“The Horsemen was the tongue in cheek name given to the government program that placed a series of devices across the world, both in enemy and friendly countries. You could say they were used for leverage if the country trounced too far on our generosity or refused to take into account our national interest when they acted up. The joke in fed circles was that the government could activate the Horsemen at will and bring about the destruction of the planet itself.”

“We were holding the world hostage?” Brady asked.

“We call it diplomacy,” Mr. Tim explained. “The capability was emplaced but never utilized.”

“Until Greene’s allies took out the East Coast,” Lana added. “After the War, the government created seven protected sites around the world with only one person at the site knowing what was there and security measures that were beyond anything the Peak had.”

“Does he have the others?” Mr. Tim prodded.

“He did. I thought something was wrong when Brady’s men stumbled across one of the devices and returned it to the mountain. The device you found was coded as biowarfare, but when I ran it in the system, I found the serials had been switched. One of the Horsemen devices was recoded. It can only be done at the presidential level and was done by one of his staff members.”

Brady’s gaze was riveted to her.

“Arnie Smith had another one,” she continued. “I don’t know what happened with him, if he was really crazy or he found something. I looked at the rest of the keypads in the command center. Only three of us had access to them. Greene, Arnie, and me, as the VP’s representative on the surface. There were infrastructure keypads and a few of the nuke, bio, electromagnetic, and chem keypads for the East Coast weapons systems. When I ran the serials, I found several of them had been recoded,” she continued.

“How many Horsemen does Greene have?” Mr. Tim demanded.

“He’d gathered all twenty at the Peak.”

Mr. Tim uttered a choked curse.

“It’s okay, sir,” Lana said quickly. “I took them all.”

Silence followed her words. Mr. Tim was staring at her in surprise, Brady in intense interest.

“You have the Horsemen?” Mr. Tim repeated.

She nodded.

“That information does not leave this room,” Mr. Tim said resolutely. “Talk about insanity breaking out if anyone knew ...”

“I was going to take them to the Peace Command Center,” she said. “I hoped ... I don’t know what I hoped. That maybe everything would be all right and someone could disable them.”

“No one will disable them, even if they could,” he said. “Hon, the difference between you and the rest of us is that you see the keypads as a threat. Anyone else with have a grain of ambition would see them as a tool. They’d kill half the planet to obtain the apocalyptic collection you have.”

“I know that now,” Lana said in a hushed tone.

“Brady, I don’t need to tell you how important it is that her vault doesn’t fall into *anyone’s* hands,” Mr. Tim said. “Take her and the Horsemen to

Colorado. I'll reassign the Appalachia militia temporarily under someone else. Lana, I need all the info you have on Greene and who he was talking to."

"Roger," Brady acknowledged.

"Yes, sir," she said quietly. Though troubled, she felt somewhat relieved at not having to keep the secrets alone anymore.

"Can you still monitor the eastern infrastructure?" Mr. Tim asked.

"Yes. I rerouted the ops to my micro."

"Don't mess with anything for a while. You're safer if Greene thinks you're dead."

She nodded.

"I'll go to those I trust and warn them. With Lana, you'll have access to all the emerops depots the feds have east of the Mississippi."

Lana listened, chilled at the coldness and precision of his directions. She knew without a doubt Brady would follow Mr. Tim's orders.

"Check in again in two days," Mr. Tim directed. He appeared pensive before speaking again. "Lana, I need to tell you something else."

I can't handle anything else, she wanted to shout at him.

"I didn't train and educate you because your grandfather or someone called me. You're my daughter by blood. I took you in when your mother died. I intended to make you the companion of some powerful politician at some point, but you showed an incredible aptitude for learning when you were quite young," he explained. "I decided to use that and keep you close. I told no one the truth, because I feared what that would mean. No one wants my boys. I see them once a year at most, but you had access to me and the government's secrets that would've put you in danger had anyone found out."

She listened. She'd always known she was closer to him than even his companions. That he'd hidden their relationship from her made her angrier at him.

"Someday, maybe I'll forgive you for all of this," she managed, hearing the hurt in her voice. "But not today."

"I understand. Brady, take care of my girl."

"Done," Brady said.

Mr. Tim gave her a small smile before the viewer flashed off. Brady motioned her to follow him. She obeyed. He disappeared into a small room

off the entrance and returned, PMF grays in his hand.

“These cancel out your thermal signature,” he said, holding them out.

She looked at the grays, the clothing she’d seen for years on the people she thought were the country’s enemies, then back at Brady. He was too hard to offer the type of empathy she wanted, but he was the man who’d been with her since the beginning of the end.

“You’ll have to trust me,” he said. “I’m the only person who can get you and the Horsemen to safety.

“I trusted the Guardian,” she replied, taking the clothes from him.

“I haven’t changed. The circumstances have.”

Lana drew a deep breath. Elise had said to survive, and Lana had no doubt Brady was the only one who could help her. He had the support of his rebel army and now, the feds. They would need it, if Greenie found her. He’d throw everything he had after her.

And Brady would always protect her. She knew it, and it made her angrier at him for betraying her. Even his kisses, his hot touch, felt like lies. She’d truly cared for someone for the first time in her life, and he’d used her.

She ducked into the small room and changed clothes. As much as she didn’t want to admit it, there was no way of knowing who the bad guys were, not with Mr. Tim’s information about the shadow government.

“I’m ready,” she said and returned to the hall.

Brady looked her over and drew a laser gun.

Lana crossed her arms, feeling very alone. The discovery of her true father did nothing to comfort her, not when she realized how much Mr. Tim had betrayed her. Brady motioned her towards the door and hung back, pressing his thumb to a keypad on the wall. She watched him enter a code and a countdown begin, and guessed he was destroying the comms center.

Stepping onto the ledge outside, Lana heard the sounds of gun and laser fire too close for her comfort, along with the beat of helicopters in the dark skies. Brady joined her and pulled the door closed behind them. He reached into his pocket and withdrew the micro and Horsemen, holding them out to her. Lana hesitated and then took them.

“You keep those safe, and I’ll keep you safe,” Brady said. “Deal?”

She nodded, understanding it was his way of showing he trusted her, even if she was too furious to trust him. She hurt too much right now. Lana unlocked her micro and forwarded everything to Mr. Tim that he requested.

Brady started down the trail towards the darkness of the forest. Instead of retreating into the forest—the way they'd come—he walked behind a boulder and started up a set of long, shallow steps leading up the mountain. Lana looked over her shoulder at an explosion that seemed far too close. Brady didn't so much as flinch, and she hurried after him.

The stairs ascended to a plateau, and Brady strode into the center. He lifted his micro, which pulsed red for a fraction of a moment. He stepped back beside her, and she soon heard one of the helicopters grow nearer.

Lana hunkered against the mountain as the helicopter drew nearer. The plateau was too small for it to land, but it hovered near the edge. A set of stairs unfolded from the helicopter to the plateau, and Brady rushed her forward. Lana took one look at the thin metal stairs and looked away quickly. They looked barely able to hold her, let alone Brady! Hands over her ears, she took a deep breath and hurried up them, all but flinging herself into the arms of an awaiting rebel soldier.

The helicopter lifted away before Brady had two feet in its belly, and the soldier holding her strapped her securely into a seat in the rear while the two of them stood with nonchalance in the center.

The helicopter dropped suddenly, and she thought she'd vomit. Breathing deeply, she closed her eyes as the pilot maneuvered the aircraft sideways, up and down. All the while, the two soldiers before her remained standing or leaning, accustomed to the rocky flight.

She leaned into her harness, staring as the helicopter rolled. Lights from lasers and muzzle fire spotted the forest below them before they reached an urban area, mostly dark with several patches of electricity. The forest swallowed the city before she could orient herself.

The flight steadied out, and they flew for an hour over the Appalachian landscape. They flew over the Peak, and she straightened to see the devastation in the moonlight.

The Peak was flattened. Her breath caught. As sorry as she felt for all those who died, she felt relieved knowing she had the Horsemen and not Greenie or anyone who might inflict this level of damage to the country.

They flew south, and she strained against the harness to see if her own condo was still standing. The urban areas were dark and the river nearby even darker. She saw smoke moving across the sky a moment before the helicopter rolled and began its sickening maneuvers again.

Right, left, up, down ... and then she heard the explosion. Heat ripped through the cabin of the helicopter, bringing with it the scent of scorched metal. Her stomach fell as they dropped.

“Brady!” she shouted.

Pitched to the other end of the cabin, the two soldiers had strapped themselves in. The helicopter rolled as it fell, like a carnival ride without the option to get off. Lana held her breath at the whirling world, certain their death would at least be fast. The rotators caught, pulling them out of the spin, slowed their ascent, then gave out once again. Something else caught, and their ascent stopped suddenly, slamming her against the harness and knocking the breath from her.

The beating of the rotators died, replaced by creaking and scraping of metal. The cabin swayed, and Lana caught the image of wires and far below, water. Emergency lighting glowed red, turning the world inside the broken helo surreal.

The bridge. They were close to her condo; she drove the massive Sky Bridge every day to get to work. They were stuck in its wires. She looked around for Brady, afraid he’d be hurt or dead.

“Lana.” Brady’s voice was quiet and even. He was suspended in the air by the straps of his harness. “Under the seat is a box with vests and water-breathers. Reach under the bench and grab it.”

His calm words terrified her. They were going into the black water, hundreds of feet beneath them.

“Lana,” he said more gently, when she didn’t move. “Reach under the bench.”

She forced herself out of her fear and leaned forward. The helicopter dropped and caught. The other soldier cursed.

“Very slowly,” Brady hissed through clenched teeth.

She obeyed, inching towards the bench until she lay on her side, suspended by the harness above the seat by a few inches. Her fingers worked across the hard metal seat and under. There was a box strapped to the floor beneath the bench. Her fingers grazed the cold metal, and she stretched towards it. The helo creaked but didn’t move.

“I can’t reach it,” she said. “Wait, maybe I can.” She fumbled with the straps on her harness and pushed the releases.

“No!” Brady snapped. “Stay strapped in.”

“I can get it,” she said, ignoring him and adding silently, *I won't let you die*. She rolled slowly until she was on the floor, wedged between the bench and the punctured floor of the helo.

Lana eased the straps off the box and pulled. It didn't give. She released a breath, closed her eyes and then yanked. The heavy metal box grated towards her. She stood carefully and tugged it out from under the seat. With trembling hands, she deactivated the latches with a touch, and the top of the box slid open.

“Secure yours then toss us one of each,” Brady directed. She glanced at him. He looked as calm as he sounded, and she wondered how he could face his own possible death with such confidence and poise.

She was ready to break down crying and throw herself out of the helo in the hopes she didn't die when she hit the water. Brady's tranquility steadied her, and she searched through the box. Instead of listening to him, she dug out the water-breathers and life vests, each packaged in small plastic containers the size of her hand. She straightened and tossed them down the cabin to the soldiers.

“She makes a bad grunt,” the soldier beside Brady said. “Doesn't follow orders.”

“Civilian-types,” Brady grunted in agreement as he tore open the plastic containers.

Lana opened a water-breather mask and perched it on her forehead like sunglasses before placing the inflatable vest beneath her arms. Once it hit water, it would inflate, and the water-breather would activate. She looked again at what awaited them and then up at Brady.

“You don't really think we'll survive the fall, do you?” she asked in a hushed voice.

“If we do, we'll need the equipment,” he replied. “Harness up. I may jar us loose.”

She lowered herself back to the seat and pulled on her harness, strapping it on. Brady unstrapped himself, and she watched uneasily as he inched closer to the center of the cabin, his hands—and concentration—on the ceiling.

“Should be there,” the other soldier said.

“Looks like the handle is damaged,” Brady replied.

The helo creaked and slid again in the wiring. The unmistakable snap of wires reached them, and the helicopter tilted.

Brady muttered a curse, reached for his laser weapon, and fired at an angle at the ceiling. Lana closed her eyes at the sudden light and heard him tearing something out of the ceiling. The helo teetered, throwing Brady off his feet. He held onto the railing lining the ceiling with one hand and beat at whatever was in the hole in the ceiling with his other hand.

“Brady, please sit down!” Lana said, alarmed. Warmth splattered her face as he continued to slam his fist into the hole. She touched it, surprised it was his blood. “Brady, we’re going to fall. Just sit down!”

He said nothing. The helo lurched.

“Brady!” she cried as he slammed into the wall of the cabin.

They fell. This carnival ride was worse. Lana slapped at the water-breather until it covered her mouth and nose then squeezed her eyes closed. After a sharp drop, their tumble slowed suddenly. The helicopter righted itself fast, and she saw the parachute Brady had been trying to release by smashing his fist against the control box in the ceiling.

Her heart leapt as Brady was flung out of the helicopter. She screamed.

Chapter Eleven

THEY SMASHED INTO THE water. Cold water poured into the cabin. Lana fumbled with her harness and yanked it free, slogging through the rising water. She struggled to pull herself out of the cabin, against the flow of cold river water. She gripped the doorway and pulled as hard as she could until her legs were free. She planted them against the side of the helicopter and pushed free.

Floating in the shocking cold, she oriented herself in the darkness. The water-breather worked, but the lifesaver was slow to inflate. Finally, it caught, and she kicked her feet as it pulled her towards the surface.

Lana's head broke free, and she pushed the water-breather up, gasping. Her arms and legs were already too cold to feel. She looked around, unable to see Brady or the other soldier.

"Brady!" she rasped. "Brady!"

There was no response. Lana looked up at the bridge, trying to determine which way it was to shore. She'd die if she stayed in the water. She wasn't too far from shore, though any distance felt impossible with her cold body.

She pulled the water-breather down and focused hard on kicking her wooden legs. With grueling slowness, she drew nearer the shore. Finally, she felt rocks scrape one leg, and Lana lifted her head. The bank was within reach.

She stretched and pulled herself onto the bank, shaking hard with cold. She couldn't stand, not with her frozen body, and she rolled onto her back, out of the water.

Hot tears started down her face. Lana lay gasping, unable to catch her breath for several moments. When she could, she pushed herself up and gazed out over the dark river.

"Brady!" she cried again.

No answer. An idea occurred to her. She pulled her micro free and rested her wet thumb against it until the screen unlocked; it worked. The Horsemen were in her other cargo pocket. She scanned the area for any other micros operating in the area.

There were none. Brady could've lost it in the river, but she should still pick up some electromagnetic fluctuation, if he was anywhere except the

bottom of the river. Lana sank to the ground, too shocked to register what to do next.

Anger and sorrow collided within her. Brady hurt her, yet he'd been her only friend and protector. Her last words to him had been spoken in anger. New emotions flooded her. She'd admired him as the Guardian, but she'd fallen in love with the rebel leader. Her anger at him slid away as she huddled against a large river rock, alone. Tears filled her eyes, and she sobbed.

Lana cried for a long time, shaking. When no more tears came, she roused herself. Her Guardian was truly gone. Her whole body resonated in pain at the thought. She had to get the Horsemen to safety.

Her clothes were still drenched. She needed new ones, or the cool night would do her in. She pulled her micro free again and looked for the nearest emerops.

Another address popped up. Her address. She'd been too tired and cold to remember just how close to home she was. With one last look at the river, she turned away and climbed the bank clumsily before heading towards the road leading from the bridge to her home.

Home. Her throat tightened at the thought. She'd never expected to see her condo again and couldn't shake the feeling it wouldn't be the same. There was no electricity in this part of the state, and looters would've likely taken everything.

But it was all she had left. Her step faltered, and more tears spilled.

Be strong. For Brady, she told herself. The thought of him almost crippled her.

While her step was anything but sure, Lana forced herself onto the road and walked. Her body shook off the chill by the first mile marker and by the second, the moon was directly overhead. She heard disconcerting sounds of heavy weapons fire in the distance, and the forest smelled as if it were burning.

Brady's caution and Mr. Tim's words returned to her as her thoughts cleared with the exercise. She looked around when she reached the third mile marker, aware she was a sitting duck. The rebellion's grays were enough to get her shot by anyone. She moved off the road into the ditch.

At the fourth mile marker, she paused. The road was ripped open, as if by a massive bomb. The gap was twenty meters wide and on the other side,

a graveyard of burnt-out vehicles. The scent of charred flesh and metal still lingered, and Lana covered her mouth and nose with her hand as she started forward again.

Morbid curiosity drew her from the gutter to the highway. She walked down the middle of the carnage, peering into hulls of greencars. Some had charred bodies while others were empty. She'd read many reports of damage and was struck by how easy it had been to dismiss the humanity of the war they were in.

She pulled out her micro to see what had happened along this stretch. There were no media reports, but one intelligence spot report described the carnage.

Attack on feds fleeing towards Sky Bridge. No survivors.

Lana replaced the micro, looking anew at the green cars and their silent occupants. It was impossible to identify anyone or anyone's individual vehicle. Yet she couldn't shake the thought that these weren't any feds; these were the feds from her condo community.

She continued walking down the middle of the road. The destruction disappeared by mile marker five, only a few hundred meters from the turnoff to her condo community. She looked back at the lines of those who fled, overwhelmed again.

If not for Mr. Tim, this would've been her fate.

Inexplicable anger at the politician surged through her. He'd used her and saved her, not for her, but for his own purposes! And here she was: back where she'd been the night he called her away. Only this time, she'd lost everything: her belief in him, her Guardian.

She'd meet the same fate as those on the road to the bridge. There was no one to protect her now. All she had was herself.

Wiping away angry tears, Lana trotted to the entrance to her community then slowed to a walk when she became breathless too fast. She was weak and chilled. To her surprise, the condo community was as quiet as the night she left. Moonlight spilled over triangular roofs into grassy front yards. The parking lot was empty, and the only sign of unusual activity was the open gate.

The grisly scene leading to the condos likely dissuaded anyone from visiting, she rationalized. She went to her condo and walked up the stairs slowly. She paused to look around again, caught in the surreal sense that

everything that happened the past few months hadn't touched the condo community. She could almost pretend nothing occurred.

Pressing her thumb to her door, she realized there was light lining the windows of the condo beside hers. Lana's hand dropped. The occupant of the neighboring apartment was Mrs. Watson, a retired fed. She was an older woman who may not have gotten the same communiqué that sent all the other feds in the community to their deaths trying to escape. Still, Lana wasn't convinced she wanted to discover what lay behind the door after the travesty along the road. She hesitated until recalling Jack, the shepherd mix she'd left with Mrs. Watson.

Lana walked down her stairwell and up Mrs. Watson's stairs. She knocked and inched away, not wanting to find her neighbor and dog dead. The door opened, and Lana gripped the railing to keep from fleeing.

"Lana?" Mrs. Watson's features registered surprise. Her brow knitted together as her eyes took in Lana's clothes.

"I'm sorry," Lana said quickly. "I shouldn't—"

"You're drenched. Come in."

Mrs. Watson left the doorway. Lana hesitated before following. The apartment was almost as she'd last seen it: comfortable and crowded with oversized furniture and rugs coating every carpeted space. The only difference was the boards hammered over each of the windows, and the weapons sitting beside Mrs. Watson's rocking chair and stacked on the couch. The woman was armed as well as Brady, Lana noted.

The occupant of the large chair in the corner of the living room launched towards her in a flurry of brown and black fur.

"Jack!" Lana exclaimed as the large animal knocked her back. "I can't believe you're okay!"

"He's more than fine. He took out one thug," Mrs. Watson said proudly. "I didn't think he had it in him after how you baby him."

Lana's face grew warmer. Jack smelled clean and looked healthy with his long pink tongue lolling out of the side of his mouth. He jumped on her again, planting his paws on her shoulders. Mrs. Watson disappeared down a darkened hallway, returning quickly.

"Jack, down! Put this on," she said. In her outstretched hand was a robe. "Just place your ... your uniform in the dryer. Jack! Down!"

Lana flushed. Mrs. Watson only offered a small smile, shoved the robe at her, and resumed her seat on the rocking chair. Lana retreated down the hall, trailed by the happy dog. The condo's layout was the same as hers, and she found the bathroom where she expected. She changed, grateful to be out of the cold, wet clothing.

Her gaze settled on the lights, and she wondered how the elderly woman had electricity when no one else did. Lana drew a deep breath and placed the clothing in the round dryer in the linen closet before returning to the living room. The retired fed had cleared a spot for her on the couch. A steaming bowl of soup awaited her on the coffee table. Jack sat beside it, wagging his tail.

"Thank you, Mrs. Watson," Lana said, overwhelmed by the kindness of her neighbor. She sat, patted Jack, and lifted the warm soup, sighing. "What are you still doing here?"

"I have everything I need here," Mrs. Watson replied. "Solar generator, a year's supply of food, weapons. No need to go elsewhere."

"You might need more than a year of food," Lana said before she could stop herself. "I'm so sorry. I shouldn't have said that."

"It's that bad?"

"Yes."

"I'll deal with it when it comes."

Lana smiled faintly, grateful for the familiar woman's gruff calm.

"What're you doing here? I thought your boss would've airlifted you out."

"He airlifted himself out."

"Typical of the political elite," Mrs. Watson said with a frown. "At least you didn't get caught up in the rush to the bridge."

"I was ... working that night," Lana managed.

"Lucky you. Doesn't look like any of our neighbors made it."

Lana lowered the soup, her appetite gone. "Is it safe for you here alone?"

"With enough weapons, yes. Most of the condos have been looted already. I blew apart the last thug that tried to get in here. They come back every couple of days," Mrs. Watson said and indicated the living room window with one gnarled hand. "They threw in a grenade last time. It was a dud. I got as many boards up as I could."

"Who are they?" Lana asked, eyes on the window.

“Everyone’s trying to survive. You do what you have to in that situation, even work with people you didn’t think you ever would,” Mrs. Watson said wisely.

Lana’s face grew warm again, and she silently thanked the retired fed for brushing off her grays so diplomatically.

“Can you fire a weapon?”

“Poorly,” Lana admitted.

Mrs. Watson appeared thoughtful before she pushed herself to her feet and hobbled to the couch. She picked up a handgun-sized laser weapon, set it down, and picked up a smaller one.

“Take this one,” she said. “Keep it on you at all times.”

“Are you sure?” Lana asked.

“I have enough. It was my daughter’s long ago. She couldn’t shoot a greencar if it was in front of her. Here’s how you load it.” Mrs. Watson demonstrated with a deftness at odds with her age. Lana watched then took it when Mrs. Watson held it out to her. “You came from the river?”

“Our helo went down and got tangled in the bridge’s support wires.”

“That would explain why you were wet. You’re lucky if you fell out of the sky into the river and lived to tell it.”

“I don’t feel lucky.”

“You’ve always struck me as a smart girl. I’m sure there’s a reason for your survival.”

Brady. The ache deep within her started again. Lana pushed him from her mind. It hurt too much to think of her Guardian. She couldn’t help feeling bad she’d never taken much time to get to know her neighbors better. She knew nothing of Mrs. Watson’s family. Mr. Tim never gave her the time to form friendships. Her condo was nothing like Mrs. Watson’s. Lana’s apartment held the basics: a place to sleep, a place for her clothes and enough furniture for Jack to sleep on.

“Where were you headed when you fell out of the sky?” Mrs. Watson asked.

“South, I think,” Lana said vaguely. As much as she liked Mrs. Watson, she feared trusting anyone ever again. “I was with some ... ah, well, others who knew where we were going.”

“Rebels?”

“Yes. PMF members.”

An awkward silence fell. Lana lifted her soup again and sipped.

“Your condo was likely broken into,” Mrs. Watson said after the long pause. “You can stay here tonight. Probably safer. I put up boards on all the windows. No guarantee we’ll survive the night, but you probably understand that.”

“I’m beginning to,” Lana said. She set down the bowl, emotions bubbling again. “Mrs. Watson ... I have nowhere else to go. After tonight. I mean, I know where I should go, but I ...”

“You’re scared?” Mrs. Watson asked with a gentle smile.

Lana nodded.

“You should be. These are scary times. I’ll give you as much ammo as you need. People overestimate how much food they need. As long as you have water, you only need to eat once a day.”

“I can access the emerops storage facility,” Lana added. “Walking across the country seems crazy.”

“In my time, walking was the best way to evade being caught,” Mrs. Watson said. “I never told you I was one of the original members of the special ops security teams, did I?”

Lana shook her head.

“I was on their first team in the East-West War. The second team had the benefits of genetic modification. We didn’t. We had to rely on our wits as well as our bodies to get into and out of some really rough places. If you need to walk cross country then walk cross country. Maybe by the time you get there, this all will be over.”

“You’re a wise woman,” Lana whispered. “I’ve never been on my own before this. I don’t know if I have what it takes. I’m not like you.”

“Get some rest. The guest bedroom has been ready for visitors since my daughter died ten years ago. In the morning, I’ll feed you, pack you a bag, and send you on your way. Mission first, my dear.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Watson.” Lana smiled, amused at such hardcore words from a woman whose frail frame would struggle under the weight of a laser shotgun. Still, she heard the wisdom of hundreds of special ops missions in Mrs. Watson’s voice. Mrs. Watson was right; Lana needed to complete her mission, even if she wasn’t sure how to do it.

Without Brady. Her smile faded, pain filling her breast. If only she hadn’t been so angry at him when they parted. Or if they’d met at a

different time. Or if the helo hadn't gone down.

Near tears again, Lana retreated to the guest bedroom, sat on the bed, and withdrew the micro. She began to plot a route west. Jack stretched out on the floor beside the bed. Her gaze went to him in consideration, and she wondered if it was better to take or leave him.

The emerops facilities were placed strategically, with one never more than two days from the next closest depot. Of course, most of those travel days were by vehicle of some sort. She chewed her lip as she watched the micro map multiple routes, gauging how much food and water she'd have to carry to survive. And ammo. She'd have to take as much as she could.

She cried herself into a restless sleep. Jack's snoring and the Horsemen under her pillow kept her from sleeping well. She couldn't stop thinking of Brady. She even caught herself touching her ear to keep from sliding her finger behind it to the subcutaneous net implant. Even if she had one more chance to talk to him, she wasn't sure what she'd say. But she missed the sound of his voice, and her body yearned for his touch again.

When dawn outlined the boards hammered across the windows, she rose. Mrs. Watson was already up, and the scents of bacon and eggs reminded Lana how long she'd gone without real food. The elderly woman sat at the small kitchen table, her weapons within reach.

"I have these for you," Mrs. Watson said and held up two bags. "Anti-sleepers and appetite suppressants. I hated these things, but you might need them."

"Thank you."

"Sit down. Eat."

Lana did. She ate fast and had second helpings. Mrs. Watson sipped tea and waited for her to finish before she motioned to the clothing slung over the back of the couch.

"You should be dressed in civilian clothes. These were my daughter's. I packed you a bag with a change of clothes. I only have one weapon that takes that ammo, so you can take it all. I repaired your boots last night. You're set."

"You don't know how much this means to me," Lana said with feeling. "I couldn't do it without your kindness."

"Nonsense. You'd find a way. I'm just helping start you off right. Keep in mind the vandals and thugs are out at night. You'll want to find a place to

sleep where you can protect yourself. And you must take Jack. I packed enough food for Jack for three days.”

Lana nodded. She rose, anxious to be on her way but grateful to take Jack with her. Mrs. Watson quietly swept their dirty plates away. Lana approached the couch, where the large rucksack sat. She hesitated, recalling how bruised her shoulders already were from the harness in the helo. With a deep breath, she hefted the heavy sack and pulled it over her shoulders. She turned in time to see Mrs. Watson’s skeptical look turn into a smile.

“Thank you again,” Lana said and started to the door. “I’m going by my place really fast. When I get somewhere safe, I’ll send help for you.”

“I’m fine, dear, really. I’ve got enough ammo to outlast any vandals.”

Lana opened the front door. Unaccustomed to the weight of the rucksack on her back, she almost toppled over at the first step of the stairwell and caught the banister with both hands.

“Here. Tighten the straps. The higher on your back it is, the easier to carry,” Mrs. Watson instructed.

Lana felt the weight lifted, and she wrenched the straps as tight as she could. When Mrs. Watson released the rucksack, it felt better balanced, though no lighter. She stepped down the stairs slowly and turned to wave at Mrs. Watson. The elderly woman stood in her doorway and waved.

With a return wave, Lana set her gaze on the door to her own apartment up the stairs. A few minutes of huffing later, she opened the door. Despite what Mrs. Watson had said of vandals, the apartment was untouched.

Lana closed the door behind her and looked around, dismayed. There was a reason the apartment was still the same. She had nothing. Mrs. Watson’s apartment was warm and homey. Lana’s a place to sleep and nothing more. Aside from her bed, wardrobe, and a couch, there was nothing else in the apartment. Jack slept on the couch, and all her belongings were in the wardrobe.

The condo felt like it belonged to a stranger. Her throat tightened. The only thing remotely personal she owned—her photo viewer—had been destroyed on the Peak. She’d never thought of her apartment as lacking character. Of course, she’d rarely been there in daylight. Mr. Tim was high maintenance.

Jack crossed to what had been his favorite spot on the couch. He sniffed at it.

Lana opened her wardrobe and looked at the fed uniforms hanging within. They were pressed and waiting for her, as if no one had told them her life had changed. In fact, standing in her apartment, she had the surreal sense that life hadn't changed, as if she could open the door and go to work like any other day.

Emotion filled her as she realized she'd never had a home, even before the attacks. She'd never appreciated her former life enough to make her apartment her home. She'd never taken a chance on a man or let herself wonder what she was missing. Lana snatched the uniforms and flung them around her room. She slung the markers designating her as the Undersecretary's assistant against the wall then crushed them with the heel of her boot.

It didn't feel like enough. She still felt anger and sorrow. She shrugged out of the rucksack and opened the drawers of her dresser, dumping their contents onto the floor. Looking around, she realized her life was filled with nothing but government-issued clothing and a cheap, worn bedspread.

She had nothing but Jack. Now that there was no government, she was nothing! The flash of her reflection in the mirror caught her attention. She looked thinner, pale, scared.

Lana sank onto the bed and cried again. She wanted Brady back. Jack padded to her and thrust his moist nose into her ear. Lana hugged him. She recovered herself and wiped her tears, gazing around one last time. It was a grueling two-day walk to the nearest emerops facility.

With a deep breath, she rose and struggled in to the straps of the rucksack. Jack waited for her by the door, and she tucked the weapon Mrs. Watson gave her into one cargo pocket. The old woman had loaded it for her. The Horsemen were in her other cargo pocket. She touched the pocket as she moved towards the door.

No matter what, she had to get the Horsemen to safety. She started towards the forest hedging the road adjacent to the condo community.

"Come on, Jack."

Chapter Twelve

BRADY'S WORLD WAS ONE of cold and darkness. He was wet, that much he could determine. The ground beneath was rocky. He thought he heard voices from somewhere. They faded as he fell into his unconsciousness. He felt nothing as he floated in the dark of his mind, until sudden, hot pain tore through him.

His body bucked, and his eyes flew open. Lights blinded him and there were several blurry faces hanging over his. The world grew loud, with voices jumbling with the sound of equipment and possibly the thump of a helicopter. He couldn't focus and strained against whatever held him in place. He made out one familiar voice.

"Be still, Brady. You're okay!" Dan shouted.

Brady relaxed, unable to clear his head or move his body. He fell back into the dark quiet of his mind. When he awoke again, it was to the feeling of a warm breeze across his face. He didn't recognize the hospital room. Its colors were pale purple and the bed beneath him more comfortable than any he'd lain in.

It had to be a fed hospital. Army-types and rebels would never have access to such a place. The appearance of a nurse in a fed's uniform in his doorway confirmed his assumption.

"How are you feeling?" she asked as he stretched and sat up.

"A little rough," he admitted. His voice was gravelly from lack of use, and his arms and legs felt heavy as he tested them. "Where am I?"

"Billings Federal Medical Facility. Stay in bed. You were a mess when they brought you in."

"Billings?" Brady asked. "As in ... I'm in *Montana*?"

"Good. We were worried you'd have some brain damage," the woman replied cheerfully. "You remember your name?"

"Brady."

"Rank."

"Major."

"Where did your accident happen?"

"I wouldn't call falling out of the sky an accident," he grunted. "We were shot down somewhere in Tennessee." His mind began to clear. "Where is

she?”

“Where is who?”

“Lana. She was with me in the helo.”

“You were the only survivor.”

Her words fell as hard as he had from the sky. The nurse smiled again and studied the micro in her hand, which monitored his vitals. Brady sat in silence for a long moment, thinking hard. He recalled the horror of falling from the sky and getting caught in the bridge. The terror on Lana’s face was fresh in his thoughts, and he heard her scream again as he was flung from the helo, before it hit the water.

“Did they pull the helo out of the river?” he asked. “Did they verify I was the only survivor?”

“You can ask in a little bit, after you eat.”

“No. *Now.*”

The nurse raised an eyebrow but didn’t jump at his sharp tone. He could guess her thoughts without hearing them: she was silently clucking at the army-type who thought he could boss around a fed.

“I’ll bring you something to eat,” she said instead and walked out.

Brady struggled to move his body. He was weaker than he remembered feeling in a long, long time. He shoved the sheets off and looked over his body. His right arm was bandaged with a fracture-snap, his left ankle as well. He touched his face and felt the scars running along the left side of his face, neck, and head. He was shaved bald. Irritated, he sat back on the bed. Even his DNA-enhanced body would need time to heal, just not as much time as a normal person.

But he had to know if they found her body. His heart leapt then sank as Lana’s scream echoed in his thoughts again.

“Hey, champ.” Tim’s voice was a pleasant distraction. The politician managed to make even his casual wear appear distinguished as he stood in the doorway with sparkling blue eyes.

“How did I get here?” Brady asked.

“Dan called me. I sent in twenty helos and only one made it back.”

“Lana?”

Tim’s smile faded. He shook his head. Brady released his breath.

“Dan stayed behind where your helo went down to search. You were in critical condition. The docs put you in a coma for over a week in order to

transplant half your organs. You'll be on your feet in no time."

"I hate organ transplants."

"You've got the innards of an eighteen-year-old. I plan on having the same transplant in about ten years."

"So she's gone." He felt worse than he expected. "I failed you."

"You kept her alive for quite a while," Tim said. "I'll always be grateful to you."

"They didn't find the Horsemen or her micro either?"

"Nothing."

Brady's gaze went to the window. There was no body, no micro, and no Horsemen. He couldn't imagine all would still be missing, unless she was alive somewhere. Hope trickled through him. She had to be alive.

"It might take me awhile to get used to the bald Brady," Tim said. "I've got work for you here, but I think—"

"I want to go back."

"—I think you want to go back." Tim chuckled. "You think she's alive, like I do."

"I think where she is, so is her micro and the Horsemen."

"I thought it odd none were found, but they didn't find the pilot or anyone else from the crash either. Dan searched the whole area, for ten kilometers out in every direction he could. Lana doesn't have the ... skills for survival."

"The one thing you didn't teach her," Brady pointed out.

"If I'd known the world was getting ready to end, I might've taught her that, too," Tim replied smoothly. "What I can say is that she learns fast. She knew where we wanted her to go, and—assuming she's alive—she has access to every facility on the route."

"If she's not dead in a ditch somewhere. She has no sense for first aid, either."

"True. But ..."

Brady knew what the ambitious man wanted. Tim's concern was as much for Lana as it was her precious cargo. Tim cared for Lana—that much Brady could see—but Tim cared as much for his career and getting what he wanted. Brady was a different kind of man. Even if he didn't put the same price tag on something material, he didn't begrudge Tim for being the way he was. Without Tim, none of them would've survived in the first place.

“When does this come off?” Brady asked, indicating the two fracture-snaps.

“Tomorrow,” the nurse said as she reappeared with a small tray of food. Brady’s stomach roared at the scent of real food. “You can leave in another week.”

“He leaves tomorrow,” Tim said before Brady could speak.

“Very well, sir.”

“I’ll need a team. Five men, from our unique pool of soldiers,” Brady said, exchanging a look of understanding with the Undersecretary. “We’ll have to risk flying past the river if we want to find her.”

“They’ll be here in the morning with enough supplies and ammo to take out Texas,” Tim said.

“And I need a micro with all emerops facilities between Tennessee and Colorado marked.”

“You’ll have one in an hour.”

“Sir, I need you to approve his release at the desk,” the nurse said. “And you, Major Brady, need to eat all you can if you plan on *walking* out of here in the morning.”

Brady grunted in response and dug into the steak on the plate before him. He’d wolfed half of it down by the time the two left him alone in the room. He was weak; he could feel it. He’d have to catalyze his healing with adrenaline and other drugs.

While he trusted Dan, he couldn’t help feeling that Lana was more capable of fending for herself than they gave her credit for, if only because she knew how important it was to keep the Horsemen safe. She’d been learning how to defend herself and watching how his people operated for a few days before the accident. Someone as bright as she was would figure out a way to get somewhere safe.

At least, he hoped she would. Brady ate until he was too stuffed to eat more, his mind racing.

Precisely at six the next morning, he strode through the medical facility’s maximum security barriers. His body didn’t feel right, but he had enough drugs with him to get him through a couple of weeks, when his body would be fully healed. He emerged from the thick steel walls into the sunlight. A smile spread across his face.

Tim stood in his black fed uniform, comfortable with the soldiers eyeing him. Dan and Elise were there with three others. Brady had no doubt Dan had chosen the team; the cheerful man was nonetheless shrewd when he needed to be.

“Before you leave,” Tim said, stepping between Brady and his team, “I’ve briefed your team already. The decision was made at levels higher than mine that we are sending in everything we have in three days. PMF are spreading the word to the populace to hole up in the underground railroad. We’ve gotta crush this before it wipes us all out.”

“We’ll be back by then,” Brady said.

“You must be. This isn’t something I can influence.”

“You can influence anything, Tim, so I assume this is your idea and your window.”

Tim’s smile was faint. “The politics are changing slowly. Seems someone ordered hits on a few key politicians in the way. I can influence everything on this side of the Mississippi.”

Brady didn’t ask. He didn’t want to know what Tim did behind the scenes. Tim moved closer and lowered his voice.

“What your grandfather planned with mine so long ago is about to happen. If we don’t act, the country will be split by civil war. The era of fractured power and corruption is about to end. It may not happen peacefully.”

“You always have my support,” Brady said. “Just let me do what I do best.”

“I’m counting on it. Do you have anyone you’d rather I not purge?”

“All of my men.”

“Very well. Good luck. Bring back the Horsemen. And, be careful. I need more than your brawn, Brady.”

Brady nodded and stepped around Tim. Their world was about to get messier. Tim had been prepared for this day by two generations of ambitious men who intended to see someone of their bloodline in the seat of power. Brady didn’t care for power, which was why he’d always gotten along with Tim. Even so, he knew Tim was as vulnerable as any man to the siren song of absolute power. His grandfather had an almost subservient relationship to Tim’s, but Brady had left the shadows on many occasions to

remind Tim of what really mattered when the politician's ego started to get the best of him.

"Dan," Brady greeted his friend warmly and shook his hand.

"Lookin' alive. I wouldn't say good," Dan replied. "I brought Elise."

"I see," Brady said, looking over Lana's blond friend. Even Elise's usual disdain for the regular military was welcome. Her critical gaze swept over him with a frown. "Let's go."

"We thought we'd start at Lana's house," Elise said as they all walked towards the awaiting helo. "She lived near the bridge. If she survived, she would've probably gone home."

"We searched it from top to bottom," Dan added. "Nothing. It was bombed out about a day after the helo went down. Still, that's gotta be the starting point. She'll have left some sort of clues behind."

"She doesn't have our training," Brady said, pensive. "I calculated the nearest emerops from there. There are three within about a week's walk."

"Yeah, we know that now," Dan said with a look at Elise. "The feds weren't very forthcoming with that information. We could've tried to track her if we knew, but we didn't until two days ago. Tim released the locations to everything east of the Mississippi. We've mapped about twenty possible routes to the three facilities. From there, it gets more confusing. Each facility is within three days' walk of three more facilities with another twenty possible routes."

"We have Elise. Elise knows her better than anyone," Brady said with a glance at the blond woman. "So we go back to the beginning. We'll figure out which route she took and track her."

"Maybe she'll beat us to Colorado."

"Not on foot she won't."

"You're underestimating her," Elise warned.

"For her sake, I hope so," Brady said.

"My friends," Dan said in a softer tone, "I don't like saying this, but be prepared for the worst. Chances are, she didn't make it out alive."

Brady and Elise exchanged a grim look. Neither spoke. Brady's chest had tightened at Dan's words, and he felt fear for the first time since he was a kid in basic training and had his first brush with his own mortality. The small team boarded the helo and lifted off. Brady focused on the micro, trying to figure out where Lana might've gone. At last, he set it down and

gazed out at the terrain below. Dan was right. There was no real way to know which route she might've taken. He hoped there was some clue at her home.

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Chapter Thirteen

LANA PICKED HER WAY through the forest and stopped at the edge, peering at her destination. She'd slept only when they were safe inside the emerops facilities and downed anti-sleepers between. Thus far, none of the emerops facilities had been in a town. That this one was in the middle of a town—even a tiny one—made her nervous. After ten days of walking, she needed a rest, now that she'd made it to the river.

The emerops facility was across a field and a road then down a few blocks in the ghost town that was the city of Randolph on the eastern shores of the Mississippi. Lana's heart pounded as she left the forest. She'd traveled nonstop, sticking to narrow country roads and the forest to avoid both people and zones marked as having any sort of radiation fallout from the nuke strikes.

All the cities along the Mississippi River had been marked as contaminated to some extent. Randolph was the smallest of them, so she'd picked this town to cross the River rather than the larger ones south along the Mississippi.

Jack sat beside her. Lana sipped water. Her shoulders had ached the first week, and she'd traveled through a hazy world of discomfort and fear. She'd run into no one in her two weeks and grown comfortable in the forest with Jack. The idea of possibly running into people whose alliances she couldn't predict made her queasy. However, she needed to get to the emerops facility in the town and then cross the bridge across the Mississippi. Once she did that, she could risk contacting Tim on her net and pray he reached her before Greenie or anyone else found her.

Because her Guardian wasn't coming this time. The ache of loss had faded a little over the past two weeks, but she still cried herself to sleep at night.

With a deep breath, Lana left the forest. Jack loped ahead of her then paused to wait at the center of the field. As she reached him, she heard a sound that jarred her. A military transport rolled from the main road leading out of the forest a few hundred meters away towards the town. Lana froze, hoping they didn't notice the lone figures in the middle of the field.

People emerged from the buildings that looked abandoned. Surprised, she watched a few men and women meet the transport in the road just outside town. Soldiers dressed in PMF grays and others in the fed's black uniforms began unloading the transport, tossing cases of rations to the ground.

A few glanced her way, and Lana braced herself. Only one stared longer than a second. She held her breath, expecting them to charge her. No one did. Lana started forward again and circled the transport, puzzled by the mix of uniforms. She'd thought at first maybe the PMF scavenged the fed uniforms.

"Refugee?" one of those who had emerged from the town asked.

"Yes." Her word came out a croak after two weeks without speaking. Lana cleared her throat.

"Follow Kelli in."

A short brunette waved her over. Lana followed, unable to take her eyes off the soldiers.

"Where you coming from?" the brunette asked.

"Eastern Tennessee. The rebels are bringing supplies?" Lana asked.

"Rebels and regular military. They're all there is now. I heard everything is fine out west, though."

"Why don't you just cross the river?"

"The bridges were all destroyed, and the old barriers from the war are back up."

Lana sighed, her mind quickly turning to her alternatives.

"The government pretty much abandoned us," Kelli said, tone hardening. "We found their emergency back-up supplies here. It's all that's kept the people alive."

Lana's second plan was foiled. As they walked into the town, they were greeted by people calling out to Kelli. The brunette waved in return and led her through the small town to a boardwalk lining the wide, slow-moving Mississippi River. The size of the river made Lana tick off one of her alternatives. There was no way she could swim it. Even if she did, the feds had thrown up walls on the other side that looked like they could withstand a nuclear blast.

Kelli led her into a building. "We keep a record of everyone who comes through. Just need your thumbprint."

Lana gazed at the micro on a table, hesitating. “Could I possibly use the restroom first? I’ve been walking for a while.”

“Down the hall.” Kelli said and pointed.

Lana went, trailed by Jack. She ducked into the bathroom and pulled out her micro. Tim had said not to mess with anything, but she’d heard the anger in Kelli’s tone when she mentioned the feds. Lana hacked into the federal system, changing her own profile. She tucked the micro away and returned to the foyer.

Kelli waited by the door, gazing out at the river. She and the others appeared healthy, which surprised Lana. Lana pressed her thumb to the screen, relieved when the new info she’d entered popped up.

“Nice to meet you, Lana,” Kelli said, looking over her shoulder. “From Asheville. That’s a long walk.”

“It was,” Lana agreed.

“You look it, too. But you’ll be fine here. We divided up the buildings into small apartments. Everyone stays in the city or under it. It’s safer here, and the supplies are dropped off every day about this time,” Kelli explained. “Follow me.”

“So you haven’t tried to cross the river?”

“Why would we? For all we know, the reports we hear are false and the whole country is like this. In any case, my husband, Mike—who was voted to be the liaison with the soldiers—isn’t likely to let it happen. Neither will the soldiers.”

It’s not like this over there, Lana thought silently. She trailed Kelli, who walked to the main street again.

“We turned those buildings into a makeshift hospital. They’re the only ones with electricity. We’re building a bigger battery to store the energy we generate from the river, but ...” Kelli shrugged. “It’s not as easy as that. No one here had the skills. For now, just the hospital has power.”

“I still can’t believe the PMF and army are working together,” Lana said.

“PMF has transports, army has supplies. Seems logical enough,” Kelli answered. “The Twelfth Army settled into Arkansas about a week ago. They were headed to Tennessee but we heard something bad happened, split the government at the top level. Someone sent them south instead of north. Good for us, though.”

“Amazing.”

“Where you been all this time? Under a rock? Anyway, we’ll put you in temporary housing until we have a place for you,” Kelli said. “This is your new home for now.”

Lana looked at the building. Few people were out in the streets, but the front office area of the building held several women who had turned it into a living room. Mismatched chairs, crates, and one couch had been arranged in two circles around stacks of antique books and lanterns.

“A few of us hunt every night for meat then have a bonfire to cook it up. Not bad for the end of the world, eh?” Kelli asked with a smile.

“Only until the supplies run out,” Lana said in response. “What then?”

“We planted crops in the field you walked across and a few others down the road. We’ll just have to protect them from others. We have a plan,” Kelli answered with confidence Lana didn’t share. Kelli greeted a few of the women in the room and led Lana into what looked like a former warehouse in the back of the building. The warehouse had been divided up with hanging blankets into a maze of hallways and personal rooms. Each room held a low bed or cot and two crates.

“One for your stuff and one to sit on,” Kelli explained, ducking into one such room and holding up the blanket acting as a door for Lana to enter. “You’re responsible for cleaning your own clothes and linens. We have more blankets in the corner nearest the entrance. It can get chilly here at night. This is the most important thing.” She held up clothing covered in mosquito netting. “The bugs are bad here, and they have diseases. We all wear them.”

Lana looked Kelli over more closely, noticing the clothing for the first time.

“Questions?” Kelli asked.

Lana shook her head. Jack climbed onto her bed and stretched out.

“We have dog food, too. Tons of it. More than we have dogs,” Kelli added. “I’ll bring you some for him.”

“Thank you,” Lana said. Kelli flashed a smile and left.

So far, this wasn’t what Lana expected. Her room was tiny, and she heard others rustling in rooms nearby. She couldn’t help but feel surprised by the kindness and careful planning of the refugees who’d lost everything but electricity in one building. Of course, she’d spent the last twenty years in the competitive upper-class circles, learning how to keep out of the way

of those who would use her to get to Mr. Tim. He'd urged her to hide herself away when she wasn't at work with him, telling her tales of how bad the upper class was.

On many occasions, she'd seen the duplicity and cold manipulation he'd spoken of. Usually, he was the one doing it, so she'd listened to him.

She'd never wondered if the lower class was different. She had few memories of her mother and grandparents and never crossed paths with anyone from the poor class. If these people had been from the elite class, they'd have shot her on sight. Nothing in the town would be standing, because the elite hoarded power and anything that would give them influence.

Even though her bed was a cot, she didn't think she'd seen anything so appealing. Tired of puzzling over the world around her, Lana shrugged off the rucksack, pushed Jack over, and lay down with him. She didn't expect to sleep, not with the amount of anti-sleepers in her system. However, she fell into a deep slumber soon after she lay down.

She dreamt of what life with Brady might've been like, away from the war and betrayal. The dream was sweet and short. When Kelli woke her, the warehouse was dark, except for the low light of lanterns like the one dangling from the ceiling into Lana's room.

"I thought you'd be hungry," Kelli said. "Change into the mosquito gear and come on out."

Lana struggled out of bed, exhausted still. She changed and placed her micro and vault into her pockets then followed Kelli out of the warehouse, through the front office space and into the street. Where the street had been vacant during the day, they were crowded at night. Groups of people milled and moved towards the fields surrounding the town, guided by moonlight and the light of handheld lanterns.

"It was a good hunting day," Kelli said, excitement in her voice. "Five bucks. Big ones, too. Looks like you were good luck!"

Lana said nothing but touched Jack's scruff, nervous around all the people. She feared staying here too long and wondered again how she'd cross the river.

They left the town and joined those in the field beside the river. Five bonfires had sprung up, each one with a massive spit turning a large deer in its center. A cool breeze swept over the river, and Lana shivered until they

neared one of the spits, the one with the least amount of people there. Kelli greeted one of the men with a kiss and a quick hug before going to the woman cutting chunks of meat off the deer. Lana stood to the side, watching Kelli prepare two plates. Beside the spit were two kettles over smaller fires. Kelli ladled out the contents of the kettles onto each plate. When she returned, Lana identified rice and beans.

“Enjoy,” Kelli said. She plopped a piece of flat bread over the top then sat down with her own plate.

Lana hesitated then sat, watching Kelli use the bread in place of utensils to eat her dinner. She mirrored the movement, feeding meat to Jack as she ate. The meat was well cooked and tender, which made up for the lack of seasonings. The rice and beans were bland until mixed together. Lana found herself eating faster than she should have, hungry for real food after ten days of appetite suppressants and the dehydrated staples that she’d stuffed her bag full of. She had enough for a month, but after a few days, she found herself wishing for real food instead of the stale bars.

Several soldiers—two in grays and three in black uniforms—approached the bonfire, speaking with the men gathered in a group on one side. Lana’s eyes settled on them, and she found herself tensing. She’d seen what the PMF did to feds; if not for Brady, she’d be raped and dead by now. She knew nothing of the military regulars aside from the very few she’d met.

And Brady, who had been in both worlds.

Her gaze dropped to her plate, and she stared at the runny beans and floating rice. She’d tried not to think of him while traveling. She didn’t want to admit he was dead. She didn’t want to think about losing the man who made her feel something so strong for the first time in her life.

“I need to cross the river,” she told Kelli.

The woman glanced up from her plate, surprise on her features.

“I have ... family in Colorado,” Lana said. It wasn’t completely untrue; Mr. Tim was in Colorado.

“A few people have tried. No one has come back,” Kelli said slowly.

Because they’re dead, Lana guessed. There were likely some nasty security features on the other side of the Mississippi left over from the East-West Civil War. Lana’s access was limited to the eastern part of the country. She could see nothing in her micro beyond the River.

“Hey, Kelli.” Two soldiers—one in black and one in gray—approached. The one in gray spoke.

“Hi, Leo,” Kelli said with a smile. “Anything on patrols tonight?”

Lana studied the soldiers. They were well armed and their uniforms pressed and clean.

“Nothing. It’s a good thing. Found a few more refugees just south of here. You have room in the warehouse?”

“We do. We had another refugee wander into the town today,” Kelli said, motioning to Lana.

Lana braced herself as the two looked her over carefully.

“Welcome,” the man in black said at last. “She looks healthy.”

“Seems that way. We didn’t test her for radiation yet,” Kelli added. “The equipment isn’t working again.”

“We can send someone to fix it,” the soldier in gray said.

“I didn’t expect to see you working together,” Lana said, unable to help her curiosity.

“Still our country,” the PMF soldier said. “We’re just trying to keep the people safe for now.”

“You have a common goal,” Lana said thoughtfully. “Interesting.”

“We’re all there is here in the States,” the military regular said. “The rest of the military is overseas. Domestic protection fell to PMF. For once, someone in the chain of command had some common sense.”

“Only time in history,” the PMF soldier said with a snort. “Kelli, you checked her profile?”

“She’s clean,” Kelli confirmed. “Sorry, Lana. We welcome everyone with open arms but are cautious nonetheless. We’ve thrown a few in the prison we created and sent a few more home with these guys. No idea what happens to them then.”

“Better you don’t know,” the PMF soldier said with a smile. “Nice to meet you, Lana.”

“Thanks,” she managed.

“How’re the kids?” the other soldier asked Kelli.

“Very well, thanks,” Kelli said with a warm smile. “The radiation treatments we found in the feds’ storage facility worked. Thanks again to your docs for showing us how to use them.”

“I’m just happy they’re all right. Lots of others aren’t. We’ve gotta finish our rounds.”

“Hellos to the others.”

The two soldiers moved away, greeting the next group of people before sitting down to talk.

“Your kids are sick?” Lana asked.

“They got a dose of radiation poisoning. We got here about five weeks ago from Georgia. My husband and I got separated. He came with the kids and I came alone. Thank god we all survived!” Kelli said. “But the kids were pretty messed up. Someone found the supplies and all the drugs. It’s what keeps the hospital functioning, so we can treat everyone who comes this way. My kids are recovering.”

Lana said nothing, dismayed. She’d never thought to open the supply points for the general public. Suddenly, she felt guilty for using the emerops depots for herself like a typical member of the elite.

“So, who do you lock up?” she asked.

“Who else?” Kelli said with a laugh. “Feds! They got us into this mess. Rumor has it they’re trying to revive the East-West War. No love lost between us and them in any case.”

“I don’t blame you.” Lana turned her attention to her plate. She placed it on the ground and watched Jack wolf down the rest. “They’re all selfish bastards.”

“That they are. Though I’m grateful they stashed stuff here, where it was found and my kids could get treated. So many other lives have been lost that might’ve been saved.” Kelli’s gaze grew haunted, and Lana couldn’t imagine what she’d seen during her journey from Georgia to the small town of Randolph.

“I think I need some sleep,” Lana said, feeling ill. “Is it all right if I retire to my room?”

“Of course. I’ll come get you in the morning, so we can assess your skills. Everyone here has a role to support our little community. But we’ll worry about it tomorrow,” Kelli said.

“I’d be happy to help any way I can.”

Kelli smiled again. Lana walked back to the town and to the storefront that was her temporary home. She retreated to her room and turned up the lantern overhead to hide the light of her micro. Jack stretched out on the

floor, content after his dinner, while she stared at the screen of her micro. With a deep breath, she released the locks on all the emerops facilities east of the Mississippi.

The token seemed too small to make up for not thinking of it sooner. It did little to fill the emptiness within her. Lana tucked the micro away. Distraught, she lay down on the bed and stared at the flame in the lantern.

Her thoughts went to Brady again. She took deep breaths to keep from crying. The loss of him and all the other lives made her feel like the worst person on the planet. She missed her Guardian.

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Chapter Fourteen

LANA'S CONDO-COMMUNITY WAS pulverized. The eerie hulls of burnt-out cars up the road had been creepy even to Brady. The remains of Lana's home was more what he was used to: debris surrounding a dirt crater large enough to swallow the whole community. They'd circled it twice, but the blast had scorched dirt, trees, and any traces of Lana over a hundred meters in every direction beyond the crater.

The sun sat low on the horizon, and the morning air was still and filled with the scent of fire and death. Brady scanned the surrounding forest again, trying to figure out which way Lana had gone.

"You're certain not the road?" Dan asked. "She's not one for roughing it."

"But she's smart," Elise countered. "And she knows Greenie is after her."

And that she holds the keys to the world's survival in her hands, Brady added silently. He hadn't told them about the Horsemen. Elise needed no other motivation than her friend was in trouble, and Brady hadn't yet digested how such tiny devices could collapse the countries of the world.

"Four deer paths," Brady said. "Two of which lead towards known emerops facilities about two to three days out. We know she was headed west, towards Colorado."

"So did she take the northern route or the southern?" Elise pondered. "Southern."

"Why southern?" Dan asked.

"Because I would've taken the northern. I don't know, Danny," Elise said in irritation. "None of us can think like this fed. But if we stand here talking, we're not gonna find her."

Brady hid a smile. He'd begun to like Elise even more since spending time with her. She still gave him the look that said she thought he was a lesser being because of his status, but she'd refused to sleep until they found her friend.

"You two team up to take the northern route," Brady decided. "I'll take the southern."

Elise started off before he'd finished. Dan winked at him and followed. Brady started around the crater towards the southern route. None of them had spoken again about what to do if Lana wasn't alive. They were going to find her either way, though he wanted nothing more than to see her well.

Even if she hated him for what he was. He still recalled the look she'd given him before they left in the ill-fated helo. She'd turned from the sweet, open Angel who kept him company on dark nights to a stranger who wanted nothing to do with him. He hadn't expected the sudden loss to hurt like it did. He'd regretted taking her to his bed initially but now wished he'd taken up her offer to become his companion, even if only for the few nights they had together. It was better than one night.

Brady pushed her from his mind, focusing on the deer path leading away from the condo community into the forest. He looked for signs anyone had walked through the brush and branches, pausing at intervals to squat and look at his surroundings from a different angle.

"Any luck?" Tim's voice interrupted his concentration.

"No, Tim," Brady said dryly. "While I'm searching the ground for footprints, you think you can find her using the technological powerhouse you're sitting on?"

"We've tried. She's off the radar. I created this monster that can hack into our systems and make herself disappear."

"That you did," Brady agreed. "You did good, Tim."

"Until a few weeks ago, I would've agreed. Can you move any faster?"

"We can find no trace of her yet. I can't forget your deadline. It's all I think about."

"Brady," Tim said, considering. "Did anything ... happen between you two?"

Brady's jaw clenched. How did he tell his closest friend and benefactor he'd had a one night stand with his daughter?

"Interesting," Tim said. "Don't answer. I don't want to have to despise you. I guess this will work out after all."

"What will?"

"If you ... *when* you find her, I'm assigning you as her personal protection and sending you both somewhere safe."

"My place is on the battlefield."

"You can manage battles from a distance," Tim replied.

“I haven’t exactly done the best job keeping her safe. You sure you want me in that role?” Brady asked.

“Absolutely.”

“You’re the boss. I gotta go,” Brady said and touched his net to close it. For reasons he couldn’t explain, Tim’s assignment irritated him. Brady belonged in the field with his men, and life after they found Lana was not going to get easier. The entire East Coast had to be purged and redeveloped.

He tried to tell himself this was why he was agitated. But it was the raw thrill at the idea of having her in his bed every night that lit his blood afire. He recalled one of their conversations from before their paths crossed, where he’d promised to marry her. He’d meant it as a joke only, something to make her feel better and take her mind off of the chaos around her.

Only now, he couldn’t help thinking she was the only woman he’d ever met he would even consider taking such an oath to. It was part of the reason why he’d turned her down as a companion. He had too much respect for her and Tim to make her a mistress when he almost felt compelled to make her something more.

Brady brooded then dismissed everything to focus on his surroundings. A couple of hours later, Dan’s voice came across his net.

“We got something.”

“What?” Brady asked, alarmed by the grimness of Dan’s voice.

“A body.” Dan added quickly, “Not Lana’s.”

Brady almost sighed in relief.

“A little old woman. Elise said she was Lana’s neighbor. I guess she tried to escape and didn’t get far. She’s dressed in grays—*your* grays.”

“I gave Lana a set before we left the commo site,” Brady said. His heart quickened at the first sign of proof that Lana might be alive. “Any sign they were traveling together?”

“Not likely. The body hasn’t been dead long. It looks like she was living out here, not traveling.”

“No sign of Lana?”

“None. Still not sure if she came this route.”

“Keep looking.” Brady’s attention shifted again to the forest.

He searched for another hour, finding no sign of human travelers on the trail. Frustrated, he sent Dan a rally call and returned to the crater. Elise was pacing and Dan calm.

“This isn’t working,” Brady said. “We’ve got two and a half days. She had ten. We’re looking at this all wrong.”

“We have no way of knowing where she went or how far,” Dan pointed out.

“Let’s assume she ran into no trouble and traveled all ten days with four-hour breaks every day,” Brady said. “How far could she get?”

Elise whipped out her micro and focused on the calculation. Brady tapped his foot, frustrated they’d wasted half a day without finding any trace of her.

“It depends on the route. But,” Elise paused, studying the results, before continuing. “She’s somewhere in this box.” She showed him the micro, which displayed a forty-kilometer stretch along the Mississippi that was twenty kilometers deep.

“That’s eight hundred square kilometers,” Brady said. “And you’re excluding the area on the other side of the Mississippi.”

“She can’t cross the river. The Mississippi is locked down with everything the feds have.”

“Oh dear god,” Dan said with a snort. “You can give a fed a micro ...” He took it from Elise.

Brady waited impatiently as his friend manipulated the data.

“There. Forty square-kilometer area. There are three cities along the Mississippi. I recommend we start there,” Dan said. “I’m giving her the benefit of the doubt that she made it all the way to the river.”

Brady looked over the newest results then called for a helo to airlift them. Half an hour later, the chopper descended near the crater. Brady and his team climbed in and were lifted up. Laser fire chased them across the sky, and he gripped the edge of the open bay tightly, not wanting another fall from the sky.

When they were too high for lasers to reach them, he sat and pulled out his medic bag. He felt the impact of the past few hours much more than he preferred. He shot himself up with the drugs he’d brought with him, leaning his head back against the back of the seat as they traveled.

The helo left them at Texarkana, the southernmost point on their map, before missile fire from the other side of the river erupted. Brady watched the helo lift off then turned to the abandoned city. The missile fire stopped when the helo retreated.

“The emerops facility is ...” Elise frowned and trailed off. “It says it’s at the edge of the city and open.”

“Open? As in, she’s here?” Dan asked.

“No. Open as in ... well, they’re *all* open. It must’ve happened overnight. I checked them yesterday.”

“Some glitch maybe?”

“I can’t tell.”

“Where is it?” Brady asked, gazing at the empty highway system on one side of them and the city on the other.

“About three kilometers. Follow me,” Elise said and started forward.

They jogged to the emerops facility. Brady identified it long before they arrived. It had been raided, and looters left a trail of supplies leading out of it. He poked his head into the facility but saw nothing aside from scattered supplies.

Something rustled in the back, and Brady drew a knife, entering. He followed the sounds and peered through one shelf into the aisle on the other side. A youth was stuffing a bag full of medical supplies.

“Brady!” Dan called.

The boy froze then bolted. Brady cursed and darted around the shelf, sprinting after the kid. The youth turned a corner, and Brady followed then stopped. The youth had dropped into a dark hole in the floor of the facility.

“Here, Dan!” he called and knelt. He peered into the hole. The entrance under the facility was hastily dug but the tunnel running beneath the facility had thick metal walls and concrete floors and was lit by battery-operated lanterns. “There’s a tunnel under here.”

“Underground railroad,” Dan said.

“The what?” Elise asked.

“It’s how people like us get away from people like you. It’s a series of bunkers connected by tunnels, set up by the PMF to protect the people during the East-West War.”

“Ours ran under the major cities. People have expanded them since then,” Brady added.

“Let’s see where it goes,” Dan said.

“This is why the city looks abandoned,” Elise mused. “It’s gotta be huge to contain all those people.”

“A lot of them are,” Brady agreed. He shifted and lowered himself feet first into the hole. “It runs parallel to the river.”

Dan dropped beside him, followed by Elise and the other members of their team. Emergency fracture-snaps lay to Brady’s right. He picked one up then looked down the tunnel.

“The kid went this way,” he said.

“You really want to follow?” Elise asked. “What if the entire city is down there? They’re not going to welcome us with open arms, and I don’t have much ammo.”

“Live a little, Elise,” Dan said with a smile. “This is what we call fun. Right, Brady?”

“Right,” Brady agreed and started down the tunnel.

They walked for two hours without running into any tunnels branching off from the main one.

“We’re about to walk under the next town,” Elise said with a glance at her micro.

“Is there an emerops facility here?” Brady asked. The tunnel widened, and his pace slowed as he saw another tunnel intersect it.

“No. Next town.”

“What is this?” Dan murmured.

Brady reached the intersection and saw the tunnel running perpendicular opened into a crowded underground city. Four-story buildings had been built to the ceiling, flanking a narrow pathway and canal of water, siphoned from the Mississippi. The buildings held lights and people, and the canal curved to the left, hiding the size of the city.

“We don’t have anything this elaborate where we are from,” Dan said. “This is a bunker city.”

Brady stepped into the bustling world. By the level of activity and sophistication, he judged this place had been used for longer than the past few weeks. He was more intrigued by the sight of soldiers in PMF grays as well as those in the regular military’s black uniforms. He slung his weapon over his shoulder as they walked deeper into the underground city. They received some curious looks from the inhabitants. None approached, until one of the PMF soldiers caught his eye.

Brady stopped and waited for the soldier to approach. The soldier looked over his subdued rank then at Dan and Elise.

“Welcome, sir,” he said. “May I escort you to our commander?”

“Please,” Brady replied. “This place is incredible.”

The soldier flashed a smile as he started down the narrow pathway lining the canal.

“Did I see regular army-types with PMF?” Dan asked.

“Yes, sir. We are all that’s holding the world together along the river. We combined our headquarters in Arkansas, too. The surge of refugees created a problem and we heard ... well, we heard the rest of the country was destroyed,” the soldier answered.

“Not destroyed. Everything west of the river is fine. Everything east of here is a disaster,” Elise said.

“No one who went west returned,” the soldier said with a curious look at her. “We assumed the worst.”

Brady’s eyes took in the occupants of the underground world. The strain was visible in the faces of many, though those he saw were in good health and fed. The city seemed to be over capacity, with people seated outside the buildings and even more packed inside.

The soldier led them up a set of stairs winding around smaller buildings and into a building apart from the rest. He knocked on the door briskly and opened the door, motioning Brady in.

“Charlie,” Brady said as he took in the familiar commander seated at a table. The quarters were small, with nothing more than a table, a few trunks, and a cot.

“Brade!” the barrel-chested man replied, rising. “What a surprise to see you here! Shouldn’t you be back east, blowing up stuff?”

“Things went crazy,” Brady said and grunted as the large man squeezed him in a bear hug. “This is my team. You remember Dan. Elise is one of the fed’s special security types.”

Charlie greeted Dan and Elise then motioned for them to sit. Brady lifted his chin to the rest of their team, and they obediently left the commander’s small quarters.

“What brings you here?” Charlie asked, sitting on one of the trunks.

“We’re looking for someone,” Elise said and handed him her micro, which displayed Lana’s picture.

“This little girl again,” Charlie said, studying it.

“What do you mean again?” Brady asked, exchanging a look with Dan.

“The feds and PMF headquarters both issued a priority one lookout for her. Neither said why. It’d be nice to know if she’s dangerous. There’s a hefty reward out for her, too.”

The way Charlie’s gaze glowed at the mention of the reward made Brady uneasy. He suspected General Greene had issued one lookout and Tim the other.

“We haven’t found her yet,” Charlie added. “But then again, there are so many refugees trickling into the cities along the river, it’s hard to say she’s not here. We’ve been rather cut off from the rest of the world. We formed our own networks along the river and joined forces with the Twelfth Army. They took up camp about a day south of here in Arkansas.”

“I heard they were headed back from Europe,” Elise said with a frown. “How did they end up here?”

“It wouldn’t surprise me if Tim re-routed them,” Brady said. “Greenie could’ve done a lot of damage with the Twelfth Army at his command.”

“We could’ve used some help.”

Brady glanced up at Elise’s hard tone, sensing she’d not yet absorbed the fact the government she served had splintered.

“What’s done is done,” he said. “We gotta move forward.”

“*This* is forward?” Charlie asked, tapping the screen of Elise’s micro before handing it back. “Seems an odd mission for someone of your rank, Brade, unless you lost that integrity of yours and are just after the money like I am.”

“I still got it and you still don’t. I think that’s why they stuck you in Arkansas,” Brady said. His gaze lingered on the picture of Lana. It was a recent picture, and she was smiling, her dark eyes dancing. “It’s an important mission.”

“Ah, I see,” Charlie said. “A little toy for you, I take it.”

Brady looked up. Charlie’s gaze was amused, though he said nothing of Brady’s long look at the picture. Brady began to recall why he never liked Charlie that much in the first place. It had nothing to do with Charlie illicitly selling PMF weapons overseas. It was Charlie’s seedy character that disturbed Brady. The thought of his Angel in Charlie’s reach infuriated Brady.

“Rest assured we haven’t seen her. I’m assuming she’s a fed. She’s not going to know about the underground railroad. You came from Texarkana?”

Charlie asked.

“We did,” Dan answered. “She can locate and open the federal emergency supply depots. We’re trying to figure out which path she took. We thought she would be in one of them or at least, would’ve left some sign she was.”

“The supply depots we found open this morning?”

“That would be them.”

“These are the ones we searched.” Charlie pulled up a geospatial depiction on his micro and passed it to Brady. “None of these had been touched in years, from what we can tell. There was one in Randolph, according to our patrols, but the people discovered it a few weeks ago and have been using the supplies. North of Randolph, we have no idea.”

Brady studied the map. There were five within two days of the underground city. He passed it to Elise, who looked at the sites Tim had identified.

“You found all but two,” Dan said, looking over Elise’s shoulder. “So we have three to check in the box we identified, if we include the one in Randolph.”

“This definitely helps. Can you contact us if you find anything else?” Brady asked.

“Of course. You all are welcome to stay here for the night.”

“We can’t stop,” Elise said.

“Then you’re welcome to supplies.”

“We’re fine.”

Brady looked at her pointedly, and she crossed her arms.

“If you can spare someone to guide us to the first of the emerops facilities, we’d appreciate it,” Dan said. “Or send several and take whatever looters haven’t gotten to.”

“Deal,” Charlie said. “Good luck finding your girl, Brade.”

“Thanks, Charlie,” Brady said. He ignored the loaded words, rising instead.

Charlie stood and opened the door, speaking to the soldier outside.

“What do you think?” Dan asked, gazing at the micro. “These two are about fifty kilometers apart in different directions.”

“We’ll have to split up,” Brady answered. “You and Elise take this one in the south. I’ll take the northern one. We can meet up tomorrow at Randolph,

unless you can't run that fast.”

“Damn right I can run that fast,” Dan said. “Elise won't let me stop.”

“Not until we find Lana,” Elise said.

“Tony here will take you out of the catacombs,” Charlie said, returning his attention to them. “Which direction do you want to go?”

“We're splitting up. One north, one south,” Brady answered.

“Tony will go north. I'll pull in someone to go south. Whoever is ready, go with Tony.”

“Thanks, Charlie,” Brady said. “When we find her, we'll be in touch again.”

“We'll keep looking until then. A lot of money up for grabs, Brady.”

Brady signaled to the two team members going with him then looked to Tony. The soldier led them down to the canal. Brady couldn't help the feeling that they were still shooting in the dark. There was no way to know where Lana was; he had to hope to stumble upon her. He followed Tony through the underground world and up to the town above. The sky was dark, the stars bright without competition from man-made lighting in the streets. He breathed deeply, not realizing how musty the underground world was until he breathed fresh air.

On instinct, Brady opened the channel to Lana's net. After a brief hesitation, he spoke.

“If you're there, I'm coming for you. Just give me some sort of sign you're out there.”

Chapter Fifteen

“SO WE’VE DETERMINED YOU have no physical coordination or skills. You don’t cook, either.”

Lana flushed at the matter-of-fact tone Mike, Kelli’s husband, took. The towering, slender man was looking over a list with a frown.

“We have a lot of things we need people to do, but you possess virtually no skills. If I didn’t know better, I’d say you were a fed.”

“She’s a student,” Kelli said. “Your family must’ve saved their whole lives to send you.”

“I’m not sure where to put her,” her husband said with a frown.

“I was a technology major,” Lana offered, unaccustomed to feeling skills sought after by feds were inadequate everywhere else. “You said you have a generator you need help fixing, right?”

“You can’t do anything else.” Mike smiled to soften the words. “We have someone from Harvard here who can’t figure out the generator. But, if it’ll keep you busy ...” His look was doubtful.

“She made it across Tennessee,” Kelli pointed out. “She’s got something in that head of hers.”

“Give it a try.”

“Thank you,” Lana said awkwardly, recalling Elise’s words that she’d never make it on the outside. She wasn’t certain what kind of skills these people had that she didn’t.

“We’ll think of something,” Kelli said as they walked down the street. “I don’t think you can fix the generator, so don’t worry about it if you can’t. If you didn’t notice, we have no technology here outside the hospital. We even had to learn to start fire from scratch.”

“I never thought the world would come to this,” Lana said. “Or there were people like you.”

“You probably got some of that brainwashing in college,” Kelli said. “You were probably the only non-elite there.”

“I was,” Lana agreed. “It’s a different world.”

“At least we have a chance to start over.”

Lana gazed at her, unable to shake her surprise that those in this small community were the opposite of what she expected.

“If everyone is reduced to the same level, it might help people remember we’re all the same,” Kelli added. “Do you think so?”

“I think the elite class will never understand that,” Lana said honestly. “There are good among them, but they just aren’t like ... this.” She gazed around.

A handful of people were building an annex onto one of the buildings with their hands rather than with the technological tools she’d seen create structures. Some people dug trenches while others placed pipes in the trenches and covered them again with dirt. Men and women worked over large cauldrons of food in one building while young men and women focused on making blankets, clothes, and other textiles in another.

With their hands. Lana glanced at her own palms, which were soft and slender. She knew the manual labor class worked with their hands, but she didn’t realize they used them to do more than serve the elite. Warmth crept up her face as she thought how stupid she’d sound to someone like Kelli.

“Here it is.”

Lana looked from her hands to the massive, seven-foot-tall Tesla generator. It sat between the boardwalk and one of the buildings where the people had dragged it. Much like her, the generator sat useless. Yet it was the only familiar thing to her in the town. Lana’s hand went instinctively to the pocket with her micro before she dropped it.

She circled the generator. It was the size of a greencar—large enough to power the town. Aside from the chunks missing along the edges from the townspeople dragging it, it looked like it was in good shape.

“Don’t worry if it’s too much,” Kelli said. Lana couldn’t help feeling irritated at the assurance in Kelli’s voice, as if the town had already decided she wasn’t likely to hold her own.

She was tired of feeling that way.

Lana went to the side opposite Kelli and pressed her thumb against the keypad. The control panel opened. Though hibernating, the Tesla generator displayed no error messages. She flew through the options on the command panel. The metal panels on top of the generator opened like a flower, automatically adjusting themselves to catch the most sun. Lana looked around to make sure no one was watching then pulled her micro free. She set it on top of the control panel and assessed the results, then activated the

generator's artificial intelligence so it would adjust as needed to power the town. She returned her micro to her pocket.

"There's nothing wrong with it," she said, returning to Kelli. "It'll take a couple of days to charge. There's no energy stored in it right now. Once it's charged, it'll power the town for two weeks without a new charge or indefinitely, if I set it to recharge as needed."

Kelli was quiet for a moment in surprise. "We'll have to check the Tesla receivers in all the buildings," she said. "I can't believe you know what to do. The Harvard guy didn't!"

"I was a good student," Lana said, afraid to say more. Without her micro, she doubted she could do much more than turn it on.

"Now we know what to tell Mike!" Kelli said. "You can check all the receivers."

"Kelli, I really need to get to Colorado," Lana said. "My family is there."

"Lana, Mike won't risk sending anyone over there, not after the three who went and never came back," Kelli said. "And the soldiers say the same: don't try it."

"Please, Kelli. It's important I see my ... my father again. He needs me," Lana begged. "I'll check all the receivers and make sure the town will have energy before I go. Just please ask Mike to help me get across."

Kelli's gaze went to the generator. At last, she nodded. Lana almost sighed in relief. All Mike had to do was get her across the river. The rest, she'd figure out when she got there.

"Mike'll be happy about this," Kelli said, smiling. "He said only a fed could turn this on. I'm happy he's wrong."

"Me, too," Lana forced herself to say.

"I'm going to let him know. You're welcome to explore the town," Kelli said as she started away.

Lana looked back at the generator, dread in the pit of her stomach. She trailed Kelli. Jack trotted ahead of them back into the town. By the time Lana caught up, he'd had been lured into one of the buildings by a little girl with a handful of uncooked rice. Lana stepped through the doorway, patting Jack.

"You must be Lana," a woman said, rising from the corner with a sleeping child cradled in her arms. "This is the nursery. We watch the kids during the day while everyone is working!"

Jack was obediently following the girl in yellow that fed him rice. She led him to the other side, where a group of toddlers were playing with toys carved from the forest's trees. Another corner contained crates full of sleeping babies while older children sat reading antique books in the center of the room. The children were monitored by a few teens, who sat in one corner laughing and talking.

Lana watched the toddlers greet Jack excitedly. They surrounded him, offering him whatever food they had and petting him.

"They love your dog," the woman said. She moved to the nearest empty crate and placed the baby inside it. "I was just getting ready to head over to get their midmorning snacks. Want to come?"

Lana nodded.

"I'm Melissa."

"Lana."

"You came at a good time. It's taken us a few weeks to get everything running smoothly. Well, mostly smoothly," Melissa said. "Still a lot of us trying to deal with not having light at night or our favorite foods."

"I can imagine," Lana said. "But this is so much better than anything I expected."

"Mike says along the Mississippi, all the towns are like this. We've been trading experts with the neighbors. No one here knew how to plant crops, but the next town over was made up of farm laborers. It's working out better than any of us expected."

"Winter will be rough," Lana said.

"It will be. We've got plenty of wood, though, from the forest. That's how they did it in the olden days."

At least now they'll have real heat, she thought to herself. The generator would be more than the town needed, even for winter.

"Has Kelli showed you around?" Melissa asked.

"A little."

"These are the kitchens. These buildings here each have a different purpose. Meat preparation there, breads and everything else there, then the last building is where we cook. We centralized all the ovens from the town into one area. The kids get snacks twice a day," Melissa explained, leading them into the building smelling of bread.

“Where do you get fruit and vegetables from?” Lana asked, gaze skimming over the oranges in crates.

“We trade for them or get them from the military. Not sure how they ended up with so many oranges.”

“So the PMF and military really are helping.”

“They are. We invite them for dinner, but for the most part, they just do patrols and bring us supplies. Mike handles the coordination with them.”

Melissa motioned to a crate of oranges. Lana took one side and the redhead the other. They carried the crate back to the building acting as a nursery.

“I still can’t believe how nice it is here,” Lana said. “It’s not what I expected.”

“I think we all just want to make our new home as pleasant as possible. Most people didn’t get a second chance like we did. Kids, come eat!” The toddlers left Jack at her cheerful voice and crowded around the crate.

Lana watched, feeling more alone than she thought possible. The people of the town had barely survived an apocalypse Mr. Tim and others should’ve prevented. *She* should’ve prevented. Maybe if she’d paid more attention to the information coming in or been a better analyst ... part of her knew there were no indicators she missed. Another part of her found that to be impossible.

“Jack,” she called. “Thank you, Melissa.”

Melissa smiled in response, her hands full with a toddler trying to steal another’s oranges.

Lana stepped into the street and looked around. The people of the town were employed in maintaining and improving their new lives. Lives she’d helped destroy.

If she didn’t get the Horsemen to safety, more might be lost. Greenie would find her or someone else would. She couldn’t risk staying here too long. Restless, she returned to her room in the warehouse and lay on the bed, thinking hard.

Dark fell, and several of the lanterns in the warehouse were lit. Hers stayed dark. She waited for Kelli to find her and eventually rose, hungry. She and Jack joined the others on the street, going to the bonfires. Lana looked around for Kelli and saw her near Mike at the far bonfire. Kelli’s

features were drawn, her gaze distracted. She sat with a plate of food, not eating.

“Are you well?” Lana asked, approaching.

“Yes, thanks,” Kelli said. “I’m so sorry! I forgot you!”

“I can find my way here,” Lana replied with a smile.

“Go grab some food.”

Lana did. The woman carving this night’s kill gave her extra for Jack. Lana returned to sit by Kelli. When Kelli said nothing, Lana spoke.

“I met Melissa today,” she said.

“Melissa’s great with kids,” Kelli said. “I spent the day at the medical facility. My little one hasn’t been doing so well on his treatment.”

“I’m sorry to hear that. There was nothing in the supplies to help?”

“Unfortunately, no. We’re taking it a day at a time.”

Lana felt for the quiet woman as she fell in to a sad silence. More soldiers in gray and black made their way down the bonfires, pausing to talk to Mike. Lana couldn’t relax until they’d left. Jack helped her eat her meat and then finished off the rice and beans. She sat back, comfortable with the warmth of the fire. Kelli giggled as she fed Jack the remainder of her meal as well.

“Meat’s hard to come by,” Mike reminded them, crouching nearby. Though his words were firm, he patted Jack.

“Any news today?” Kelli asked.

“Just the usual. A few more stragglers, rumors of a new East-West War,” Mike summarized with a shrug. “A few of more of the feds’ secret supply facilities were found today. They were all open. Something must’ve happened to destroy whatever kept them locked. It’s a good thing for any survivors out there. The military is trying to find them all and pull out the supplies before anyone else steals them.”

“Were there a lot of them, I wonder?” Kelli asked.

“They’d found five already within the area they’re patrolling. Seems there are a lot of them along the river.”

“How wonderful.”

Lana was quiet. Mike’s gaze fell to her.

“Great job with the generator,” he said. “We didn’t think it would ever work.”

“Thanks,” she said.

“I understand you want to cross the river.”

Lana nodded.

Mike gazed towards the Mississippi. “We could use someone like you here. In fact, all the cities along the river could.”

“I really need to get to Colorado,” Lana said quietly.

“The PMF has subs. They can take you to the opposite bank, but they’re the first to say not to do it. No one makes it onto the bank with the security the feds installed to keep us Easterners from crossing,” he said with a shake of his head. “I’ll think about it. I’d rather see you alive and here than blown to pieces trying to get across the river. You could always wait a few weeks or so to see if they disable the security.”

Lana sought the words to convey her urgency without revealing just how important it was.

“The girl misses her family, Mike,” Kelli said. “She fixed the generator. She definitely contributed. If she wants to leave, she can help us check the receivers then go her own way.”

Mike sighed. “All right. I’ll talk to the PMF. None of us know enough about the receivers, so we do need your help before you go.”

“Of course,” Lana said, her hopes rising. “I can check them tomorrow.”

The couple exchanged a look. Mike rose and left. Lana shifted, sensing she’d said something to cause the silent communication between Kelli and Mike.

“If you’re alive, I’m coming for you. Just give me some sort of sign.”

Lana froze at the words. It took a long moment for her to register Mike hadn’t spoken them, and the familiar voice came from the implant in her ear.

“You feel all right?” Kelli asked.

“Yes, thanks. Just ... I think I need some sleep,” Lana said, standing abruptly. “Come, Jack.” She itched to grab her micro or tap her ear and respond.

Brady—her Guardian—was alive! Lana’s body went on autopilot as her mind returned to her fall from the helo. She’d seen Brady thrown from it and no bodies wash up on shore. While she knew his genetic engineering made him harder to kill, she’d never imagined he’d survived. Even hearing his voice, she couldn’t help thinking she’d heard him because she wanted to hear his voice again, not because she actually had.

Lana returned to her little room, shaking with emotion. The lanterns hanging from the warehouse ceiling were all lit. She whipped out her micro and toyed with it. She'd been afraid to try to contact anyone through her personal net, fearing discovery by General Greene. Slowly, she replaced the micro. She couldn't endanger these people. Greene would level the city to get to her.

"I'm sorry I couldn't protect you." Brady's voice held the gravelly note it had since his neck was injured. "Elise's safe. She swears you're not dead."

Lana lay down, relieved to hear his voice again. Tears filled her eyes. She ached to respond but had to be satisfied with the knowledge he was alive.

His voice turned softer. "I hope she's right."

I miss you, too, Lana thought. She wiped her eyes, embarrassed to feel the tears on her cheeks. She'd destroyed these people's lives and lost the only man she'd cared for. Now, she couldn't even talk to him without doing worse.

"We started at your condo building. Dan says the condos were leveled about two days after the helo went down. No one was alive when we arrived. We're now in a city along the Mississippi. There are ..." Brady went on.

Lana listened as he described their plan then continued to talk about the others. She'd expected his voice to cause more confusion after she learned what he was, but she felt only comfort and hope. The news that no one had survived the strikes on her condo building made tears rise for a different reason. Mrs. Watson had been kind to her and Jack.

Lana rolled onto her side and listened, crying herself to sleep for a different reason this night. She'd never felt so happy or terrified. There was no guarantee she'd make it to safety or that he'd live long enough to find her. All she could think about was their night together and how much she needed him here this night. She was in love with him, only she couldn't tell him yet. She may never get the chance to tell him or to apologize for their last exchange being one of anger and frustration.

But maybe, just maybe, she'd have a second chance. Exhausted by thought and emotion, she drifted into sleep.

The next day, Lana finished checking the last of the Tesla receivers. Most were in working order and just needed to be reactivated, a simple process she used her micro to do when no one was looking. Several of the buildings had been stripped of receivers to supply the hospital with extra ones. She'd checked the hospital's first then worked her way down the buildings along the main street.

By evening, she'd finished. Satisfied, she stepped into the street. She could imagine the lives of the people here would change dramatically again once they had energy.

The day had been unusually hot and humid, and she wiped sweat from her forehead. She was grateful when a cooler evening fell. She stepped from the final building and watched men and women carry cauldrons towards the bonfire area. Several more refugees had arrived earlier in the day. Like her, they were welcomed with open arms. She couldn't help but feel grateful to the people of the small town.

The distant roar didn't register until the jets were overhead. Lana looked up curiously, wondering if the military was doing maneuvers. The jets came from the west, beyond the river, a realization that didn't register until the ground shook under the impact of the first laser missile strike dropped.

Lana was knocked off her feet. A surprised silence fell over those in the street before someone bellowed.

"To the shelter!"

People scrambled, and Lana looked around, lost. Everyone was going into one of three buildings. Another explosion flung her to the ground. She covered her head as dirt and debris rained over her. When it stopped, she twisted to see a crater at the end of the street near the river. Jack rose and shook himself off.

"C'mon!" Someone grabbed her and hauled her up. Lana glanced at Mike as he released her and dashed into the nearest of the three buildings. Jack trailed them.

Another missile slammed into the street, and the building around her shook. Lana braced herself and hurried after Mike. He led her down a set of stairs and through a thick metal door at the bottom. Lanterns lit the underground, and people huddled in quiet groups. Lana had the impression of more than a single-room shelter. Corridors punctuated by lantern

stretched in each direction off the room. Mike strode down one, and she checked to make sure Jack was with her before following.

The underground tunnel led through several other chambers. Lana suspected the labyrinth of tunnels and chambers ran beneath the entire town. She waited to feel the walls shake from more strikes but felt nothing.

Mike stopped finally in a chamber where two soldiers—one in black and one in gray—were dusting themselves off. Lana watched them speak briefly before the two in uniform started down another tunnel. She looked around. Kelli waved her over to a small group of four.

“Rough day,” Kelli said.

“You all are prepared for anything,” Lana said. “Are your kids safe?”

“They are. The hospital has several doors leading down here. They evacuated everyone.”

“So were you expecting someone to strike the town?” Lana asked, touching one metal wall. “This doesn’t seem like something you built the past few weeks.”

“It’s part of the Underground Railroad,” Kelli answered. “We took a lesson from the East-West War and created bunkers and tunnels between cities to escape the eyes of the feds. We did the same in Georgia. I assumed they were everywhere.”

Lana was quiet, wondering if she should know this, since she was posing as a non-fed. She had no idea that such an elaborate system existed for the lower class. In fact, she was finding she knew nothing of the class she was born into.

“I guess the receivers don’t matter too much now,” she said.

“We’ve got extras down here. I hope the generator survives the attack,” Kelli said. “Can I ask you something?”

The edge in her voice warned Lana. Lana nodded, and Kelli stepped away from the others. Lana followed and crossed her arms.

“You’re running from something, aren’t you?” Kelli asked.

“Would it matter if I were?”

“No. Mike already told the soldiers the person they’re looking for isn’t here. I don’t know how you changed your profile, but you appearing the same day the soldiers came by looking for someone new and suspicious can’t be a coincidence.”

Lana looked towards Mike. He made his way around the room, checking on people with smiles of assurance.

“And, well, when you got the generator to work, we kinda figured it out,” Kelli added. “Only feds can do that with a fed generator. It’s how they’re programmed. We have our own kinds of generators, ones that don’t work nearly as well.”

We. Lana wasn’t sure what to say.

“Did you open the supply facilities, too?” Kelli’s voice had grown softer.

Lana nodded.

“It was very good of you.”

“I didn’t know people were ... I should’ve done it sooner,” Lana said.

“I’m glad we didn’t turn you in.” Kelli’s smile was genuine. “You helped a lot of people that way.”

I killed so many more, Lana thought to herself.

“I take it these guys are after you.”

“I’m not sure,” Lana said. “No one can know where I am.”

“I just assumed ... maybe the rumors of another civil war are right,” Kelli said, her face growing worried. “We don’t have enough food down here to last for too long.”

“Did you ask her?” Mike asked, joining them.

“What we thought,” Kelli answered.

“Both sides put out a lookout for you, and the army-type said the feds had issued two lookouts,” he said to Lana. “I’m pretty sure these jets aren’t here for anyone else. They must’ve tracked you somehow. You still want to get across the river?”

“Yes,” Lana said.

“I’m sorry I didn’t listen to you.”

“I’m the one who should be sorry. I didn’t mean to bring this upon you.”

“They’re prepping to take you across now.” Mike motioned for her to follow.

Lana went, troubled that someone had discovered her and endangered the lives of those in the town. She’d been safe for ten days on her own; maybe hacking into the fed system to change her profile was enough to draw the attention of someone working for General Greene.

The tunnel grew narrower as they moved away from the chambers. Jake trotted behind her, his nails clicking on the concrete floor. The metal lair

was much cooler than the air above ground, and water stained the walls on one side of the tunnel. She guessed they were paralleling the river. They walked for fifteen minutes before the tunnel intersected with another. Mike took them right, and the air grew even cooler. The tunnel ended at a thick metal door. He opened it. There were three PMF soldiers inside and a small submarine.

Lana looked at the soldiers uneasily then to Mike.

“Be careful,” he said.

“Thank you, Mike,” she replied and stepped forward.

One of the soldiers opened the submarine’s door and climbed in. Lana squeezed herself and Jack into the small space behind him. With Jack beside her, the tiny compartment was crowded. The soldier touched his thumb to the navigation control board. The engines purred to life.

“I can take you to the dock on the other side. A friend can take you beyond the security measures. We can’t do more than that, though, without drawing the attention of the feds,” the soldier told her quietly. “This is one of our smuggling routes. We hook a few submersible containers to the back of the sub.”

“It’s a good one,” she said, looking around her in the submarine. She pulled out her micro as they traveled at the bottom of the Mississippi. Everything west of the river was blank. She had no authority to access anything and no ability to see the emerops facilities or fed facilities.

She was about to lose her only tool. She tapped it against her thigh, deep in thought as an idea formed. The messages and information she’d discovered had been forwarded to Mr. Tim. The East Coast’s infrastructure systems still reported to her micro, but she could tap into them from the Peace Command Center.

The submarine bumped against the dock on the other side of the river, and the soldier turned it off. The door cracked open, revealing a similar platform to the one that had been on the other side of the river. A single PMF soldier in gray stood waiting. The man who piloted her across the river stayed in the sub, and she and Jack climbed out.

“See you tomorrow, Jim,” the soldier awaiting her said to the other soldier.

“Bright and early,” came the response.

Jim closed the door, and Lana watched the submarine sink quietly into the surrounding water and disappear. He motioned for her to follow. Lana trailed him through a network of tunnels, sometimes away from the river and sometimes parallel to the river, until she was too disoriented to know for sure which direction they went. At last, the tunnel sloped upward and dead-ended at a thick metal door.

“Head due west or south and you won’t run into any patrols or security,” the soldier said quietly, his hand resting on the door. “There are a lot of swamps in Arkansas, so just stick as close to the roads as you can. And avoid towns. They’re monitoring all population hubs within a hundred kilometers of the river for refugees. Ready?”

Lana drew a deep breath and released it. She nodded.

Jim opened the door. She stepped through it. The door closed behind her, leaving her in near-complete darkness. She waited for her eyes to adjust and squinted around her. The river was several hundred meters away. Behind the walls she’d seen from the opposite side, there were hundreds of the fed’s special security forces in semi-permanent camps. Alarms were sounding, and lights flooded the river and area around it.

Ahead of her was the darkness of a thinning forest. The door to the underground tunnel network was hidden behind a boulder and draped with moss. She checked her micro and did as the PMF soldier said, heading due west. When she’d gone a hundred meters, she squatted and set her micro down. She set it to connect with the fed’s central computer system just before dawn, hoping to draw attention away from the town of Randolph while giving her a head start.

“This looks messy,” Brady’s quiet voice came across her net. “Hope you’re as far from this shit as possible.”

Lana smiled. She considered responding then looked down at her micro. She gave it a few more commands then buried it under a bush.

“Come on, Jack,” she whispered. “We got a long way to go.”

“Elise says you used to call her to kill bugs in your room. I’m wondering how you made it out of the Peak.”

Brady’s comment made her stifle a laugh. She needed anything to take her mind off the next few hours, because she had no idea if she’d survive what she was about to try.

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Chapter Sixteen

THE BOMBING OF THE town of Randolph stopped an hour before dawn. At the first drop of laser missiles, Brady had figured there was one thing that would make the fed jets target the inconsequential town, and it was Lana.

“I called it off,” Tim said. “You have no idea what that took.”

“I imagine knocking off a few more people allied to Greene. I don’t think you called in this strike,” Brady answered, looking over the flattened city grimly.

“No one we’re supporting did. Brady, I don’t need to tell you that there are more rats in the fed ranks than I can find. Assume you’re being tracked as well and act accordingly.” The frustration and anger was back in Tim’s voice. Along with it was another emotion: worry.

“If she’s here, we’ll find her,” Brady assured him. “At least we know she’s alive.”

“Or was.”

“Brady out.” He motioned the PMF members behind him towards the city.

At his request, Charlie had called in everyone in the area to help the survivors. Dan and Elise rolled up on a military transport, and Brady waited for them as the others moved into the town.

“There’s nothing left,” Elise said, distraught.

“Not above ground,” Dan replied. “You’re forgetting the underground railroad.”

Elise appeared relieved then frowned. “Why hasn’t she contacted any of us on her net?”

“Because this is what happens when she does,” Brady said. “Tim confirmed she’d logged into a database from here. One of Greene’s moles caught it.” He started forward, anxious to see if the underground railroad survived the onslaught.

“Entrance here,” one of the soldiers called, looking up from the subsurface monitoring device in his hand. Several more joined him to clear out debris and the remains of a building.

Nothing stood. Brady repositioned his weapons so he could help and began slinging debris away. His body was starting to feel the strain again, but he pushed himself on. Within half an hour, the metal door leading to the tunnel system was cleared away. One of the soldiers blasted it with concentrated laser. It took four strikes before the door caved with a crunch.

Brady was the first in. He dropped to the ground. Two soldiers stood near the tunnel entrance nearby, weapons raised. He lifted his hands.

“Everyone alive down here?” he asked.

“Yes, sir,” one answered and lowered his weapons. “Is it over?”

“For now.”

Dan dropped beside him, followed by Elise.

“Where is everyone?” she asked, taking in the underground structure. The room beneath the collapsed building was empty.

“We heard the laser and cleared everyone out,” one of the soldiers answered. “They’re this way.”

“We’re looking for this woman,” Elise said, striding towards them. “Have you seen her?”

Brady glanced at Dan. Elise had a one-track mind and less diplomacy than either of them. Dan snorted, and Brady joined Elise as she held out her micro.

“She’s here,” one of them said. “Refugee. She came in a few days ago with a dog.”

Brady’s heart quickened. Elise tucked the micro away and started down the hall ahead of the soldiers.

“Pardon our friend,” Brady said, forcing himself to stay with the soldiers instead of racing down the hall with Elise. “I’m surprised the underground held.”

“Me, too,” one of them agreed. “Though I’m grateful it did.”

“Brade,” Charlie called.

Brady turned to see his friend leading three medics.

“We’re opening another entrance. You find your girl?”

“She’s here, sir,” the soldier beside Brady said.

“Good. Will keep everyone off my back,” Charlie said.

They walked through the tunnel to a large room, where people sat and whispered. The room fell silent as their group entered. Elise was walking among the survivors, her features growing irritated.

“Is there another room?” Brady asked, reading the blond woman’s face.

“There are a few. Let me find Mike,” one of the soldiers said. He trotted down another hallway.

“Who is Mike?” Brady asked the remaining soldier.

“He was nominated by the town to lead them and interact with us,” Charlie said. “Good man. Real sharp.”

“She’s not here,” Elise complained, joining them.

“I’m working on it already,” Brady told her. “Go stand by Dan and keep quiet.”

She looked ready to argue but obeyed. Brady couldn’t help but hope not all elite security forces were as high-maintenance as this one. It would make for an aggravating experience, if Tim was serious about assigning him to manage the battlefield from afar.

A few minutes later, the soldier reappeared with a tall man with a sharp gaze and quick smile.

“Good to see you, Charlie,” he said, shaking hands with the local commander.

“You, too, Mike. This is Brady. He and his team are looking for this little girl,” Charlie said, holding up his micro.

Mike hesitated long enough for Brady to assess the civilian knew where she was.

“We’re the good guys,” he supplied. “She’s my personal charge. I lost her when our helo went down.”

“She’s a good girl,” Mike said. “But she’s not here anymore.”

“Where?” Elise demanded, stepping forward again.

“She crossed the river.”

“What, did she swim or something?”

“Elise,” Brady growled. He pointed to the wall far enough behind him to prevent her from butting in.

She went.

“Smuggled her via the subs across the river,” Mike said. “We thought she drew the jets here.”

“You tossed her out,” Dan said.

“She begged me to let her leave,” Mike replied, unaffected by Dan’s tone. “When I saw why, I finally listened. I have thousands of lives depending on my decisions. I’m certain you can respect that.”

“We can.” Brady managed to keep his voice level. “Take us to the sub.”

Logically, he understood Mike’s decision. But the emotional side of him wanted to wring the man’s neck. Who threw a vulnerable woman—*his* vulnerable woman!—to the wild to fend for herself? No one would survive the attack that leveled the city.

Mike obeyed, and they walked through the myriad of tunnels until Elise began grumbling about the distance and Brady became disoriented. At last, they arrived at a metal door that Mike swung open to reveal a tiny submersible docked. The soldier Brady took to be the pilot by his uniform glanced up from his micro.

“I have a feeling these folks would like to cross the river,” Mike said and motioned to Brady. “They’re looking for the girl you took over earlier.”

“I can take one of you at a time,” the pilot said. “Mike, you’ll have to call Jim and let him know to meet them. He’s not expecting me for another couple of hours.”

“Will do. Who’s first?” Mike asked, turning to them.

Elise started forward, until Brady leveled a glare on her. She frowned but stopped. He stepped forward instead, following the pilot into the sub. The screen lit up in front of them, and the door closed. The sub’s motor hummed quietly and the pilot guided it deftly. Brady gazed at the screen in front of him, unable to decipher the symbols and colors.

The smooth ride grew bumpy suddenly, and Brady braced himself against his seat.

“That’s not good,” the pilot said. “Felt like a missile almost grazed us.”

A sinking feeling filled Brady. The sub bumped against a dock, and the door opened to reveal the man he assumed was Jim, dressed in his workout clothing with mussed hair.

“I’ll bring the others over,” the sub pilot said.

Brady heard without responding, striding away from the sub.

“Sir, you may not want to go above ground just yet. There are missile strikes on this side now.”

His heart dropped at the words. He touched his net implant but found the network scrambled, indicating the jets were sending out electromagnetic pulses in addition to the missile strikes.

“I need to go to the surface,” he said. “I can’t stop the strikes if I can’t get through on my net.”

“Very well, sir.”

They went through another maze before Jim reached a metal door. Before he opened it, Brady could feel the walls shaking from the missile strikes. He smelled the burning trees and metal when Jim opened the door and saw lasers streak through the skies.

“Tim,” Brady said as soon as he stepped into the open. “Strikes due west of my last position.”

“I know.” Tim sounded frustrated. “I’m working on it. This is the kind of thing Lana could figure out. It’s taking three so-called experts way too long to figure it out. And the damned comms are down east of the river. So-called experts can’t fix that either.”

Brady could picture the politician glowering at the three men he towered over. Jim closed the door behind him, and Brady stayed where he was for a long moment, watching the laser strikes. He calmly interjected himself with more drugs to supplement his waning strength then stripped out of the heavier weapons, opting for a knife and small laser gun.

“Angel, tell me you’re alive over here,” he said.

There was silence. He hid the rest of his weapons under some bushes near the entrance to the underground world and drew a deep breath.

“Brady.”

Her voice was so faint, he thought he’d misheard. He held his breath, waiting for her to speak again.

“Brady, I’m here. I set up my micro to draw their fire. I shut down the satellites supporting comms on the East Coast, but it’ll only take another two or three minutes before the backups on the sats are enabled.”

He wiped his face. “Where are you?”

“Near a large rock.”

“That doesn’t help me.”

“You can’t miss it. But wait until—”

“I’ll be there in a few.”

“Brady, you can’t cross with the missile fire!”

“Guardian out.” He closed his personal net, needing to concentrate. Brady set his micro to track any laser fire before pulling his mask over his face. He counted to three then ran.

The micro warned him of incoming fire, sending the visuals to the implant in his brain. He darted and dashed, stopped and sprinted at its

commands, focused on navigating the dangerous territory.

If Dan were with him, he'd agree: this was the fun part of their job. Brady's body soared with adrenaline as he silently defied death and reach his goal.

The sound of a helo broke his concentration, and he glanced upward before the micro warned him of another incoming strike. Brady threw himself down, rolled, and ran, taking cover behind a boulder as the laser missile exploded the ground in front of him. He looked again for the helo and spotted it flanking the area of destruction from a short distance away, traveling the same way he did.

The micro vibrated, and he bolted up and forward, determined to find Lana before someone else did.



Lana hid between the boulders, gaze glued to the area where the laser missiles dropped. Jack was restless, and she rested her hand on his head to keep him still. She'd watched the laser missiles fall around her micro for almost an hour.

Someone wanted to make sure she didn't survive. She shivered in the chill of dawn. A helo thumped in the near distance, and she shrank down farther to keep it from spotting her.

Brady had closed his channel. It might save them both, since every inch of her being wanted to scream at him to stop. The sats would be on backup

power right now, eliminating her chance of communicating without drawing the fire of the missiles.

So she waited. And waited, growing as anxious as Jack. It took too long for Brady to appear, and her stomach twisted as she imagined him blown to pieces.

Not again. She couldn't lose her Guardian again.

The thump of the helo returned, this time much closer. Lana scrunched down as far as she could in the shadow of the massive rocks around her. When the helo circled the rocks, she began to suspect they'd picked up her transmission. She held her breath.

The helo moved away. Lana twisted to watch it lower itself to the ground a hundred meters behind her position. Her heart began to beat even faster, and she pulled free the laser gun. Three men leapt out, a blond man in PMF grays flanked by two fed special security members.

If they were with Brady, why hadn't he flown with them? Lana stood and moved to the far side of the rocks, facing the area where the missile fire fell. As suddenly as it started, it stopped.

Brady still didn't appear. She armed the laser gun and tucked it into the space between her clothing and the small of her back. With the vault in her pocket, she waited.

A figure appeared from the forest between her and the river. Lana almost uttered a cry of surprise, astonished he'd survived the missiles. Brady pulled off his mask, trotting towards her. His uniform was torn, and blood turned the gray color brown. His head was shaved. Even from the distance, she could see the scars down one side of his face.

He'd barely survived the helo crash, she assessed, shocked. Yet he moved as if he were completely healed. She couldn't imagine even one of the genetically altered warriors healing so quickly from an impact great enough to create the deep scars on his face!

"Charlie!" he bellowed at the PMF member.

The sound of a laser gun jarred her. Brady dropped. Lana whirled, surprised to see the PMF man in gray lowering the weapon. She darted behind the nearby rocks. Charlie's next laser shot glanced off the top of the rock, searing a hole through it. Lana stared at the hole, surprised, and dropped even lower.

"Come on out, girl, and I won't hurt you," Charlie commanded.

“You expect me to believe that after watching the missile attack?” she returned, reaching for the laser gun. Her heart thudded. She’d shot Donovan on accident and only grazed his arm from a meter away. There was no way she could do enough damage to Charlie from four times as far to allow her to escape.

“I’ll count to three, girl.”

She leaned back to see Brady’s body, praying for a sign he was still alive. His body wasn’t where he’d fallen. She moved as far as she dared from the rock, searching for him. Somehow, he’d moved back to the wood line. His laser gun lay where he fell. She couldn’t see what he was doing, but she saw with relief he was alive.

“One.”

“Distract him, Angel,” Brady said quietly via her net.

An idea formed. Lana freed the vault from her pants and quickly went through the opening sequence. She dumped the keypads into her cargo pocket.

“Two.”

“This is what you want,” she said and held it up. “The keypads to the systems are in here.”

There was a pause. Then the man asked, “What systems?”

“The weapons systems. Or didn’t they tell you what they were after?” She rose slowly as she spoke. For the first time in her life, she told a real lie. “These keypads control all the military’s weapons in the country. Whoever has them will be able to take control.”

“You’re lying,” he replied, gaze on the vault. “They wouldn’t give that to you.”

“You think they call in a missile strike on any low-level fed?” she returned. She placed the laser gun against it. “I’ll destroy it if you try to take it.”

Brady was creeping forward. Blood had bloomed, staining the left side of his abdomen and down his hip. She tried hard not to look at him, terrified of giving him away.

“I’ll give you a better deal. I’ll let you live if you give it to me,” the man in gray responded.

She made a show of arming the laser gun. He stepped closer. Brady drew close enough to one of the fed security members and drew his knife. He

snatched the officer and snapped his neck silently. The sound of the body dropping drew the attention of the other two.

“Here, take it!” Lana cried and tossed the vault to Charlie.

He reached out to catch it. Laser fire sounded as his other guard whirled and fired on Brady. Brady smashed his elbow into the man’s face and whipped him around, slashing his neck with the knife. Charlie turned to blast Brady’s exposed back.

Lana raised the laser gun, closed her eyes and fired. Someone dropped. She opened her eyes slowly, surprised to see she’d hit the man square in the back of the head. He lay on the ground, still.

Brady was staring at her. He managed a faint smile before wobbling and sliding to his knees. Lana rushed to him, horrified by the amount of blood soaking his uniform. The second man he’d killed had planted a knife in his shoulder.

“Brady,” she said, dropping beside him. “There’s so much blood!”

“Call Tim,” Brady grunted. He sank into her. Lana wrapped her arms around his muscular frame, breathing in his familiar scent. She kissed his forehead and cheeks, tears in her eyes. “Put pressure on my side.” His voice was strained.

Lana obeyed, planting one hand on the laser wound in his side. He hissed in pain, his dark eyes growing distant.

“Nice shot,” he managed.

“Thanks,” she replied then touched her net. “Mr. Tim.”

There was a pause then a surprised, “Lana?”

“We need help. Brady’s hurt.”

“Tell him I locked down all missile strikes on domestic territory. Stay where you are.”

Brady’s eyes closed, and Lana touched his face, terrified of the blood and his paling skin. Her own clothing was soaked with his blood.

“Brady,” she said, panic in her voice. “Brady, stay with me.”

“Tired,” he whispered.

“Next time you shouldn’t run through a missile strike.”

“I’ll be fine. Or I won’t.”

“You will be. You aren’t leaving me again!” She traced the scars along one side of his face, taking in his features with concern. He was turning white. His breathing grew shallower.

“Mr. Tim,” she said again. “Please hurry.”

“Working on it,” came the terse response.

“You can’t leave me now, Brady,” she whispered. “We’re in this together, remember? You promised.”

“I’ll live,” Brady managed. “I’ve died a few times and lived to tell about it.”

She kissed his forehead and hugged him as well as she could. The hand pushing against his side was covered in warm blood, and Lana’s panic increased as Brady’s body began to relax.

“Brady! Talk to me! Tell me something,” she ordered.

“Angel?” He opened his eyes and gazed at her, disoriented. “You’re shorter than I expected.”

She choked on a half-sob, half-laugh.

“The chocolate was good,” he murmured, drifting off again.

“Stay with me!”

“I will. I promised you. Would rather die but I made a promise.”

“Promised me what?” she asked. She tried to shake him as he faded again. “Brady, what did you promise me?”

“To marry you, of course. That’s what people who care about each other do. Isn’t that ... what ... you ... said...”

She stared at him, surprised he remembered when she’d forgotten. He went limp, and she struggled to hold him up.

“Lana!” Elise’s cry made her look up. The blond Amazon and Dan raced toward her from the gutted forest.

“Elise! He just ... I tried ...” Lana’s throat was too tight to explain.

Dan dropped beside her, and the two lifted Brady’s body from her lap and stretched him out. Lana stood back, helpless. Dan tore Brady’s uniform open then pulled out a small emergency medical kit and slapped skin grafts over the two wounds. Meanwhile, Elise loaded a mini-med-gun and shot Brady twice.

“He’s under,” she said.

“Is he okay?” Lana ventured.

“On a normal day, yes. But he was battered beyond recognition from the helo crash,” Dan said. He touched the device behind his ear. “Tim, we need a med-evac now, or Brady won’t make it.”

Jack whined from nearby, and Lana moved to his side, unable to help the two soldiers tending to Brady. Soon, she heard the unmistakable sound of a helo nearing.

The next hour passed as if in a dream. Brady's body was placed on the helo, and Lana climbed in with him while Dan and Elise stayed with Jack. Doctors worked quickly to stabilize Brady in a helo ride that seemed far too long for Lana's comfort. Shaking with fear for Brady, she watched them cut through the skin grafts and transfuse blood then jump his heart. His chest was covered in the same deep scars that lined his face and neck.

They made her want to cry, for she couldn't imagine what kind of pain he'd been in after the helo crash. And he'd still come after her. Any resentment that lingered from his betrayal melted away at the sight of what he'd been through to save her. One of the medics cleaned up her hands and face before returning to Brady. They worked on him until she felt the helo descend and finally reach the ground.

More medics rushed out to the helo. Lana followed them into the medical facility after a quick look around, not recognizing the flat landscape and distant red rocks surrounding the canyon in which they'd landed. The medics finally motioned for her to stop and closed double doors.

Lana stood in the silence outside the operation room, exhausted and worried. She made her way to the nearest waiting room. She soon grew too restless to sit still and paced. She turned to retrace her route and stopped.

"Hello, Lana," Mr. Tim said, standing near the door. "May I join you?"

She stared, unaccustomed to the political powerhouse asking for anything. His blue gaze swept over her, lingering on the blood-soaked clothing she wore. For the first time in her adult life, Lana didn't care what he thought about her appearance or presence someplace where he might not think she belonged.

"He's stable," Mr. Tim said. "Pretty torn up, but stable."

She rubbed her face with a heavy sigh and sat, relieved.

"And you?" he asked politely.

"I'm fine."

"Looks like you could use a decent meal."

"I assume you're here for these, not for us," she said, aware of how harsh her words sounded. She fumbled with the cargo pocket and opened it.

“I’m here for you. And for Brady. I’ll get those later,” Mr. Tim replied.

Lana looked up at him in surprise.

“I know you probably still hate me right now. What kind of father treats his daughter as a servant her entire life and lies to her about pretty much everything?”

“I understand why you did it,” she said, looking away. “You needed access to everything the government had. Who better than your own daughter to plant as a mole?”

“I wanted to protect you,” he countered. “Greene and any of the others couldn’t know you were my daughter. And yes, everything and everyone in my life has a function and purpose. I live by a certain creed, one that runs in our family.”

His words reopened the wound she’d tried to heal too quickly. He waited for her to speak.

“I don’t want to do it anymore,” she said at last. “I don’t want anything to do with your world.”

“Does that go for me as well?”

She hesitated then shook her head. “I’ve always admired you, Tim. You are cut out for politics and betrayal. I am not.”

“This is the family business, as they say.”

“I want out of it. I want to be with Brady.”

Tim drew a deep breath and sat in the chair beside hers. She searched his youthful face. Even knowing their relationship, he was hard to read.

“Very well,” he said at last. “I’m disappointed in your decision, but I respect it. I had thought it might come to this.”

“You can send me overseas, like the elite do their unwanted children.”

“Of course not,” he said with a smile. “One of the family’s estates is here in Montana. You’ve accompanied me there on the few days I’ve gotten to relax over the past few years.”

“I know it,” she said, recalling the rustic mansion nestled among pine trees next to a lake.

“I was saving it for you. As my companions had children, I gave each an estate. Ran out of estates after the fourteenth and stopped having children. You were the last.” He flashed one of his contagious smiles. “The one here in Montana has always been my favorite. Fitting that my only female child was named its mistress.”

“You’re giving it to me?” she asked.

“Not officially until my death. But it’s your new home in the meantime. I’ll call ahead when I plan on visiting,” he said. “And I’ll ensure Brady follows through with his promise to marry you. I can think of no one better to take care of you.”

“Tim, you’re not going to order Brady to marry me,” she said with a faint smile. “He was delirious anyway.”

“Nonetheless, it will be arranged.” Tim’s voice held a note of resolution she recognized. He’d made up his mind.

“Tim—” she objected.

“It is done. Now, I have half a country to salvage. No contact, unless there’s an emergency. And keep those keys safe. I’ve made arrangements to have anyone watching me assume they’re going with me to Colorado,” he said as he rose. “When things calm down, I’ll tell you more about my shared history with Brady’s family.”

“Wait, you’re not insisting we marry to unite the two families or something elitist, are you?” she asked.

“Of course not.” His faint smile said otherwise.

“Was this your plan all along?”

“Take care.”

Anger at her newfound father rose. He left before she could say more. Instead, she sat and stewed. He’d either played everyone around him like the politician he was, or he’d simply seized on an opportunity that she and Brady created.

Her thoughts turned to the mansion on the lake and to the idea of spending her life there with Brady. Lana sat back in her chair, imagining a simpler life with her Guardian. Once again, she gave her benefactor the benefit of the doubt. Whatever Tim’s intentions, he’d agreed to let her out of his political game.

She found herself intrigued and hopeful.

Elise appeared in the doorway with Dan. Lana looked up and smiled, happy to see her friend.

“C’mon. They’re holding the helo to take you home,” Elise said, holding the door open.

“I want to stay.”

“I’ll stay. You need to clean up and eat,” Dan directed.

Lana hesitated then looked down at herself again. She rose and trailed Elise out of the medical facility and into the awaiting helo.

The helo flew west, towards the border with Idaho. Lana held her head in her hands as they flew, exhausted. They reached the ranch beside the lake, and her spirits lifted.

She took in the multistory, quadruple A-frame lodge that would become her new home. She recalled how empty her condo had felt when she went back to it two weeks ago. She was free of service to Tim, of the fourteen-hour days and political games.

For the first time since she could remember, she had a *home*. There was only thing missing from the scene before her.

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Chapter Seventeen

One week later

BRADY LOOKED UP AS the familiar nurse walked in.

“I hope not to see you again soon,” she said. “If you don’t take the time to heal, you won’t leave here next time.”

“I know. I’m going someplace quiet for a little while,” he replied.

“I’ll take care of him,” Dan said from his seat in the corner.

“See that you do. The docs are serious. Any more drugs in his—”

“I get the point,” Brady snapped, irritated. “We’re leaving now.”

The nurse shook her head at him and left. Brady stretched his body. He was weaker than ever before. The nurse was right, and he felt it. All the drugs in the world wouldn’t help him if he didn’t take some time to heal.

“Wait ’til you see this place,” Dan said, leading him out of the room. “I’m coming to live with you.”

Brady glanced at him. He’d wanted to ask about Angel but feared doing so. He’d been disappointed that she wasn’t there when he woke or to fly with him to Tim’s Montana home. Then again, in his battered state, the last thing he wanted was to see how angry she still was for his betrayal. Even if the sweet woman had killed a man to save him, she was likely just as angry at him as she was at Tim.

Still exhausted, he sat next to Dan in the helo that transported them from the medical facility to the lush green foothills of the Rockies. It reminded him of his native Appalachia with the exception of the pines. The helo flew over Tim’s ranch and mansion, perched on a lake. Brady was impressed. He knew Tim to be wealthy, but he could fit a good chunk of his militia in the house alone.

The helo landed, and the two of them emerged. Jack ran from the house to greet them, nearly bowling Brady over.

“No, Jack,” Dan said.

Brady recovered his balance, once again amazed at just how weak his body was. Everything they hadn’t transplanted after the helo crash had been transplanted this time around. The nurse was right: he wouldn’t survive if something else went wrong.

Dan bypassed the mansion and led him towards the lake, where two forms stood on a large dock. His friend of many years stopped well out of earshot and touched the net implant.

“Elise. These two got some talking to do,” Dan said.

The blond woman turned, gaze falling to Brady. Lana turned with her. Her face glowed with health, and her dark eyes sparkled. He felt as if he’d never seen her before. She was happy and healthy, and it showed.

Elise trotted to them and joined Dan. Brady paid them little attention as he stepped forward, uncertain how he was going to be received. Lana watched him approach, the same uncertainty on her features. He stopped a safe distance away and was the first to break the awkward silence.

“You look good.”

“Thank you.” Her features turned pink. “How are you feeling?”

“Better than I look,” he replied. “How are you holding up?”

“Very well. I told Tim I was done with government service. This is my new home now.”

They studied one another for a long moment. Brady saw no anger in her face. He’d never thought he’d find a reason to leave the battlefield. Standing with his brave Angel, he couldn’t think of a reason he’d want to leave her side.

“I owe you a thank you,” he said. “For shooting Charlie. I know bloodshed isn’t your thing.”

“I couldn’t let you die. I thought I’d lost you twice before. Never again.” Her guardedness fell away suddenly, and Lana closed the distance between them. She flung her arms around him.

“Here I thought you’d still be angry,” he said, breathing in the scent of her hair.

“I’m so sorry I doubted you, Brady,” she whispered.

“You had every reason to doubt to me,” he replied. “I’m sorry I lied to you, Lana. It won’t happen again.”

“I feel like I know you so well and yet know nothing about you.”

“I’m not going anywhere. We’ve got all the time in the world.”

“You’ll stay?”

“I will.”

“And not because Tim is insisting on it?” she asked, pulling away enough to look up at him.

Brady smoothed the hair away from her face. He kissed her forehead lightly, marveling at the treasure he'd found when the world seemed ready to end.

“We’re in this together, remember?” he said softly.

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