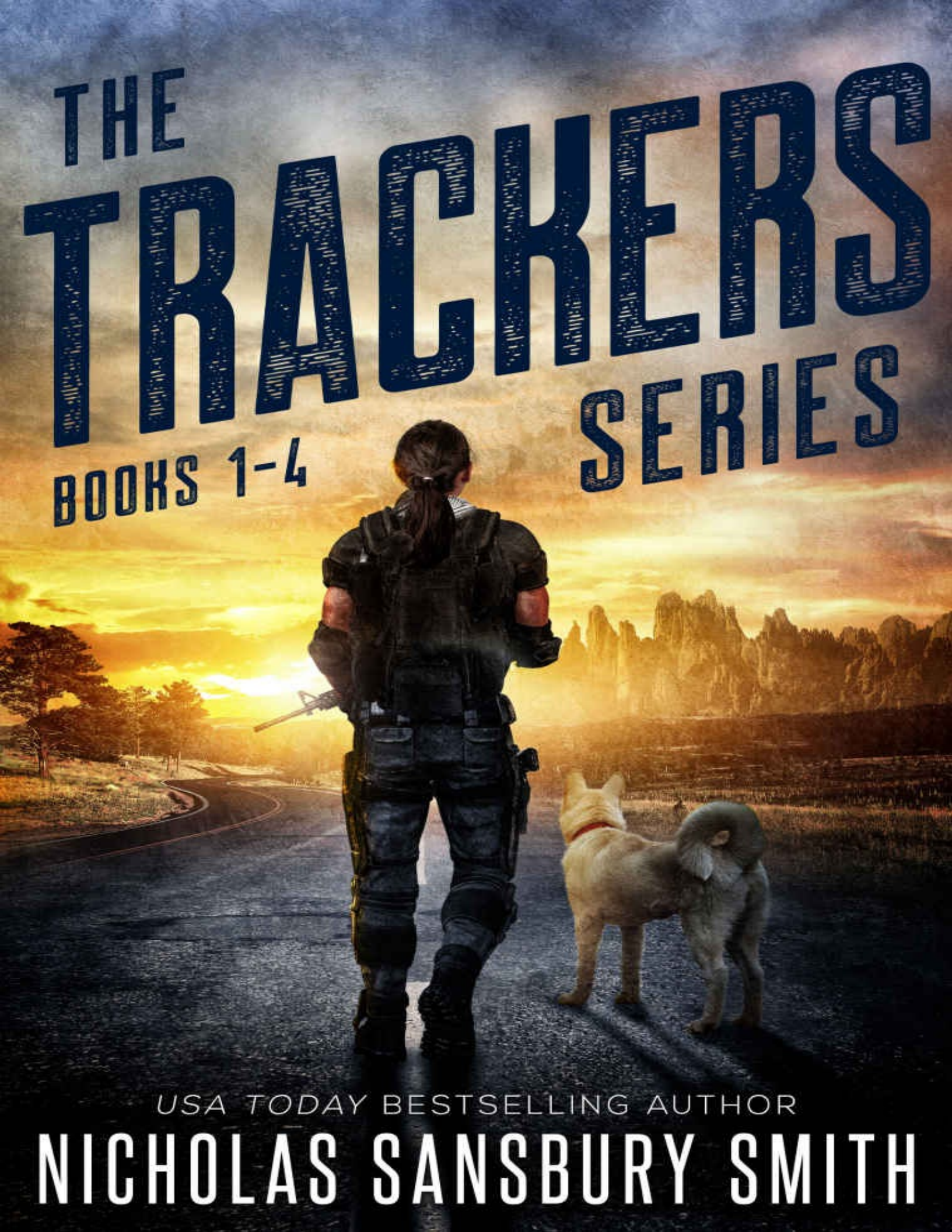
THE TRACKERS SERIES

BOOKS 1-4



USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

NICHOLAS SANSBURY SMITH

THE TRACKERS BOX SET

BOOKS 1-4

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Orbs II: Stranded
Orbs III: Redemption
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Contents

TRACKERS
— Prologue —
— 1 —
— 2 —
— 3 —
— 4 —
— 5 —
— 6 —
— 7 —
— 8 —
— 9 —
— 10 —
— 11 —
— 12 —
— 13 —
— 14 —
— 15 —
— 16 —
— 17 —
— 18 —
— 19 —
— 20 —
— 21 —
— 22 —
— 23 —
— 24 —

TRACKERS 2 ~ THE HUNTED
— Prologue —
— 1 —
— 2 —
— 3 —
— 4 —

— 5 —
— 6 —
— 7 —
— 8 —
— 9 —
— 10 —
— 11 —
— 12 —
— 13 —
— 14 —
— 15 —
— 16 —
— 17 —
— 18 —
— 19 —
— 20 —
— 21 —

TRACKERS 3 ~ THE STORM
— Prologue —
— 1 —
— 2 —
— 3 —
— 4 —
— 5 —
— 6 —
— 7 —
— 8 —
— 9 —
— 10 —
— 11 —
— 12 —
— 13 —
— 14 —
— 15 —
— 16 —
— 17 —

— 18 —
— 19 —

TRACKERS 4 ~ THE DAMNED
— 1 —
— 2 —
— 3 —
— 4 —
— 5 —
— 6 —
— 7 —
— 8 —
— 9 —
— 10 —
— 11 —
— 12 —
— 13 —
— 14 —
— 15 —
— 16 —
— 17 —
— 18 —
— 19 —
— 20 —
— 21 —
— 22 —
— 23 —
— Epilogue —

Books by Nicholas Sansbury Smith
About the Author

TRACKERS

TRACKERS

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For Chloe, Gerber, Bella, Ace, and all of my faithful furry companions that are always on a mission tracking down treats.

There is no hunting like the hunting of man, and those who have hunted armed men long enough and liked it, never care for anything else thereafter.

—Ernest Hemingway

Acknowledgements

Many people have a hand in the creation of this story. I'm grateful for all their help, criticism, and time. I'd like to start with the people that I wrote this book for—the readers. You are the reason I always try to write something fresh, and the reason I strive to always make each story better than—and different from—its predecessors. For those of you waiting on my other books, I thank you for your patience, and hope you enjoy *Trackers*.

Before you dive in, here's a little background on how this story came to be. In 2016 I was finishing up book five of the Extinction Cycle, and at that time, I thought *Extinction End* would be the "end" of the series. I decided to write a new type of story—a story without monsters, zombies, or aliens—about a different type of threat to our national security.

Rewind ten years. I'm sitting at my desk as a planner with the State of Iowa. It was there that I learned a good deal about a terrifying weapon known as an electromagnetic pulse (EMP). During a meeting with several agencies, I was shocked to learn there wasn't much being done to harden our utilities and critical facilities to protect against such a threat.

A few years later, I started working for Iowa Homeland Security and Emergency Management. I had several duties as a project officer, but my primary focus was on protecting infrastructure and working on the state hazard mitigation plan. During my tenure, I helped multiple communities apply for grants to build safe rooms in their schools or municipal buildings to protect from tornadoes. A few years later, I started working on grants that strengthened and hardened power lines in rural communities.

After several years of working in the disaster mitigation field, I learned of countless threats from natural disasters to manmade weapons, but the EMP, in my opinion, is the greatest of them all.

That brings us to today. We're living in tumultuous times, and our enemies are constantly looking for ways to harm us, both domestically and abroad. We already know that cyber security is a major concern for the United States. North Korea, China, and Russia have all been caught hacking into our systems. We also know other countries are experimenting with technology that can shut down portions of our grid. But imagine a weapon that could shut down our entire grid. The perfectly strategized EMP attack gives our enemies

an opportunity to do just that.

Before you start reading, I would like to take time to thank everyone who helped make this book a reality, starting with the Estes Park Police Department.

In the spring of 2016, my fiancée and I spent a week in Estes Park, Colorado, a place I had visited many times growing up. I wanted to show her this gorgeous tourist town that borders Rocky Mountain National Park, and I decided it would also make a good setting for a portion of *Trackers*.

The police department very graciously allowed me to tour their facilities and ride along with Officer Corey Richards. Department officers and staff explained police procedure for tracking lost people, and their operations and response to natural disasters. Captain Eric Rose, who is in charge of the Emergency Operations Center, described what they went through in the flood of 2013, when Estes Park was quite literally cut off from surrounding communities.

I've spent time with many law enforcement departments over my career in government, and I can tell you Estes Park has one of the finest and most professional staffs I've ever had the pleasure of meeting. Thank you to every officer for serving Estes Park and assisting with *Trackers*. I hope you find I did your community justice.

I'd also like to thank my literary agent, David Fugate, who has provided valuable feedback on each of my novels. The version you are reading today is much different than the manuscript I submitted, partly because of David's excellent feedback.

Next up is my editor, Erin Elizabeth Long. She has had a hand in every book I've written thus far. I won't lie—*Trackers* was a challenge for both of us, and Erin really encouraged me to continue pushing until I got the story right. Thanks, E. I appreciate you more than you know.

I also had a great group of beta readers that helped bring this story to life. You all know who you are. Thanks again for your assistance.

Trackers is more than just a post-apocalyptic thriller about the aftermath of an attack on American soil. It's meant to be a mystery as much as it is a thriller. There are a lot of EMP stories out there, but I wanted to write one that included new themes and incorporated elements of Cherokee and Sioux folk stories, which I encountered when obtaining a degree in American Indian Studies.

This story, like many works of fiction, will require some suspension of

belief, but hopefully not as much as my other science fiction stories. Any errors in this book rest solely with me, as the author is always the gatekeeper of the work.

In an interview several years ago, I was asked why I write. My response was that while my stories are meant to entertain, they are also meant to be a warning. *Trackers* could be a true story, and I hope our government continues to prepare and protect us from such a threat.

Captain Eric Rose of the Estes Park Police Department told me that he wasn't sure he was ready for a post-apocalyptic Estes Park. I'm not either. Let's all hope this story remains fiction.

With that said, I hope you enjoy the read, and as always, feel free to reach out to me on social media if you have questions or comments.

Best wishes,
Nicholas Sansbury Smith

Foreword

Dr. Arthur Bradley

Author of *Disaster Preparedness for EMP Attacks and Solar Storms* and *The Survivalist*.

When used conventionally, a nuclear warhead could destroy a city and cover the surrounding region in deadly radiation. Horrible to be sure, but at least it would be localized. When detonated in the atmosphere at the right altitude, however, that same warhead could generate an electromagnetic pulse (EMP) that would cause almost unimaginable harm to our nation.

The most significant effect of such an attack would be damage to the nation's electrical grid. Due to the interdependency of systems, the loss of electricity would result in a cascade of failures promulgating through every major infrastructure, including telecommunications, financial, petroleum and natural gas, transportation, food, water, emergency services, space operations, and government. Businesses, including banks, grocery stores, restaurants, and gas stations, would all close. Critical services such as the distribution of water, fuel, and food would fail. Emergency services, including hospitals, police, and fire departments, would perhaps remain operable a little longer using generators and backup systems, but they too would collapse due to limited fuel distribution, as well as the loss of key personnel abandoning their posts.

In addition to the collapse of national infrastructures, an EMP could cause widespread damage to transportation systems, such as aircraft, automobiles, trucks, and boats, as well as supervisory control and data acquisition hardware used in telecommunications, fuel processing, and water purification systems. Such an attack could also damage in-space satellites and significantly hamper the government's ability to provide a unified emergency response or even maintain civil order. Finally, many personal electronics could also be damaged, including our beloved computers and cell phones, as well as important health monitoring devices.

With the collapse of infrastructures, loss of commerce, and widespread damage to property, an EMP attack would introduce terrible financial ruin on

the nation. Consider that it is estimated that even a modest 1-2 megaton warhead detonated over the Eastern Seaboard could cause in excess of a trillion ($1,000,000,000,000) dollars in damage.

Testing done in the 1960s, such as Starfish Prime and the Soviet's Test 184, provided some idea of the potential damage, but weapons have become even more powerful and our world more technologically susceptible. No one really knows with certainty the extent of the damage that would be felt, but expert predictions range from catastrophic to apocalyptic. What is universally agreed upon is that the EMP attack allows for an almost unimaginable amount of damage to be done with nothing more than a single nuclear warhead and a missile capable of deploying it to the right altitude. Given that there are more than 128,000 such warheads and 10,000 such missiles in existence, it seems prudent to better understand and prepare for this very real and present danger.

What many do not know is that the U.S. has been openly threatened with an EMP strike by Russia, Iran, and North Korea. Leaderships of these countries have come to appreciate the truly asymmetric nature of such an attack. Consider that an EMP strike would be largely independent of weather, result in long-lasting infrastructure damage, and inflict a damage-to-cost ratio far greater than any conventional weapon, including a nuclear "dirty bomb." Worse yet is that our enemies would not limit themselves to a single EMP strike. Rather, they would detonate several warheads, carefully timed and positioned across the nation to achieve maximum damage.

Author Nicholas Sansbury Smith understands how an attack could cripple the United States. I first spoke with him when he was working for Iowa Homeland Security and Emergency Management in the disaster preparedness field. He reached out when he was writing a science fiction story about solar storms with some questions about my book, *Disaster Preparedness for EMP Attacks and Solar Storms*. Since then, Nicholas has also spent a great deal of time researching EMPs.

Trackers is a work of fiction, but many of the places in the story are real. Utilizing his background in emergency management and disaster mitigation, Nicholas has done an excellent job of describing a realistic geopolitical crisis that sets the stage for an EMP attack. The following story is a terrifying scenario in which brave men and women must adapt to a challenging new world—a world that we could see ourselves being thrust into. Part of me wishes Nicholas had continued writing purely science fiction stories about

aliens and government designed bio-weapons because *Trackers* is a novel that could become non-fiction.

— Prologue —

A six-man Marine force recon team boarded the Sikorsky UH-60 Black Hawk just after midnight. Staff Sergeant Sam “Raven” Spears sat inside the belly of the bird, smearing camouflage paint across his tan skin. After a ten-year career with the Marines, he was accustomed to slipping his combat gear over his muscular frame for missions at the ass-crack of dawn, but he wasn’t used to the Predators receiving orders directly from the President of the United States.

Raven turned to look out the window as the Black Hawk flew away from base under the cover of darkness. The pilots swooped low over flat fields on approach to the North Korean border.

His current enlistment with the Marines was over in a few weeks. He had hoped to buy land, start a business, and make a home in Estes Park, Colorado after over a decade of war, but the sight of the mine-studded fields and the presence of the Korean civilian in the troop hold made him question if that would happen now.

The Black Hawk was closing in on the demilitarized zone, and Raven could see why it was known as the most dangerous border in the world. To the north was one of the most oppressive and violent regimes on the planet. Barbed wire fences, landmines, and guard posts seemed like flimsy defenses against the totalitarian nation. Troops were stationed on both sides of the border, so close they could practically hit each other with hand grenades. The whole area was a tinderbox—and the Predators were being dropped right into the middle of it.

Shit was about to get very real, very fast.

The Marines with Raven all specialized in deep reconnaissance and were trained in search, seizure, and raid missions. He had a feeling the thin Korean man dressed in black sitting across the troop hold was going to help them

track a target. Sad eyes framed by crow's feet met his gaze for a moment before Raven looked away to the members of his team.

The men were all dressed in black-clad armor, fatigues, and helmets mounted with "four eyes" night vision optics. They carried suppressed M4s as well as M9s. Gunnery Sergeant Rodney Black, the middle-aged team lead, had been studying a map as the rotors thumped nearly silently overhead. He folded it and met the eyes of each man in turn with the cold gaze of a Marine that had seen the horrors of war for too long. He had a hard-on for rules and respect, which made Raven the least popular Marine on Team Predator.

"All right. Listen up, everyone, because we don't have much time," Black said in a firm, authoritative voice. "Our orders come from the Commander in Chief himself."

He reached into his vest and pulled out two pictures. The first showed a dark-haired young woman in a party dress smiling happily at the camera.

"This is Hannah Sarcone, or Lima 1," Black said. He passed the photo around for the men to look at. As the picture circulated, Black held up the other photo of a redhead wearing a peace sign t-shirt.

"This is Sarah Baker, or Lima 2. Both girls are being held at a small prison camp near the border. The best map we have of the area is shit, which is why Mr. Lee is here."

The photos reached Raven, and he studied the faces of the young women. They looked…nice. Sweet. How the hell had two pretty girls ended up in a North Korean prison?

Black pointed at the Korean man across from Raven. "Lee here used to work at the prison before he defected to South Korea."

Every helmeted head turned to Lee. Raven wasn't one to judge; his own past wasn't all roses and daffodils. But he could tell the rest of his team was unhappy about having a traitor in their midst, regardless of who he'd betrayed.

"What's so special about these girls?" asked Staff Sergeant Billy Franks.

Black scowled, even though the question was a good one. "They're American citizens and college students who went to Seoul for some human rights protest. They must've taken a wrong turn at the border, because Miss Baker and Miss Sarcone are now being held in a North Korea detention facility."

"Hang on just a sec, Gunny," Franks said. "*Sarcone*? Not any relation to Senator Mack Sarcone, is she?"

Black's hesitation was answer enough, but he admitted, "She's Senator Sarcone's granddaughter."

Raven could guess how the rest of the story went. Sarcone had pulled some strings, and now President Brandon Drake had authorized the Predators to drop in behind enemy lines to bring Sarcone's granddaughter home.

There was a skeptical snort from the other end of the troop hold, and Black held up a gloved hand to silence his men.

"I know what you're all thinking. But we're Marines, and our job isn't to question orders. Our job—our *duty*—is to extract our targets and bring them safely back to base. Got it?"

The Predators answered "Yes, Gunny!" in one voice.

Black held up the map he'd been studying earlier. "We believe Lima 1 and 2 are both being held here," he said, stabbing the laminated paper. "There are three buildings in the compound, but our intel points to this one."

"If we storm the wrong building, Senator Sarcone's going to be really pissed," Billy whispered.

Raven shook his head. He didn't have many friends in the Marines besides Billy. The young man had a sense of humor and could do a killer impersonation of Sergeant Black that consistently earned him and Raven both extra laps and push-ups.

"Lee has given us a rundown of the defenses. He numbers hostiles at least two dozen soldiers armed with RPGs, .50 cals, and whatever else they've been able to get their hands on. We'll take out the guard towers first with the M240 to clear a path. Then we split up and head in."

Black pointed at Raven. "Staff Sergeants Spears and Franks, you're with me on Alpha Team. Lee will guide us. Everyone else, you're on Bravo Team with Staff Sergeant Nixon as lead."

A few seats down, Nixon acknowledged the order with a nod of his large head. He looked ready to crush some North Korean skulls in his massive hands. Raven caught Billy's nervous gaze and tried to give him a reassuring smile. The kid had been on plenty of missions with the Predators, but nothing like this. Hell, none of them had ever done something this crazy.

Maybe I shoulda stayed on the Rez, Raven thought. At least back on the Rosebud Reservation, the biggest threat had been whatever damn fool his sister was dating.

"We don't believe the North Koreans know who Lima 1 is yet, otherwise they would have already moved the girls to a more secure facility. We've

only got one shot at this. If we fail, these young women will be dead or locked up in some Pyongyang rat hole, which could escalate this situation into an all-out shit storm. President Drake wants this done ASAP, which means speed is more important than stealth. Understood?”

Mr. Lee, who had not yet said a word during the briefing, ran a finger across his throat as Black looked at his men individually.

“They kill us all if we get caught,” Lee said in halting English.

“Our Korean friend is right,” Black said. “He’ll lead us inside. The plan is to get the girls and get out as quickly as possible. Bravo team has the C4, and Nixon will be responsible for planting it.”

“They have my brother,” Lee said. “Put him in prison when I leave. We will get him and American girls.”

Command must have promised the former prison guard that they’d rescue his brother. Raven didn’t have the heart to tell him that his brother was at the bottom of their to-do list.

“Gunny,” Franks said, “just curious, but what happens when the Supreme Leader finds out the US was responsible for this raid?”

Black knitted his brows and very firmly said, “He won’t. ’Cause there won’t be any evidence.”

Staff Sergeant Nixon nodded at that and patted the satchel holding the plastic explosives.

“Prepare for radio silence,” said one of the pilots over the comms. “We’re approaching the demilitarized zone.”

“Any questions?” Black asked.

Franks raised a hand tentatively, but he lowered it when Black looked away.

“That was one of those rhetorical-type questions,” Raven said with a chuckle. “Just stay close to me, rookie. I got your back.”

Final gear and weapons checks sounded as the Crew Chief, a corporal named Hendrickson, worked his way to the door. The dim light in the cargo bay was switched off, shrouding the team in complete darkness.

Raven listened to the rush of wind and low whoosh of rotors, waiting to flip his optics into position. In the pitch black of the early morning, he could only see outlines of the rolling mountains in the distance. There was a single light somewhere to the west. He had seen satellites images of the Korean Peninsula at night, and the whole country was almost completely dark north of the DMZ. It didn’t look much different as he gazed out from the Black

Hawk.

He flipped his optics into position as Corporal Hendrickson grabbed the M240. A green-hued view of the North Korean countryside stretched across Raven's field of vision. In the distance, nestled at the base of the mountains, was their target. Four guard towers flanked the trio of buildings, and a skirt of barbed wire fences surrounded the prison. For a North Korean facility, it was on the small side. Raven hoped that meant fewer armed guards.

The pilots dipped lower on approach, the rush of cold wind filling the belly of the Black Hawk. Raven had enough experience under his belt to know this mission was risky in the worst way. They didn't have backup just blocks away like he'd had in Fallujah or Baghdad. It was just the Predators against a small army of North Koreans that could call in MiG fighter jets at any moment.

Raven desperately wanted a cigarette to calm his nerves. Fortunately he didn't have much longer to contemplate the odds they were facing. The pilots began their approach, and Hendrickson angled the M240 toward the buildings.

Black gave the order with a quick flash of his hand, and the chief opened fire on the first guard tower. The bark of the 7.62mm rounds reverberated through the troop hold. Tracer rounds lanced into the cinder blocks as the pilots circled. An explosion burst from the tower, blowing it to rubble, and the chief quickly roved the big gun toward the next tower.

The next North Korean guard got off a single shot before the 7.62mm rounds punched through his body. He tumbled over the side and plummeted to the ground.

"Clear!" the chief said.

Within seconds, the pilots were lowering the bird to the ground just inside the barbed wire fences. Even before Black signaled them, the Marines were lined up and ready to jump out. Raven scanned the terrain as he waited for his turn. The closest building was two stories of brick with multiple windows on the second floor. The other two structures were just single-story concrete blocks. About two hundred feet separated each building. Barrels, crates, and several vehicles provided blind spots for enemy contacts to hide behind. A single hostile came bursting out of the middle building, pulling his pants up as he stumbled out into the cold night.

Staff Sergeant Nixon, the first Marine out of the troop hold, took a knee and fired a burst from his suppressed M4 directly into the surprised guard's

chest. The man slammed into the building, leaving a streak of blood as he slumped to the ground.

“Get movin’, Spears!” Black said.

Raven jumped out and focused on the structure where the girls were being held. The second his boots hit the dirt, he was running toward it at a hunch. Franks kept low to the left with Black and Lee following right behind them. To the right, the men of Bravo team fanned out. The Black Hawk rose back into the air, and Hendrickson opened up on the other two guard towers across the compound.

Raven shouldered his M4 and flitted the muzzle over his fire zone. His view transformed into two-dimensional canvas as he moved. Scanning it systematically, he looked for hostiles. A North Korean flag whipped from a pole nearby. Raven moved to the next section of the grid. To his left were several trenches dug along the fence.

“Contacts,” Franks said. Lee dropped to his belly as Black took a knee ahead of them and fired on two North Korean guards that had come running out of the front door of the first building. Both soldiers dropped, crying out as the lethal shots tore through their bodies.

The crack of automatic gunfire sounded from the left. Raven hit the dirt as rounds split the air he had been occupying seconds before. A cool breeze that reeked of animal manure drifted over him in the respite. The moment of calm before the tempest was shattered by another flurry of gunfire that seemed to come from all directions.

Raven crawled to a boulder for cover, more bullets forming a neat halo around his body. Somehow he made it to the rock without taking a round.

The shots had come from the trenches. Stupid to look away before he cleared the area. That was the kind of mistake that would get him killed, and he was *not* going to be one of those ironic cautionary tales other Marines told each other.

He could almost hear his squad telling the story to the guy who would take Raven’s place: *Poor bastard was two weeks away from going home.*

He waited a few moments for the gunfire to stop. Behind him, most of Alpha and Bravo teams advanced toward the third building, while two Marines held security to fire at contacts outside. The Black Hawk was circling, Hendrickson training his M240 on enemy hostiles out of view from the ground. Across the compound, the other two guard towers were silent.

Raven rolled away from the rock and propped his rifle up with an arm,

aiming in the direction of the shots. He flipped up his optics with his other hand to scan the area with naked eyes.

Where the hell had the shooter disappeared to?

Shots erupted from behind him, and the sound of suppressed fire answered.

“Hostile down,” reported Black.

The target Raven was tracking fired again, and a bullet kicked up the dirt to his side. He rolled to the left as more shots pecked at the ground.

There was a brief reprieve, and Raven scanned the area where he had seen the muzzle flashes. He squeezed off a quick three-round burst, followed by another, trying to draw them out. Someone yelled in Korean, and another soldier replied with a shout.

A beat later, an explosion bloomed from the trench, and a scream rang out. Raven flipped his optics back into position and covered his helmet as dirt rained down on him. When he looked up, Billy was running over to him. He knelt and put a hand on Raven’s back.

“I just saved your ass, brother,” he panted, reaching under Raven’s arms to help him up. “Hope those Korean sons of bitches enjoyed the gift I sent them.”

“Thanks,” Raven said, managing a nod. He looked over his friend’s shoulder at the two-story building when he saw a flicker of motion in a window on the second floor. Down below, a North Korean guard missing an arm crawled out, still screaming. While Raven was momentarily distracted, the window on the second floor shattered. Billy’s smirk was erased by a bullet through his chin. Hot blood splattered Raven’s face.

More rounds rocked Billy’s body before he even hit the dirt. Raven felt one whizz by his helmet as he crawled back to the rock for cover.

“Billy!” Raven shouted. He gritted his teeth, shock turning to anger. Grabbing his M4, he popped his helmet up to look for the bastard that had killed his friend. A muzzle flash came from the window, and a split-second later a round slammed into the rock, forcing Raven back down.

“Spears, what the hell is happening back there?” Black said over the channel.

“They got Billy and I’m pinned down! There’s a sniper at—”

Another shot pushed him to the dirt. He lay on his back, staring up at the sky. Green tracers danced across the night as Raven waited for his opportunity. His no-good father hadn’t given him much, but the old man had taught Raven to push his emotions deep down, where the enemy couldn’t use

them against him. He was calm now, patiently waiting for his moment to strike back.

“I’m heading in,” Black said over the comms. He ordered Bravo to follow him into the building. The unspoken message was this: Raven and Billy were expendable. The mission was to extract two high-value targets; grunts like them were just collateral damage.

Raven jumped to his feet and fired off several shots at the building. Then he sprinted toward a barrel for cover and a better vantage. He was fast, but not fast enough.

The sniper popped back up at the window and fired a round that hit Raven in his chest, jerking him backward with such force that he crashed to the ground a few feet from the safety of the barrel. His rifle hit the dirt to his left.

Despite the pain, he reached out, and then pulled his hand back as rounds slammed into the dirt. He abandoned the gun and crawled over to the barrel. There was no pain, and Raven didn’t feel any blood when he felt for the wound. His vest had taken the brunt of the impact, but he couldn’t seem to get enough air.

Gasping, Raven looked back at Billy’s ruined body. A shot pinged off the top of the barrel as he pulled his M9. He took in a long breath, and then pushed himself up, squeezing off two shots at the North Korean sniper. There was a shout over the comms about an RPG, but Raven continued firing. He found his target on the fourth squeeze.

Just as the sniper slumped out of the window, a projectile streaked overhead and slammed into the building. The shockwave from the blast hit Raven like a tsunami, lifting him off his feet. He landed hard, the little air remaining in his lungs pushed out from the sucker punch of the blast.

Pain rushed through his body and stars burst before his vision. He could feel the rush of blood singing in his ears. Everything hurt. Even his eyeballs seemed to be on fire.

His vision faded, red rolling in like a bloody tide.

Voices called out in the distance.

“Spears! Where the hell are you, Spears?”

Head pounding, Raven tried to blink away the pain. A tremor rumbled under his body, another explosion rocking the prison compound. He managed to bring his pistol up as he squinted at several figures making their way toward him.

He lowered the gun when he saw it was Sergeant Black and Staff Sergeant

Nixon. The men were shielding two girls, both of them bruised, dirty, and wide-eyed with terror. Lima 1 stumbled and fell, and Nixon picked her up. He helped guide the girls to the Black Hawk that was hovering a few hundred feet away while Black remained behind. He pointed at Billy's body and yelled orders to the other two members of Bravo team. The men rushed over to grab the corpse.

A shout came across the prison yard. "Wait!" Lee shouted. "My brother!"

He ran over and grabbed Black's arm, tugging on it and trying to drag him back to the prison block. The Gunny pulled his M9 in a slow, mechanical motion, and calmly fired a bullet in Lee's skull. The man fell to his knees and then slumped on his side like a pretzel.

Raven sucked in another gasp of air as Black ran over to him, half expecting a bullet in his own skull next.

"Why?" Raven gasped. "Why did you—"

He flinched as Black reached down, but the big man was only trying to help Raven to his feet.

"Why?" Raven repeated as he limped toward the bird with the Gunny's assistance. Black raised his pistol and fired at a burning North Korean soldier who was running toward them. His flaming body hit the dirt, smoke rising into the night sky.

"Orders, Spears," Black growled. "Someone had to take the blame for this, and it couldn't be Uncle Sam. We don't want to start a war."

— 1 —

18 Months Later

Police Chief Marcus Colton knew the girl was probably dead.

Standing at the trailhead to Mount Ypsilon and Lawn Lake, navy blue police coat zipped up to his chin, Colton took off his aviator sunglasses to scrutinize the Rocky Mountains. His instincts told him the girl he was looking for was somewhere out there, inside the vast sea of shifting green and brown subalpine forests. But the dull ache in his gut also told him she was no longer alive.

Above the spruce-fir tree line, the peaks of Ypsilon, Fairchild, and the rest of the Mummy Range appeared to have been airbrushed with snow. A crimson sunset illuminated the interior of the gray clouds drifting over the jagged summits. If it weren't for the motion of the clouds, he might have thought he was looking at a painting.

It was a Friday in early September, but Rocky Mountain National Park was experiencing lower than normal temperatures. Colton had lived in the quaint tourist town of Estes Park, Colorado, his entire life. He was used to the cold, so when he shivered, he knew it wasn't from the wind.

Little Melissa Stone. The six-year-old daughter of his friend Rex Stone had been missing for three days now. Each second it became more likely that she was dead. Especially now, with the temperatures plummeting.

Melissa had last been seen when the school bus dropped her off on Prospect Avenue. A half dozen of his officers and a pack of volunteers one hundred strong were combing the foothills around Prospect Mountain.

Colton's cell phone vibrated in his pocket. It had been ringing all night. He was expecting to see a call from one of his officers or Mayor Andrews, but it was his wife, Kelly. She was waiting at home with their seven-year-old

daughter, Risa. After taking in a breath tinged with the clean scent of cedar, Colton swiped the screen and brought it to his ear.

“Hey, honey.”

“I haven’t heard from you for hours,” Kelly said.

“I’m at the Ypsilon trailhead waiting for Raven. Weather looks like it’s about to take a turn for the worse. How are you? How is Risa?”

“I’m fine. Risa is okay, but she keeps asking when you’re going to find Melissa. I’m about to put her to bed. We had some soup, and we miss you. When will you be home?”

“It could be a while. Raven is an hour late.”

There was a pause, and Colton knew what it meant. His wife was his best friend and biggest supporter. He could read her like a book after twenty years of marriage.

“What are you thinking?” he asked.

“Do you really trust Raven? I mean, you’ve arrested him twice.”

“He’s just a troubled young man. You know he’s had a hard time since he got back from service overseas. That’s why I agreed to drop the DUI charge if he helped me find Sarah Kirkland earlier this year.”

“But this isn’t just some case where a kid wandered off, is it?”

Colton sighed. His wife was smart. Much smarter than him. “I’m afraid not. I got a tip that brought me up the mountain tonight, but that’s all I can say.”

“People forget how dangerous it can be living out here.”

“Ain’t that the truth? Just last week I got a call from the ranger station because a tourist was letting his toddler pet an elk. The guy thought it was some kind of horse.”

“Idiot,” Kelly said.

There was a brief silence, and in that moment he was back at home with his wife and daughter. But he was more than a loving husband and father; he was a soldier and a lawman. Someone had to be out here to protect the sheep from the wolves.

“Raven’s the best tracker in these parts,” Colton said. “He found Sarah before it was too late. Hopefully he can help me find Melissa, too.”

“He just better get his butt out there soon. I don’t want you on the mountain by yourself.”

“I can take care of myself; you know that better than anyone. Now go give Risa a kiss for me. I’ll be home as soon as I can.”

“Okay, I love you, Marcus. Be safe.”

“I love you.” Colton paused to look at the rainclouds. Normally he didn’t talk to his wife about work, but this felt different. “Kelly, you lock the doors, okay? And sleep with your Glock tonight.”

“It’s that bad?”

“I hope not, but better safe than sorry.”

Colton tucked his aviator glasses in his pocket and considered promising that he would bring the girl home, but after two tours in Afghanistan and ten years of service as police chief, he knew things didn’t always end up okay.

He put the cell phone back in his pocket. What he hadn’t told his wife was that he had called Sam “Raven” Spears out of desperation. Raven had developed some bad habits and made some very poor choices since coming home from the Marines, but the man was the best hunter and guide in the area. It was his tracking skills that Colton needed. Raven was Colton’s last hope to find Melissa in these woods.

On the horizon, the fiery glow of the sunset retreated, and the mountains swallowed the final rays of light. Wind gusted through the blanket of pine trees, swaying their branches. The cacophony of whispering ponderosas, spruce, and Douglas firs rose into a noise that sounded like the rapids of the Fall River. A passenger plane flew around the no-fly zone of Rocky Mountain National Park, heading southwest toward Denver. He didn’t see many of those out here. The lights blinked as it crossed over the mountains.

The growl of an engine shattered the peace. Headlights cut across the road below. A mid-seventies model Jeep Cherokee raced up the path, a trail of dust and exhaust kicking up into the air.

Colton looked at his watch and snorted. It was almost six o’clock. He grabbed his Colt AR-15 with an ACOG scope and, leaning against his truck, waited for Raven to park.

A raindrop pelted Colton on the shoulder. The storm was rolling in from the west. He cursed their luck and opened the truck door to retrieve his poncho. It was going to be a long, cold, wet night.

Raven pulled into the lot. The Jeep was over forty years old, but even in the faint light he could see there wasn’t a spot of rust in the gunmetal paint. He’d outfitted the truck with oversized off-road tires and a front grill guard with a winch.

“Chief,” Raven said, opening his door and stepping onto the asphalt. He walked to the passenger door and let out his dog, Creek. The Akita jumped

out and looked up at Colton with dark amber eyes surrounded by white fur. Then he ran to the side of the road and lifted up a leg.

"Nice Jeep," Colton said, making an effort to sound friendly.

Raven grinned and patted the hood. "A Cherokee for a Cherokee."

"Thought you were Sioux."

"Half and half," Raven said with a shrug.

Colton grunted. That was enough small talk. "Wasted a good hour of sunlight," he said. "Now we're going to be out here in the rain."

"An hour wouldn't have changed that," Raven said. He swung a pack around his shoulders.

"You do realize why I called you out here, right?"

Raven rummaged in the back of the Jeep for more gear. "The missing girl," he said without turning around.

"Her name is Melissa," Colton said. "The faster we get moving, the faster we find her."

Raven tightened his backpack over his shoulders and then put his long hair into a ponytail. He flashed the dimpled grin that had half the girls in town swooning. Unlike Colton, Raven had managed to serve without picking up any major scars on his face, and he looked nearly a decade younger than his thirty-three years.

"I have some questions," Raven said. "First off, isn't this outside your jurisdiction? Where is that guy that helped us with the Kirkland case? Ranger Fry?"

"Ranger Field," Colton replied. "He's checking leads farther up Trail Ridge Road."

"All right. So what else can you tell me, Chief?" Raven lit a cigarette, took a drag, and exhaled through his nostrils. "I had to cancel a date with a sweet little tourist to be here."

"Melissa was last seen getting off the school bus at her stop on Prospect Avenue, but a local named Bill Catcher thinks he spotted her riding in a blue F-150 pickup truck with a South Dakota license plate up Curry Road near Prospect Mountain. He described the driver as a middle-aged man with tan skin and a shaved head. Bill's a paranoid guy, but he has a good memory."

"Son of a bitch," Raven said. "That sounds like the same truck my sister Sandra saw speed away from her house a few weeks back. My niece, Allie, said some guy was trying to talk to her from the truck."

Colton clenched his jaw. "What? Why didn't Sandra report it?"

“I don’t know,” he said defensively. “Guess we don’t trust cops.”

Colton ignored the dig and pressed on with his questions. “What did this guy say to Allie?”

“She was too shaken to even tell Sandra what the dude looked like. Why, do you think it could be the same person?”

“I’d be willing to bet on it.”

Raven took another long drag to consider the situation.

“Some campers came out early two nights ago due to the rain. They saw a blue F-150 with a South Dakota license plate parked here at midnight. When my officers interviewed them, they said they remembered seeing a man and a girl about Melissa’s age heading up the trail. It could be nothin’ or it could be somethin’.”

“Well, shit, let’s get going, then.” Raven whistled at Creek, and the dog trotted over.

“When you finish that coffin nail, we’ll get moving,” Colton said. Raven wasn’t the only tracker out here tonight. Colton knew a thing or two about hunting people, and smoking was a rookie mistake that would tell anyone out there they were coming.

“I was going to put it out. Stop worrying, Chief.” Raven flicked the cigarette on the ground and kicked dirt over it. “Now that I think about it, I got a few more questions. What else do you know about our chase? You think he’s armed?”

“I’d bet on him being armed and dangerous.”

“So you don’t mind if I bring my crossbow and hatchets?”

Colton shook his head and cradled his AR-15 across his chest. Raven hurried back to his gear. He picked up a leather belt in the shape of an X that held two sheathed hatchets. He slung it over his back and buckled the clasp across his chest. Then he retrieved his crossbow with mounted scope.

“That truck still around?” Raven clicked on his flashlight and angled it at the parking lot.

“No, I already looked.”

Raven clicked the light off and placed it in a pocket. “You got a piece of Melissa’s clothing?”

Colton threw on his poncho and then reached into his backpack. Digging through the contents, he found the plastic evidence bag containing the pink mitten Rex Stone had given him.

Raven took it and crouched down in front of Creek, letting the Akita get

the scent, while Colton explained the plan. They would head up Mount Ypsilon trail to Lawn Lake, where the campers had reported seeing their chase.

"You think he might have backtracked along the falls?" Raven asked. "Maybe we should split up, cover more ground."

Colton clamped down on the inside of his cheek. If Raven was going to second-guess every decision, they'd never make it out of the parking lot.

"We're going to Lawn Lake, Raven."

"All right then, Chief," Raven said with a cocky grin. "Let's get to work."

***

Major Nathan "Gambler" Sardetti felt a smile coming on as the gates to Buckley Air Force Base opened. An MP threw up a salute as Nathan drove out onto the open road.

"Finally," he said. He cracked open a Red Bull and took a long swig as he sped away. After months of training and working six days a week, he was completely exhausted. He was going to need an entire pack of energy drinks to keep him awake during the drive to Empire, Colorado. His nephew, Ty, was at the Easterseals camp there, and Nathan had planned a surprise trip to visit the boy.

As soon as Nathan pulled onto the highway, he clicked the phone symbol on his steering wheel.

"Call Charlize Montgomery," he said.

The ringtone chimed from the speakers. Nathan downed half the can of Red Bull as he waited for his sister to pick up. In a few hours he was going to be in the mountains, breathing in the cedar air while pushing Ty's wheelchair down the path around the crystal clear lake. He couldn't think of a better way to enjoy his few precious days off.

A firm yet feminine voice emerged from the speakers. "Good evening, Major."

Nathan smiled. "Good evening, Senator. How's D.C.?"

"Gridlocked, per usual. How's my favorite little brother?"

"I'm your only little brother," Nathan said, chuckling at their familiar banter. "And I'm looking forward to spending some time with Ty. Thought I would call and ask if you had any special requests."

Her voice grew serious. “Just one: Don’t tire him out too much. He slept an entire day after last time you visited him.”

Nathan nodded as if she was here to see him. “I promise. And for the record, last time I just took him to the beach. He had his life jacket on the whole time. You know I would never let anything happen to him.”

There was a pause in the conversation, and Nathan knew they were both thinking the same thing. That when it had really counted, neither of them had been able to protect Ty. He’d lost the use of his legs from the car wreck that had killed his father, Richard. Charlize had never forgiven herself for not being able to save them, no matter how many times Nathan tried to convince his sister it wasn’t her fault.

“Hey, I promise not to get him over-excited this time,” Nathan said. “No candy, no soda, and no wild off-road wheelchair races. Cross my heart.”

Charlize laughed. “He’s going to be so surprised when he sees you.”

It had been a long time since Nathan had heard his sister laugh. His smile widened as he eyed the box on the passenger seat.

“I’ve got a little something for him.”

“Oh?” Charlize said. “I sure hope it’s not fireworks again.”

“You worry too much, Senator.”

There was another pause, longer than the first.

“That’s all I’ve been doing lately,” she said. All trace of jocularity had vanished from her voice. “Things aren’t good here, Nathan. We’ve got major problems domestically, but honestly my biggest fear is with North Korea. President Drake has taken a hardnosed approach against Pyongyang. There is a lot of tension at the demilitarized zone, especially after news of a top secret raid leaked.”

“Raid? I haven’t heard anything.”

“That’s why they call it ‘top secret,’ Nathan,” she said quietly.

He knew better than to ask questions. “I have a few buddies stationed at the border. I heard they’re being told to prepare for a potential attack.”

A sigh came from the other end of the line. “If Pyongyang decides to invade the south, the twenty-eight thousand troops we have stationed there would be nothing more than a speed bump to the million-strong North Korean army.”

Nathan shook his head. “Elections are just a few years away. Maybe what we need right now is President Charlize Montgomery.”

“No way. President Drake will definitely run for a second term, and when

mine is up, I'm coming back to Denver. It's time for me to be a full-time mother again. Besides, I'll be closer to you and can live vicariously through your missions. I sure do miss being up there."

"I wish you'd reconsider running again for your Senate seat. Ty needs you—but so does our country."

"Thanks. It means a lot, but I also miss…" Her words trailed off, but Nathan knew what she was about to say.

"I know. Richard was a great guy. But you're the best mom who also happens to be a fighter pilot and the most superb Senator that I've ever met."

"I'm probably the *only* one of those you've ever met. Since we're throwing out compliments, did you know you're a great uncle, and that you're shaping up to be a damn good pilot yourself? Might even break some of my records."

"You set the bar pretty high."

The sound of rustling came from the other line. "Hold on a second," she said.

Nathan took another slug of Red Bull as he waited. Before he could swallow, Charlize came back online.

"I'm sorry Nathan, but I have to cut this short. My chief of staff is buzzing in. I'll touch base with you tomorrow, okay?"

"Roger that. Love you, Sis."

"Love you, too, and thanks again for doing this. Means a lot to me and Ty."

"You bet. Stay safe and talk to you soon." He hung up and downed the rest of the can. It was good to chat with his sister, something that seemed to happen less and less now since she had been elected to Congress and he had been promoted. At thirty-one he was young for a major, but he had earned it.

He turned on the radio to the local NPR station just in time for the news.

"Good evening," came a deep, smooth voice of a rehearsed orator. "Tonight we bring you a fresh report from the Korean peninsula. Pyongyang has released a statement vowing that if more US warships approach they will consider it an act of war."

"Jesus," Nathan said. Charlize was right; things were crazy over in Korea. He went to switch the station when his Bluetooth buzzed. His heart hammered when he saw it was Colonel Howard. Clicking the call button, he prepared for bad news and said, "This is Major Sardetti."

"Major, I hope you haven't gone far because I need you to return to base."

Nathan closed his eyes for a single second and cursed in his mind. "No, sir.

I’m just a few miles out.”

“Good. Get your ass back here. We need you and Mutt in the sky. The governor has ordered a few fighters for a CAP.” Howard paused, then added, “It’s just a precautionary CAP, I’m sure, but I’d like you up there.”

“Understood, sir. I’m on my way back.” He punched the off button on his steering wheel again and cursed. Why couldn’t he just get one weekend? The 120th was always ready, and Nathan was proud to be part of the squadron. He just hoped Colonel Howard was right and this was nothing more than a precautionary combat air patrol.

Nathan checked his rearview mirror and waited for a truck to pass him on the left. Then he turned on his blinker and made a sharp U-turn through the median. The Jeep jerked up and down over the rocky ground, and the box containing the model F-16 he’d bought for Ty crashed onto the passenger floor with a rattle of broken pieces.

“Damn,” Nathan whispered. His weekend was not getting off to a good start—and the sight of the destroyed plane didn’t exactly inspire confidence.

— 2 —

Raven Spears liked Chief Colton about as much as he liked his old Gunnery Sergeant Rodney Black. Both men had a strong prejudice against anyone who challenged the rules. Funny enough, neither of them seemed to like Raven much, either.

Guess that's why your best friend is a dog, he thought. Creek was always loyal and never talked shit. He was bolting up the trail ahead, navigating the rocky terrain with grace. He stopped only to check for a scent. Raven didn't bother whistling after him. He enjoyed giving the dog his freedom, especially since Colton was keeping him on such a tight leash.

Raven drew in a long breath and reminded himself that although things weren't great, he was lucky to be alive at all. It seemed like a lifetime ago that he had escaped the Rez by joining the Marines, and after ten years of fighting wars in foreign lands, he'd come to quiet Estes Park to rebuild his life and forget the things he had seen and done abroad. Using his meager savings and a loan from a full-blooded Sioux named Nile Redford that everyone called Mr. Redford, Raven had adopted Creek and purchased property to start a hunting and fishing business. It was amazing how much tourists would pay to hunt with an authentic Native American guide.

The man trekking through the forest in front of Raven had helped bring his dream of a normal life to a crashing halt by arresting Raven for poaching. His business was shut down, and the court costs and fines had eaten up his remaining savings. Now Raven was behind on his payments to Mr. Redford. He was the type of loan shark that charged blood instead of interest, and he was starting to get impatient. That's when the drinking got worse, and when the nightmares of the things he had tried to forget started coming back every night.

The musical rush of water pulled him back to the trail. To the west was the Roaring River, which originated at Crystal Lake. From there it flowed through Lawn Lake and down the valley to where it met Fall River. This trail was one of Raven's favorite spots in the park.

Fifteen minutes into the trek, he spotted the brown, rocky embankments framing the river. A fence of aspen trees grew out of the steep inclines. He stopped at the edge of a dirt path, cautiously making his way to the side to angle his flashlight over the edge. Fifty feet below, the clear water rushed around and over boulders, polishing them smooth.

Thirty-four years ago, the dam at Lawn Lake had broken and emptied thirty million cubic feet of water into the valley and Estes Park. It had resulted in three deaths. Since then, the walls had continued to erode, pulling more of the montane forest into the valley.

Raven moved away from the ledge and continued up the trail, stepping over fallen trees and around rocks covered in moss and orange growths that reminded him of whale barnacles. The loose dirt and rocks were already slippery from the rain, and the canopy of ponderosa, spruce, and Douglas firs provided little protection. He directed his light back to the ridgeline above the Roaring River, keeping it in sight.

Colton trekked ahead with his AR-15 lowered toward the ground. Tonight he was acting like Raven's buddy, but they weren't friends and that wasn't going to change. He was here to collect a paycheck and hopefully find the kidnapped girl. If it was the same man that had scared his niece, then all the better. Raven had an arrow with the bastard's name on it.

He tightened his grip on his custom TenPoint Venom crossbow. Holding the weapon was reassuring. Not as reassuring as his old automatic M4, but the Marines didn't let him bring that gun home. He preferred his crossbow to a semi-automatic rifle on a hunt; not because it was more powerful, but because it was quiet.

The grumble of thunder broke in the distance, reminding Raven he had other problems beyond Mr. Redford and their chase. A dozen people died from lightning strikes out here every year, and a strong wind could also kill whatever scent Creek had picked up. The dog had reappeared on the trail ahead, his muzzle wet and covered with flecks of leaves.

"You got something, boy?" Raven asked. The dog sat on his hind legs, and Raven bent down next to him, cradling his crossbow in his arms.

Creek looked up and snorted. That was Creek speak for *Yeah, dummy*. The

dog knew over one hundred commands and was far smarter than any bomb-sniffing dog Raven had worked with. He could do everything but speak—which was good, because sometimes he felt like even the dog was judging him.

"Storm's getting worse," Colton said. He stopped on the side of the trail and looked skyward. Lightning webbed over the mountain peaks. Clapping thunder came a few seconds later, punctuating his words.

The radio on Colton's hip crackled, and he plucked it off his belt. "Colton here. Go ahead."

"Chief, it's Don reporting in. Trail's cold out here. Dogs don't have anything. You havin' any luck on Ypsilon?"

Colton exchanged a glance with Raven.

"Creek's picked up a scent," Raven said. "Too early to tell what it's from."

Colton brought the radio to his lips. "Maybe, Don. I'll report back later. Stand by."

"Copy that. Good luck."

Another torrent of electricity snaked across the horizon. Colton went to put the radio back on his hip but hesitated. His lips moved as if he was counting.

The next boom of thunder shook the marrow in Raven's bones. The storm was definitely getting worse.

Colton brought the radio receiver back to his lips. "Don, send everyone home for the night. Weather's getting too bad to risk it."

Raven pulled his Seattle Mariners hat from his bag and pulled it over his hair as the sky opened up. Sheets of rain hit the army of ponderosas at an angle, the patter echoing all around.

"Copy that, Chief," Don replied. "See you back at the station."

Colton attached the radio back on his belt.

"Keep away from the trees," Colton said. "The lightning—"

"I *know*," Raven interrupted. "You want to turn back?"

Colton frowned and then said, "No. I can't look Rex Stone in the eye if I didn't do everything I could to find his daughter."

Raven nodded and then patted his dog. "Show us. Find her."

Creek took off running through the woods. His nose was remarkable. Even in the rain, Creek was working a scent, following what Raven hoped was Melissa's trail. They continued along the path for another thirty minutes, jogging to keep up with the Akita. Colton didn't say much, and Raven was fine with that. He'd grown up in a household that was almost completely

silent. On the rare occasion when his parents had spoken to him, his sister, or each other, it had usually been with raised voices.

He should have known the quiet was too good to last.

“You did good work on the Kirkland case,” Colton said.

“It was either find the girl or go to jail,” Raven said.

That effectively killed the conversation.

Creek reemerged on the trail ahead. He jumped over a fallen log, wagged his tail, and took off again. By the time Raven angled his flashlight into the forest, the Akita’s white tail was vanishing through a cluster of ash trees.

Raven pointed and signaled. Colton was already on the move. The men hurried over the terrain, careful not to slip on the wet bed of pine needles and loose dirt. Rain tore through the canopy overhead. Raven’s coat and pants were waterproof, but his gloves weren’t. They were already drenched, and his fingers were freezing. He never went into the wilderness without the proper gear. This goddamn debt had him on edge.

Light as a feather. You’re light as a feather, he thought. It was the motto that always grounded Raven. He put every worry out of his mind and focused on the tracking. They were still a good three miles from Lawn Lake.

The forest became a two-dimensional canvas, and Raven divided the terrain horizontally into thirds like he had learned in the Marines. His eyes were accustomed to systematically scanning the canvas from left to right, right to left. If he detected any movement, he would stop to search.

Tonight the canvas was almost pitch black. The beam from his flashlight illuminated a narrow path through the dense woods. He ran and ran, needle-covered branches reaching out to grab him. A bird called out in the distance, a sign that Creek was too close to its nest.

Lightning streaked overhead and thunder clapped a few seconds later, echoing over and over through the valley. The chatter of raccoons followed as the forest came alive around Raven. He was completely in tune with his surroundings, at one with nature. He sniffed the air, checking it for signs of campers or their chase. There was no scent of cooking or smoke, only the fresh smell of rain and evergreens.

The canvas transformed the farther up they moved. A massive storm, far worse than this one, had blown through the forest a few weeks prior. The straight-line winds had taken down thousands of young or unhealthy trees. Beams from their flashlights danced over the debris still scattered across the path like a battlefield. The trees that had perished would take months to rot

and return to the earth.

Creek reappeared on the trail and then turned and bolted into the woods. Colton flashed an advance signal after the dog. Normally Raven would have marked where they left the trail, but he didn't have time.

Crossbow dangling from the strap on his chest, he put his flashlight in his mouth and grabbed a tree branch to pull himself up a small embankment. Colton was already a hundred feet ahead and moving at a good clip.

Raven jogged after him, branches from fallen trees reaching up and cutting his legs. He was careful to keep his light low. A beam into the sky would warn the chase that they were being hunted. He ran until his lungs felt like they were going to pop. A Marine never stopped to rest, but Raven wasn't in the same shape he had been eighteen months ago. Of course, he also hadn't smoked half a pack a day—or drunk a six-pack every night—back then, either.

Colton stopped ahead, scanning the forest with his AR-15 and flashlight. Despite his labored breathing, Raven was moving a minute later. He did his best to whistle to Creek, but it came out as more of a hiss.

The dog suddenly appeared in a clearing with something hanging from his mouth. Raven nearly tripped over a log as he directed his light on Creek. The beam fell on a wall of Douglas firs that opened to a meadow beyond. Boulders, glossy from the rain, and knee-high shrubs speckled the landscape. Before Raven could see what was in Creek's mouth, the dog took off running toward the maze of mossy rocks, zigzagging to follow the scent on the wind.

Colton shouldered his rifle and approached cautiously while Raven raked his light over the ground. He held the light on what looked like a footprint. He quickly raised a hand at Colton to tell the story. The lawman nodded and hunched down.

Raven leaned down to get a closer look at the track that was partially filled with water. It was male, about a size ten or eleven. This was too far off the trail to be the random track of a camper, and if Creek had picked up a scent here, they couldn't be far from their chase.

They were close. But his tracker's sense told him they weren't the only people on the mountain tonight. Raven couldn't shake the feeling that someone was nearby—waiting, watching. *Hunting*.

***

Nathan Sardetti kept his hand on the side-mounted control stick as his F-16 Viper tore over the Denver skyline.

His wingman, 1st Lieutenant Mark “Mutt” Blake, flanked him on the right. They were heading west over Denver to patrol the surrounding areas. The rumble of their single-engine fighters was likely to draw some attention as the Vipers provided a combat air patrol. Restaurants and bars would be hopping below, with patrons anxious to de-stress after a long week. The sound of fighter jets was going to freak out a lot of civilians.

Nathan scanned the city. He had spent his fair share of Friday nights down there, drinking whiskey and watching the Colorado Rockies get their asses kicked. Part of him missed those wilder days. He’d earned his call sign, “Gambler,” for his legendary all-night poker parties as well as his risky moves in his F-16. His older sister had left the skies to settle down with a family and a career in Washington. They were both driven, hardworking, and loved flying, but unlike his sister, Nathan had never married or had children. He wasn’t sure he’d ever be happy with a desk job, but lately the idea of settling down with a nice girl had started to appeal to him.

Blake’s voice broke over the comms. “Gambler, you got any idea why we were called out for a CAP? I have a hard time believing we’re up here to sightsee.”

“Negative, Mutt, but I think it’s supposed to make the governor feel better while he sleeps tonight.”

“Holy shit, what a waste of tax dollars.”

Nathan chuckled. “Did you hear how much the new helmets cost for the F-35s? Four hundred k, brother.”

“Damn! That can’t be right.”

“Believe it.”

“I guess I don’t feel so bad about burning some fumes, but Kiley’s mad that I’m not home for the weekend.”

“She’ll forgive you,” Nathan said with a smile. “I was supposed to go see Ty. Good thing he didn’t know I was coming, or he would have been disappointed.”

“Maybe you can still drive up tonight.”

“Hopefully,” Nathan said. They pulled away from the city, heading northwest. The vibrant lights of Denver vanished behind them as the two F-16s raced toward the Rockies. Nathan blinked several times in an effort to keep his tired eyes open. Shit, he was exhausted.

He opened up a line to the other two fighters from the 120th. 1st Lieutenant Kyle “Rabbit” Swanson and Captain Tim “Bullseye” Negan were patrolling the southern part of Colorado.

“Bullseye, this is Gambler. How’s it looking to the south?”

“Mostly clear skies out here, Gambler. We’re passing over Lamar.”

“Copy that,” Nathan said.

In the distance, the jagged white peaks of the mountains came into focus, a long jaw of teeth that never seemed to end. Lightning streaked across the dark sky, illuminating a fort of clouds with brilliant flashes as they approached a storm.

For the next thirty minutes, Nathan and Blake cruised the angry skies. Below, hubs of light glowed from the small cities nestled in the mountains. While citizens prepared for sleep, Nathan and his wingman watched over them.

All traces of civilization vanished below as Nathan passed over Rocky Mountain National Park. The no-fly zone was off limits to civilian aircraft, and there weren’t any communities in the park.

A voice came over the channel. “Viper 3, this is Strobe. You have traffic at nine o’clock. Chinese ARJ21, 100 miles, angels 35, heading 120 toward Wichita. Check.”

Nathan was wide awake now. The last thing he was expecting tonight were orders from an E-3 Airborne Warning and Control System (AWACS) specialist out of Tinker Air Force Base in Oklahoma. He checked the radar for a Chinese commercial airliner heading east at thirty-five thousand feet.

“Copy that, Strobe. Viper 3 is radar contact, tally-ho.”

Nathan watched the radar blips for Viper 3 and 4 change direction to intercept the Chinese plane. A bead of sweat dripped from his short-cropped hair.

He glanced at Blake’s jet and opened a private line. “Mutt, keep sharp. Something’s off.”

Nathan shifted his gaze from the controls to the view. Flying a fighter jet was all about multi-tasking, and he was damn good at it.

Another message came over the channel. “Viper 3, Strobe. That ARJ21 is now angel 38, heading 135. Pilots are unresponsive.”

“Copy that, Strobe. We’re on it. I’ll let you know when we have visual,” replied Negan.

Nathan tried to wrap his mind around what the radio chatter meant. Could

there be a technical problem aboard the Chinese craft? If so, why the hell would the pilots be ascending? And why had they changed course? If they kept this heading, they would be above Denver within thirty minutes.

"Gambler, I got a bad feeling about this," Blake said.

"Agreed. Stay on me."

Nathan twisted his side-mounted control stick and tore through the clouds. They were north of Rocky Mountain National Park now. Nathan surrendered to the forces lashing his body as he increased his velocity to twelve hundred miles an hour.

There had to be a rational explanation for the rogue plane's behavior. Sometimes pilots lost contact with the ground and changed course due to technical issues, but that was rare. Maybe this wasn't a bullshit mission; maybe the governor had known something when he sent the 120th up here tonight.

Nathan opened a line to Viper 3. "Bullseye, Gambler. Do you have a visual?"

"Negative, Gambler."

Nathan studied the radar. The air traffic controller came back online, but this time his voice was panicked. "Viper 3, ARJ21 is still unresponsive. Angels is now 46."

The update made Nathan scrunch his brows. The F-16s had a max ceiling of fifty thousand feet. Swanson and Negan wouldn't be able to pursue much past that.

"Strobe, Viper 3, I have a limited visual," Negan said. There was a pause, and then, "You said that was an ARJ21, right?"

"Copy that, Viper 3."

"Stand by for confirmation," Negan said.

Nathan's F-16 rattled as he shot through a pocket of turbulence. He held steady and waited for Negan to relay a visual.

"Strobe, Viper 3, this is *not* an ARJ21. I'm looking at what appears to be a Soviet-built…"

Static broke over the line.

"Viper 3, Strobe. Come again, I didn't get your last."

Nathan held in a breath.

"Holy shit! It's an Ilyushin II-28," Negan shouted over the comms.

Nathan swallowed hard. That couldn't be right. The only country still actively using the big gray Soviet Union birds were the North Koreans. They

were supposed to have a max service ceiling of around forty thousand feet, but this one was still in a climb, pushing its advertised limits. He had only seen pictures of the old planes, but he knew their purpose, and he knew they would likely be stripped down to hold as much jet fuel and as many bombs as possible. If that was the case, then they were facing the North Korean version of the American Doolittle Raid into Tokyo during WWII.

“Weapons hot, Mutt,” Nathan said. “On me!”

They came together in a fighting formation and ripped south over Rocky Mountain National Park, punching toward Mach 2 as the Ilyushin continued ascending. The plane was now at fifty thousand feet.

Questions ping-ponged in Nathan’s mind, but one kept coming to the surface: How could the North Koreans have made it into US airspace disguised as a Chinese ARJ21? They would have had to spoof multiple transponder codes.

“Strobe, Viper 3. I am weapons hot. Do I have permission to engage?”

“Copy that, Viper 3. Take that plane down and—”

The transmission suddenly cut out in a wave of static, the connection severed.

Nathan dipped his helmet to check the radar, but the contact was gone.

“Bandit just faded,” Blake said. “Where the hell did it go?”

Nathan checked the radar again to see Viper 3 and 4 vanish. An instant later, a brilliant flash lit up the sky to the south.

“Evasive maneuvers!” he yelled. “Get out of there, Mutt!”

Blake was already turning. “Is that a bomb? What the—”

The comms crackled off. All at once, warning sensors chirped in Nathan’s cockpit. The electronics were going haywire—and he was seconds away from losing control of his bird over the jagged peaks of the Rocky Mountains.

— 3 —

The rifle crack of thunder rattled Raven’s bones. It sounded like a bomb going off in the heavens. The ground shook as he switched off his flashlight and got down on his belly next to the track.

To the south, a brilliant flash of lightning seemed to illuminate the entire skyline. It lingered for several moments before fading away. The blaze of the lighting strike faded, and darkness clamped around him like he had been pulled into a wet, black hole. It took him several seconds for his eyes to adjust. Clouds blocked out the moon, making it difficult to see much besides outlines and shapes. The cold mud coated his exposed skin, and his fingers were frozen, but he didn’t dare move.

Another flash of lightning backlit the meadow. He spotted Colton, and while Raven couldn’t see Creek, he knew his buddy was out there. They waited for several minutes, motionless. Lightning webbed across the sky that was pouring rain.

Raven glimpsed Creek’s brown and white coat in the grass near a boulder in the next flash. The dog was sitting calmly with something still in his mouth.

Scanning the meadow a third time, Raven got to his feet and signaled Colton toward Creek. At a hunch, they slowly worked their way across the field.

“I think someone’s out here, Chief,” Raven whispered.

Colton glanced over his shoulder but kept moving. Creek came trotting over, whatever he had found hanging from his maw.

The men slowed as they approached. An uncharacteristic wave of anxiety rushed through Raven, and it wasn’t from the sensation of being watched. He’d seen plenty of death in Iraq, and he thought he had been prepared to

find the little girl dead, but when he rounded the boulder and saw her corpse, his heart slammed against his rib cage like a blacksmith hammering the blade of a sword.

Colton motioned for Raven to hold security and then bowed his head and dropped to his knees. Melissa lay curled up in a fetal position, still dressed in a coat and jeans.

Raven brought the scope to his eye and scanned the trees. He had replaced the custom scope with one of his own for hunts like this one. Tree limbs shifted across the illumination. There was no sign of their chase, but he was definitely out there, watching.

“Fuck,” Colton whispered. He put on a pair of rubber gloves and put a finger to her ghostly pale skin to check for a pulse.

Raven looked away to scan the meadow for any sign of movement. Whoever was out there was well hidden. Creek dropped one of her shoes and sniffed the air.

A flash of lightning arced into the trees to the north, sparks raining onto the forest floor. The clap of thunder that followed rumbled for several moments, like nature herself was screaming at the injustice of Melissa’s death. The pointless death of this little girl disturbed the balance of the world.

“I’m sorry,” Raven said.

Colton didn’t reply. He slowly rolled the girl onto her back, exposing the gash across her neck. Raven shook his head and forced himself to look away.

“What kind of animal does this to a little girl?” Colton said. He let out a long sigh and stared before finally reaching down to close her eyes.

Raven caught a drift of what smelled like burned flesh. He raised his bow into the darkness, finger hovering over the trigger. He still felt eyes on them.

“What is it?” Colton whispered. “You think the guy that did this is still out there?” He slowly rose to stand next to Raven. “I’ll kill the bastard with my bare hands.”

Frozen like a statue, Raven scrutinized the terrain, waiting for lightning to illuminate the meadow. Whoever had done this was playing some sort of a sick game, and Raven and Colton were just pawns. If the guy wanted them dead, they would already be bleeding out next to Melissa. Chances were, he was observing from a safe distance and taking pleasure in the terrible thing he had done.

“Jesus,” Colton muttered. He had bent back down and was brushing the leaves and dirt off Melissa’s legs. Then the barbeque smell made sense—both

of her legs were burned to the knee.

Raven's guts ached at the sight, a memory surfacing from the dark place where he kept the evil he had witnessed in Iraq. This wasn't the first child he had seen burned. But Melissa's injuries weren't from an explosion. Someone had done this to her deliberately.

Something about the way her feet and lower legs had been burned reminded him of something that he couldn't quite place. This memory was older than the war, something from his childhood. Growing up on the Rez, he'd been raised on Cherokee folktales, and in one of those stories, demons known as Water Cannibals would kidnap victims and roast them, feet first, over their bonfires.

Raven shuddered. He'd hated that story when he was a kid, but surely this was just a terrible coincidence. The Water Cannibals weren't real—and from his experience, humans were much crueler and more brutal than any monster.

Colton's voice pulled Raven back to the mountains.

"You with me, man?" he asked.

Raven nodded, keeping the story to himself. Only Cherokees would have known of the story, and there weren't many of them around in these parts besides him and his sister. No way in hell was he about to give Colton a reason to arrest him again.

Colton began whispering something under his breath that might have been a prayer. They waited there for several moments before Raven gave the all clear. The sensation of being watched had finally passed.

Colton pulled his radio from his belt and said, "Don, you copy? Over."

Thunder rolled in the distance. The storm was moving to the east, but the rumble drowned out the crackle of static from the radio in Colton's hand.

Don came online a moment later. "Roger that, sir. Just arrived at the station. You on your way back?"

Lips trembling, Colton said, "We found Melissa." He paused, sucked in a breath, exhaled. "She's gone. Call the medical examiner and get 'em up to the Ypsilon and Lawn Lake trailhead ASAP."

White noise broke over the channel. The growl of thunder sounded again. Raven glanced at the sky. Odd. He heard the thunder, but where was the lightning? The weather in the Rocky Mountains could be strange, but something about this storm seemed off.

"Don, did you get my last, over?" Colton said.

Raven looked down at the radio. The screen was blank, and when Colton

turned the knob, nothing happened.

“Shit,” Colton said, smacking the side of the radio. “Batteries were fine when I checked this morning.”

Raven went back to staring at the sky, zoning everything else out, his brown eyes searching for the source of the rising thunder. The edge of the storm had rolled to the east and the rain was letting up, but the roar continued to reverberate off the mountain peaks.

“What are you looking at?” Colton asked.

“I—I’m not sure.”

Just then a pair of F-16s raced over the distant peaks and roared southwest over the valley below. He lowered his crossbow to watch the silhouetted jets tear through the cloud cover under the moonlight. The pair suddenly broke away from one another, peeling off in different directions.

One of the aircraft roared toward Estes Park. At least, that’s the direction he thought it was headed, but when he looked, the glow of artificial light was gone. Was he disoriented, or was the town dark?

“Chief…” Raven began to say.

Colton pushed himself up to stand next to Raven. The jets appeared to be slowing as they swooped toward the valley. The lead aircraft’s nose dipped so low it looked like the pilot was attempting a dive.

“Something’s not right,” Colton said.

Creek bared his teeth, growling in a low tone. Raven was kneeling down to calm the dog when one of the jets veered in their direction. The pilot jerked to the right, trying to avoid the peaks, but it was like he had no control over the plane. The fighter tore overhead, the roar so loud it hurt Raven’s ears. The air current bent the tips of the ponderosas and ripped the baseball cap from his head, sending it rolling across the meadow.

Raven ducked down as the current slammed into him and Colton bent over Melissa’s body like he was trying to protect her.

The jet smashed into the summit of Mummy Mountain, a fiery blast blooming across the snowy peak. Raven shielded his eyes from the explosion. The second fighter impacted with a cliff in the distance a few seconds later.

“My God,” Colton said quietly.

They stood over Melissa’s body and stared in shock at the fires. Neither of them said a word until Raven broke the silence.

“Did you see anyone eject?”

Colton shook his head.

“Must have had some sort of malfunction, right Chief?”

“Both of them?” Colton shook his head again.

“What the hell were they doing out here, though?”

Colton bent down to pick up Melissa and Raven crouched to help.

“I’ve got her,” the police chief insisted.

Raven held up his hands and turned back to the valley. Estes Park had gone dark. The only lights out there now were the fires from the downed jets. The scene transported him back to the rescue mission at the North Korean prison eighteen months ago. In his mind’s eye, he pictured the Black Hawk pulling away from the compound as Staff Sergeant Nixon detonated the C4. The scene had looked a lot like this as they’d flown over the dark terrain in the pitch black of night with only the fires flickering in the distance.

Raven had never expected to see such utter darkness here at home.

***

Sandra Spears sat patiently in her Toyota Corolla, listening to the light rain as it beat down on the roof. The warmth from the seat heaters was slowly fading, and she was cold in her scrubs. If she couldn’t get the car started soon, she’d be late for her shift at the medical center. The prospect of walking in the cold rain wasn’t appealing, but it seemed like she might not have a choice.

Twenty minutes earlier, the car had lost power, and it had coasted to the side of Highway 34 about two miles from town. Hers wasn’t the only stranded vehicle. For the hour, traffic was heavy. Tourists had been returning from Rocky Mountain National Park, their vacations spoiled by the storm. The vague outlines of other stalled cars were littered down the highway.

One moment she had been thinking about her nightly routine at the hospital— what the staffing ratio would be, and if Doctor Newton had written broad enough orders to cover the multitude of issues they usually dealt with on a Friday night. The next she was in a dream-like state, unable to comprehend the events unfolding around her as fighter jets fell from the sky and her faithful Corolla died.

She reached for her phone to call her brother again, but there still wasn’t a signal. It was like someone had flipped a switch and everything, including her damn car, had stopped working.

Even in the rain, the fires from the wreckage continued to burn in the distance. She tilted her head for a better view, catching her reflection in the rearview mirror. Even in the dim light she looked exhausted. Her long black hair was trying to escape from its braid, and purple bags hung under her brown eyes.

Sandra had been under a lot of stress at work and at home lately, but it was the note she had found on her car earlier that day that had left her feeling rattled. She'd decided to drive through Rocky Mountain National Park before her shift to clear her mind.

At least Allie was safe. Well, relatively safe. Her daughter was staying with her father at his new home in Loveland, Colorado. Mark was an addict, and even though he had been clean for a year, it wasn't until just recently Sandra had agreed to overnight visits once a week.

Ever since Allie told her about the man outside their house, Sandra had been paranoid about letting the girl out of her sight. Mark had laughed off her worries, telling her she was overreacting as usual. Now that her car wasn't working, she felt helpless, like she was a world away from Allie even though it was only thirty miles to Loveland.

Sandra opened her purse and pulled out the cryptic note she had found and read it again. It still didn't make any sense to her, and she didn't recognize the bold, almost childlike printing.

THE STORM IS COMING.

"Hey!" someone shouted. She flinched and dropped the paper on her lap.

A man dressed in jeans, cowboy boots, and a sweatshirt was slowly making his way from car to car. She cracked her door open to listen, trying not to let in any rain.

"Does anyone know what's going on?" he asked as he passed other cars. The man was soaked to the bone, but he didn't seem to notice. Sandra didn't recognize him, and instantly labeled the man as a tourist.

He straightened a baseball cap as he approached her car. His sweatshirt read *Colorado Springs Auto Clinic*. If anyone knew what was going on with the cars, he should.

As he drew closer, however, Sandra reconsidered asking the man for help. His eyes were roving and seemed unfocused, and his hands were shaking. Her trained nurse's eye picked up on the signs immediately—the signs that she'd ignored in Mark for far too long. She would never forget the crazed look in her ex-husband's eyes when he was using. It was a look she should

have known. The same one her father had shown when he drank heavily, and it was near identical to the gaze of her ex-boyfriend Mike Tankala back on the Rez after he used peyote. For her entire life she had ignored the signs. But those days were over.

Sandra closed her door as discreetly as possible and locked it.

The patter of rain slowed to single drops, then to nothing. Sandra closed her eyes, breathing softly in the sudden quiet. That's all she needed. Just a few moments of quiet to figure out what she should do. The sound of knuckles rapping on the window snapped her eyes open. She looked up to see the man with the baseball cap flash a nervous smile and bend down toward her door. She met his eyes and saw that the guy wasn't strung out—he was just scared.

Not every man is an asshole or an addict, she reminded herself.

"Ma'am, excuse me, do you have any idea what's going on?"

Sandra unlocked the door and cracked it open warily. "I'm not sure," she said. "Figured you might know about the cars. Are you a mechanic or something?"

The man raised his eyebrows. "No, why? Oh," he said looking down at his shirt. "No, I just sell the cars."

A crowd had gathered at the edge of the road to stare at the fires dotting the mountains. The man pointed at them.

"It doesn't make any sense. How could they have all gone down like that? How is that possible?" Panic was rising in his voice.

Shaking her head, Sandra said, "I have no idea."

The man continued to the next car, and Sandra made her decision. Help wasn't coming. Her North Face jacket would keep her warm enough for the long walk, and she had bottled water in her bag. Raven had insisted she keep a knife in the glove compartment after she'd refused to buy a gun, and had shown her how to use it. She tucked the sheath into her waistband, and locked her car door manually when the automatic lock button didn't work.

Once she reached the hospital and figured out what was going on, she would find a way to contact Mark and get to Allie. She tried not to worry as she slung her backpack over her shoulders.

One thing at a time, Sandra, she thought. *Allie is safe for now, and it's not that far into town. You can do this.*

After taking in a deep breath, she broke into a trot, her tennis shoes pounding the wet concrete. If she jogged most of the way, she would reach

civilization again in thirty minutes.

The distant glow of Estes Park was gone on the horizon, but she knew this road. The turnoff for the Alluvial Fan and Lawn Lake was about a quarter mile behind her. That meant she was pretty close to the park entrance.

“Where you going?” Mr. Colorado Springs shouted after her.

“To get help,” Sandra replied. “Just stay here and stay calm, okay?”

She opted for the rocky dirt path along Fall River to avoid more questions and other stranded drivers. The water babbled to her right, cascading over rocks. A natural fence of bushes and trees ran along the side of the river, wind tickling the tips of the branches. She loved it up here. The aroma of the ponderosas, the jagged snowy peaks, the collage of colors, the wildlife—and, most of all, the constant murmur of running water. It all helped take her mind off whatever lousy thing was happening in her life.

The first time she had visited Raven here eighteen months ago, it was supposed to have just been a vacation, but these mountains had quickly become her home. The Rez had sucked the life out of her. Rocky Mountain National Park had breathed it back in.

But Sandra always felt like she was running from someone. First her father, then Mike Tankala, and finally her ex-husband. Now that Mark had moved to Loveland she was finally free of those men, but she still felt like someone was chasing her.

Ten minutes into the run, her foot hit a root, snapping her alert just in time to brace herself as she tripped and fell.

“Stupid, stupid,” Sandra hissed. She got to her knees and wiped the mud from her hands onto the grass. As she did, she caught a glimpse of something hanging from a tree across the river. It looked like a plastic sheet draped over the top of the pine tree.

Never in her life had she seen trash out here. The rangers and volunteers kept the park immaculate, and most visitors obeyed the littering laws.

Curious, she worked her way carefully down to the water’s edge. The green tarp was hard to see at first, almost camouflaged. Her breath caught in her chest when she realized it was a parachute.

“Ma’am?” came a voice.

Sandra whirled in a defensive position with her fists up, just like Raven had taught her, as a man wearing a flight suit and holding a helmet limped out of the underbrush. He held up his free hand.

“Whoa, it’s okay, ma’am. I’m not going to hurt you.”

She slowly lowered her fists as he stepped forward, the moonlight revealing the handsome, chiseled face of a man in his mid-thirties with a full head of brown hair and sharp green eyes.

“I sprained my ankle pretty bad and need to get to the nearest town as quickly as possible,” he said. “Can you point me in the right direction?”

Sandra gave him the elevator eyes treatment. His olive drab flight suit was soaked up to his waist, and his boots were covered in mud. He limped a step closer, grimacing as he looked up at the road above.

“I’m a nurse,” Sandra said without thinking.

The pilot’s eyes flitted back to hers in the moonlight. “Then I’d be grateful if you took a look at my ankle real quick.”

Sandra hesitated and then pulled off her backpack and set it on the ground. She carried a medical kit with her everywhere.

“Take a seat on that rock,” Sandra said, pointing toward a boulder.

“Thanks,” he said, limping over to take a seat. “My name’s Nathan, by the way. Major Nathan Sardetti.”

She smiled thinly at him. “Sandra. Nice to meet you.”

“How far are we from the nearest town? Did you see the other pilot eject?”

Sandra opened her med kit, talking as she worked. “Two miles or so from Estes Park, maybe less. I didn’t see anyone else. Can’t you call them on your radio?”

When Nathan didn’t reply, Sandra asked, “What happened to your plane?” She carefully cut through his flight suit and started wrapping the sprain.

“I’m not authorized to say, ma’am.” He craned his neck at the road. “Please hurry. I need to get to that town.”

Sandra tightened the wrapping and narrowed her eyes. “Major, I may be just a nurse, but I know fighter jets don’t drop out of the air like that. So are you going to tell me what’s going on or what?”

Nathan cleared his throat as if he was considering his next words carefully.

“The United States has just been attacked.”

— 4 —

Colton carefully carried Melissa's body, wrapped in his coat, down the trailhead. The rain had let up, but his heart was still racing. He had faced a hard decision: leave her there and hope the coyotes didn't get to her before they could return with the medical examiner, or bring her body home to her parents.

Protocol would have been to leave her so the crime scene could be preserved and documented accurately, but things had changed when those jets crashed. He'd done what any father would have done. Rex and Lilly didn't deserve to wait any longer to get their little girl back.

Colton's arms burned as he carried Melissa over the slick terrain. Dead bodies were always heavier than live ones. He'd learned that the hard way in Afghanistan. Since returning from his last tour, he'd managed the anger just like the doc had told him to. Counting to ten, meditating, even getting in a goddamn downward-facing dog position. He'd already tried the first of the two, but nothing was working. And he wasn't about to do yoga on the trail, not in the rain and definitely not in the company of Raven Spears.

"You sure you don't want me to carry her?" Raven asked.

"No, I'm fine. I told you to watch my damn back."

A drop of rain plummeted into Colton's eye. He paused to wipe it away and stare at the fires in the distance, his mind racing with possible scenarios, each one worse than the last.

What he did know was those flames wouldn't be going out anytime soon. Jet fuel was extremely flammable. When Osama bin Laden couldn't launch missiles at America's infrastructure, he had picked the next best thing—jumbo planes full of jet fuel.

"Chief, do you have any idea what happened to those F-16s?" Raven

asked. He stood at the side of the trail, crossbow draped across his chest, and his mud-caked Seattle Mariners baseball cap tilted back so he could look at Colton. Creek sat on his hind legs, fur soaked and matted.

"Enough with the questions," Colton said. "You'll tell our chase exactly where we are."

"He's long gone, and if he wanted us dead he would have killed us back in that meadow when he had the drop on us. Now why don't you let me carry the girl for a while?"

"I said I'm fine," Colton said, glaring at Raven.

Raven muttered something that sounded a lot like "hard-ass" and turned away, clearly not believing his lie. Colton wasn't fine at all. Melissa was dead, there was a killer on the loose, and with the radio down, he had no way to contact his officers to see what was going on in Estes Park. Something had happened to those jets at the same moment his radio went dead. It might be a coincidence, or it might be a pattern. Until they reached civilization, there was no way to know for sure and no point in talking to Raven about theories.

The trio continued down the path, rain pattering off their clothing, questions swirling through Colton's mind. He was doing his best to keep it together, but it was hard not to think the worst. It didn't help that he could feel Raven's eyes on him.

"What?" Colton asked. "You got something else to say?"

"Nope," Raven said.

Colton hoisted Melissa's body up against his chest. Pain lanced up his arm and neck. He gritted his teeth and pushed on. The military had taught him how to manage pain. Now if he could just learn to manage his anger the same way…

"Want me to carry her for a while now?"

"Goddammit, Raven, I told you to watch our backs."

Raven stopped mid-stride and straightened his baseball hat. "You trusted me enough to help you look for her, but you don't trust when I tell you we're the only two people on this mountain right now?"

"You're right, I don't trust you," Colton said.

Raven halted and pursed his lips like he wanted to say something else, but he didn't reply.

Colton continued down the trail, leaving him behind. The veins in his muscular forearms bulged as he tightened his grip on the dead girl. How was he going to tell Risa that her little friend would never be coming over for

another playdate or a sleepover?

The wind whistled through the treetops, and pine needles cartwheeled to the ground. Something trickled down Colton's face. It had been a long time since he shed a tear, but he was too busy staring through the canopy of trees to wipe it away. Overhead, a single rogue cloud rolled across the horizon, leaving behind a jeweled sky. He stepped carefully over a downed branch but kept his gaze on the cloud.

"You're not even going to tell me a theory about what happened to those jets?" Raven asked. When Colton only grunted in response, he continued, "I have a few. My people, the Sioux and the Cherokee, have many stories about the end of the world."

Colton wanted to snap but he knew it wouldn't do any good. Raven wasn't going to shut his mouth.

"End of the world?" Colton asked. "See, that's the type of path I don't want to go down right now."

Raven pressed on. "Some stories say that the Star People, our ancestors, will return. The signs will be clear. Flooding, fire, earthquakes…"

"Christians have been saying the same thing for millennia."

Raven tipped the bill of his hat toward a towering ponderosa silhouetted in the moonlight. "I'd say the signs are pretty clear, Chief. That flood a few years back, and now the fires from these jets. I'm just saying."

"Raven, you're really starting to piss me off. Whatever happened has nothing to do with your Sky People, or Jesus, or whatever." Colton lifted Melissa's body up higher. "A man did this."

The words finally seemed to silence Raven. He whistled for his dog and hurried along the trail. As they walked, Colton kept his gaze on the dazzling sky. Out here it was vast and serene, undisturbed by the glow of human engineering. When he was a kid, while his friends had been watching TV, he had been lying with his back to his parents' deck, studying the stars. Centuries ago, Raven's ancestors would have done the same thing.

The sky *was* their TV.

But something seemed off about the sky tonight—something was missing. "Raven, hold up."

He stopped and followed Colton's gaze upward. "You see another plane or something, Chief?"

Colton scrutinized the sky for several seconds. The weight of Melissa's body was making his arms tremble, but he hardly noticed anymore.

“No,” Colton finally replied. “That’s just it. I don’t see any aircraft at all.”

***

The scent of charred flesh lingered in Brown Feather’s nose as he waited near the house where his woman lived. He had brought her a present from his kill, a warning. Anger rose like a tide through his gut as he waited, but he pushed it back down. He’d waited years to see her again and tracked her across state lines. No matter where she tried to hide, he would find her. They were meant to be together. She had promised.

He couldn’t wait much longer.

With his truck not working, he’d had to abandon his original plan, which was to throw her in the back and drive until he found a place where they could be alone. She was supposed to be happy to see him. She was supposed to have waited for him. Instead, she had proven herself to be a faithless liar.

She was going to pay for her deceit.

On the day his long hunt for her had finally ended, when he’d tracked her down to this shithole in the middle of nowhere, he’d seen she had started a family with another man. The little girl was a display of her betrayal in the flesh.

The demons had always said she would betray him, but he hadn’t wanted to believe them. They had been right. They were always right. He understood that now.

After so many years with only the demons for company, he should have learned to trust them. They were wise, but they were also merciless. He needed to learn to be more like them. They were strong and fast, and they did not waste time waiting for what they wanted.

No, they simply took it.

The girl he killed had been a spur of the moment decision. After he had realized the depth of his woman’s betrayal, he’d driven back up the mountain with rage in his heart. Then he’d seen her, another dark-haired girl dressed all in pink and white, skipping away from the bus stop like a lost rabbit kit. He’d lured her into the truck and taken her into the woods with him, thinking that maybe if he had a daughter of his own, his woman would see what a good father he was and return to him.

That had been a foolish thought. He could see that now.

Instead of being grateful to be chosen, the little brat had kicked and bit him—as if any of this was his fault—and screamed and screamed until he had finally cut her throat. It had taken her less than ninety seconds to bleed out, and as he watched her feebly kicking like a toad with its legs broken, he had decided that there was only one way this could end. He had begun building up the campfire with extra logs until the flames were nearly as tall as a man.

The demons did not waste time, and they did not waste meat.

When the time had come, he hadn't tasted her after all. He wasn't worthy yet to call himself a Water Cannibal. But he would be soon.

***

Still half asleep, Senator Charlize Montgomery scanned a dark room and tried to remember where she was. Reality fought with her nightmares for control. Something had woken her, a strange sound that wasn't part of her dream.

It was an odd thing, knowing when you're sleeping but not being able to wake. This sensation wasn't new to her; the nightmare was a reoccurring memory of the worst day of her life. The pain from losing Richard, and the constant struggle of raising a child, had had a long-lasting effect on her mind and body.

She felt like she should have been able to handle the stress. Before her career in politics, Charlize was one of the first female pilots to fly combat missions from the cockpit of an F-15 Strike Eagle over Iraq and Afghanistan. She had been feared in the air and feared on the campaign trail when she had unseated an incumbent Senator in Colorado.

But Charlize was no longer that woman. She felt broken, and sometimes she wasn't sure how much longer she could hold the pieces together.

She pulled the covers up to her chin, shivering as if she could still feel the freezing wind of that day in Denver when she'd gotten the call about the car wreck that killed her husband Richard and put her son Ty in a wheelchair. The next breath was cold enough to sting her lungs. The room was cold. Too cold.

Sitting up, she rubbed her eyes and scanned the bedroom of her D.C. apartment, just a few blocks from Capitol Hill.

Usually, she would be able to hear the sporadic honking of cars and the

blare of emergency sirens, no matter how late or early the nightmare woke her. Tonight, there was only silence.

Something was wrong.

The bedside alarm clock was dark. She grabbed the remote and pointed it at the TV to check the news, but nothing happened.

She plucked her cell phone from the nightstand and clicked the home button. The screen was blank.

She tried a second time.

Nothing.

The building must have lost power, and her phone, which had been nearly dead when she went to bed, had died on the charger. She crossed the room to the window and pulled back the curtain. Rain slid down the glass. Past the blur of water, she gazed out over the nation's capital.

The city was shrouded in darkness.

She flinched at a rap on her apartment door, but she didn't turn away from the view. Four stories below, she could see the silhouettes of cars on the street. None of the vehicles were moving. It was if they had all just run out of gas.

An arc of lightning webbed across the skyline, providing a momentary glimpse of the city. The outlines of the US Capitol, the White House, and the National Mall emerged for a single moment before the light receded.

She focused on the flickering glow of what could have been a fire. It was miles away, far enough that she couldn't see what had caused it.

Another knock sounded on the apartment door, harder this time.

"Hold on," Charlize said as she threw on slacks and a t-shirt.

She opened the door to see the trusted face of her chief of staff, Clint Johnson. The forty-five-year-old staffer was drenched to the bone. He was panting and his hair was mussed.

"Why are you out of breath?" Charlize stepped to the side and gestured for Clint to come in.

"I ran here," Clint gasped. He took in another long breath and added, "From the Capitol."

"Sit down and get a hold of yourself," Charlize said. "Tell me why you're here."

Clint nodded and pulled off his coat and draped it over the back of a chair. Then he took a seat at the dining room table. "Ma'am, there's a situation."

Charlize looked back at the bedroom window. "Some sort of wide-scale

power failure?”

“Not exactly,” Clint said. He allowed himself another breath and scratched at his perpetual five o’clock shadow like he was trying to buy himself time to find the right words.

Her mind was racing like it did back in the days when she flew an F-15 into battle. “Clint, tell me what the hell is going on.”

“I got a call from General Lexton a couple hours ago. He tried calling you first, but you didn’t pick up.”

“My phone’s dead,” Charlize said. Brett Lexton was an old friend now serving as Chief of Staff of the Air Force. They went back twenty years, but this was the first time he had ever called her at night. “I’m supposed to meet with him tomorrow at the Pentagon.”

“This wasn’t about your meeting, Charlize. He had new intel on the situation on the Korean Peninsula.”

Charlize narrowed her green eyes. The last time Clint had called her by her first name was four years ago, the night of the wreck that changed her life.

“What kind of intel?”

“He wouldn’t say; he just told me to tell you to call him. Could the power outage be from an attack on the grid?”

She moved into the other room to look out the window again. The tensions were at an all-time high between the United States and North Korea. They couldn’t prove the Americans had been behind the raid that had saved Senator Sarcone’s granddaughter eighteen months prior, but between that and President Drake’s aggressive maneuvers with the Navy, the North Koreans had been on edge. Other than the usual saber rattling, however, they hadn’t threatened any specific actions against America.

“It’s crazy down there,” Clint said. “Every car I saw is dead.”

As she watched, a police officer approached one of the growing groups with his hands raised in a placating gesture. She guessed the mob was bombarding him with questions.

Clint continued talking, but Charlize wasn’t listening. Her eyes were locked on the faint glow to the north. As she scanned the horizon, she saw more fires burning at the outskirts of the city.

Something terrible had happened out there tonight. As her mind reeled, she clung to one urgent thought: *I have to get to my son.*

“Is your phone working? Ty is at the Easterseals camp in Empire, Colorado. I need to make sure he is safe.”

“I don’t have a signal,” Clint said, holding up his phone. He slipped it back in his pocket. “I’ll find someone that does and have Ty picked up.”

“How, if the power and phones are out?”

“They can’t be out *everywhere*, right?”

Charlize shook her head, uncertain. “The Capitol and the White House will have backup power.”

A horrible suspicion entered her mind as she studied the darkened city. In the wake of Nine-Eleven, the government and the military had begun toughening their defenses and planning for every possible type of terrorist attack. She’d been briefed about the possibility of a coordinated electromagnetic pulse attack. The United States was far more vulnerable than the average citizen realized, and it wouldn’t take much to completely disrupt life in the country. Such an attack could knock out the power grid, disable all electronic devices, and even cause planes to fall from the sky.

“So what do we do, ma’am?” Clint asked.

Half of Charlize’s focus was in Colorado. Nathan was probably already in Empire. He would look after Ty. But what if he hadn’t made it there? If he’d been recalled to duty, and if the power outage was the result of an EMP, then…no, she couldn’t even think about that. After everything she’d been through, she couldn’t lose her little brother, too.

She pivoted from the window to face her chief of staff.

“What do we do? We prepare, Clint. We prepare and head to the Capitol.”

She stalked to her closet, recalling something she had learned when she flew missions over Iraq and Afghanistan. Watching the government crumble there had taught her that when the infrastructure of a country collapsed, it didn’t take long for civilized society to break down. If the grid was down from an EMP attack, it wouldn’t take long for chaos to reign over the United States.

Opening her closet, she bent down and reached for the lockbox at the bottom.

“Go get my car keys from the kitchen table,” she said. He returned a minute later and handed her the key ring.

Charlize inserted the smallest key into the lockbox to reveal her M9 and four extra magazines.

“Ma’am, with all due respect…”

Charlize silenced him by palming one of the magazines into the pistol with a click. She tucked it into her waistband. Then she put the other magazines

into her bugout bag and threw it over her shoulder.

“Do you trust me?” she asked.

There wasn’t a single second of hesitation in his voice. “Yes, Senator.”

“Good, because I have a feeling that whatever happened may have just changed the world.”

— 5 —

“What do you mean the country has been attacked?” Sandra asked the wounded pilot.

“I can’t tell you anything more than that because I simply don’t know.” Nathan limped down the dirt path, leaning on a stick he’d found.

“So you can tell me we’ve been attacked, but not by who, or why, or…”

“That’s exactly what I’m saying. I’m a pilot, not a politician, but you’ve heard the news. I’m sure we can both guess who was behind this.”

“North Korea?”

Nathan didn’t reply. He was moving at a good clip, faster than Sandra could comfortably walk. She increased her pace to a jog.

“Listen, I’m not going to tell anyone,” Sandra said. “But I have a daughter in Loveland. If she’s in danger, I deserve to know what’s going on.”

“I’m sorry, ma’am—”

“*Stop* calling me that. My name is Sandra Spears, and I am not an old lady.”

Nathan halted and turned around so fast she almost ran into him. They were close enough she could smell his breath. It was odd being this close to a man and not catching the scent of alcohol.

“Ms. Spears, I also have family out there. My nephew is at a camp not too far from here. I appreciate you wrapping my ankle, and I understand your concern. But I can’t tell you anything beyond what I’ve already said. If I learn otherwise, I will gladly share this information. But for now, my mission is to get to the nearest town and find a way to communicate with command.”

Sandra sidestepped around the pilot and kept walking down the hill leading back to Highway 34. He followed in silence, descending carefully down the steep trail. Yellow and purple wildflowers with bell-like petals grew along

the path. The bottom of the trail opened into a meadow carved in half by the Fall River, which cut through the green pasture and wrapped back up to the highway.

"Keep low," Nathan said, watching the cars and stranded motorists on the road above as if he wanted to avoid civilians.

Sandra considered asking why, but she'd had the same idea to avoid other people. For a fleeting moment, the observation terrified her. If Nathan wanted to avoid contact with anyone else then something was really wrong.

The country had been at war for as long as she could remember. But that was overseas. Had he meant there was an attack on American soil?

Of course that's what he meant.

Sandra paused in her tracks, her heart beating so hard she could feel it throbbing in her neck.

"Major, should I be worried about my daughter's safety?"

Nathan had opened his mouth to reply when a shout echoed from the road.

"Hey! Hey, *you*. Down there!"

Sandra and Nathan looked up to the road. A crowd of stranded drivers had gathered along the railing by the side of the highway. In the front of the group stood a barrel-chested man wearing a tight flannel shirt. He wedged a cigarette between his lips, took a drag, and then shouted, "You one of them pilots?"

Sandra took a step back when she saw the shotgun the man was carrying.

"Stay by your vehicles, help is coming," Nathan yelled back.

The man flicked the cigarette onto the ground, crushed it with his cowboy boot, and hocked spit over the railing. "Like hell. I want to know what killed our cars."

"Keep walking," Nathan whispered. He started moving back to the trail, and Sandra trotted after him.

"Hey!" the man yelled. "I asked you a *goddamn* question. Don't you turn your back on a soldier."

Nathan stopped and pivoted back to the road. "I don't know what happened, sir, but help will be coming soon. Just stay where you are or walk into town."

The other people muttered and began to disperse, but not the soldier. He climbed over the railing and slid down the embankment. "Get back here and tell me what the hell is going on."

"Is this guy serious?" Sandra muttered.

Nathan turned his back on the irate man. “We don’t have time for this.”

Sandra eyed the shotgun one more time, then took off running after Nathan. He moved fast enough that she had trouble keeping up, and when she told him to slow down or risk doing more serious damage to his ankle, the pilot only sped up.

“If you hurt yourself, I’m not carrying you through the woods into town,” she said. “And since I’m the only one of us who actually knows how to get there, maybe you could slow down and let me lead.”

That made him pause. He looked back at her and then stepped to one side to let Sandra walk ahead of him. She would have laughed at the surprised expression on the major’s face, but she was too worried to enjoy the moment.

Only an hour had passed since the planes had dropped from the sky, but some people were already panicking. It wouldn’t take long for others to follow. Fear was, in Sandra’s opinion, the most powerful emotion in the world. It was fear, not love, that had trapped her in a series of bad relationships with addicts who vented their rage on her. Fear turned normal, law-abiding citizens into panicked mobs—and drove paranoid soldiers to chase strangers through the woods with a shotgun.

Sandra flinched at the crack of a gunshot nearby. The blast echoed through the valley, framed on both sides by raging fires, and she began to run.

***

“Did you hear that?” Raven asked.

He helped Colton lay Melissa’s limp body in the back seat of the Chief’s Ford Explorer. They draped a blanket over her.

“Sounded like a gunshot.” Raven pulled off his baseball cap and looked toward Highway 34. “My ears are still ringing from those explosions. I must be hearing things.”

“Must be, ’cause I didn’t hear anything,” Colton said. He carefully shut the door to the truck. “You heading back to town?”

Raven shrugged and looked toward Estes Park, trying to find its familiar glow in the distance.

“You can follow me to the station, and I’ll have Margaret cut you a check.”

Raven put his soaked cap back on and attempted to straighten the bent bill.

“Sounds good.” He turned to his Jeep Cherokee but hesitated. “You sure you don’t want to tell me any of your theories about those jets?”

Colton climbed into the driver’s seat and inserted the key into the ignition. “I thought you were already convinced it was the end of the…”

He trailed off as he turned the key and nothing happened. “What the hell?” Colton muttered. He cranked the key again, but there was nothing. No click, no whining sound. Nothing at all. Glancing up, he checked the overhead lights, then turned to look in the back seat.

“Won’t turn on? I have a pair of cables,” Raven said. He stepped closer to the truck, eyeing the dark taillights. That was odd. Not a single light had turned on. They hadn’t been gone that long. No way the truck would lose all of its juice so quickly.

Colton stepped back out onto the parking lot, rocks crunching under the weight of his boots. Raven lit a cigarette. Drawing in a long drag, he watched warily as the Chief began eyeing his Jeep.

Colton held out his hand. “Give me your keys.”

Raven took in another drag and raised a brow. After exhaling a cloud of smoke, he said, “Keys to what?”

“I don’t have time to play games right now. Just give me your keys.”

Raven fished in his pocket and pulled out a keyring with a coyote’s foot on the end. He wasn’t sure what the hell was going on, but he was too cold and downright scared to argue with Colton. Instead of tossing the keys over, however, he slid behind the wheel of his Jeep and cranked it. The engine rumbled to life. He turned it off again and looked at Colton.

“Looks like it’s just your ride,” he said.

“How old’s your Jeep?”

“1974. This baby’s older than me.”

“Shit,” Colton muttered. “This ain’t good.”

“Chief, you want to tell me what the hell is going on? You’re really starting to screw with my head.”

“You want to know my theory? Well here it goes, Raven. I don’t think this was an accident. I think an EMP did this.”

“EMP? Isn’t that a band from the 70s?” Raven asked.

“Electromagnetic pulse,” Colton explained, shaking his head. “Could be caused by a nuclear weapon being detonated in the upper atmosphere.”

“A nuke? You got to be fucking kidding me. You think someone nuked the United States?”

Creek sat on his hind legs beside Raven and whined, pawing the man's leg. Raven bent down and stroked the Akita's fur.

"You been listening to the news, man?" Colton said, "The situation with North Korea is really bad. One of my old service buddies told me there's a rumor that a senator's kid got herself caught on the wrong side of the border, and a whole platoon of Marines had to blow up a prison compound to get her out."

Raven scratched nervously at his nose and considered setting the record straight. He tried not to think about his final mission too often, and he'd been sworn to secrecy about what he'd witnessed in North Korea. In the year and a half since leaving the Corps, Raven had tried to drown those memories in a bottle, but he could still see Billy's shattered face and the look of betrayal in Lee's eyes in the split second before Gunnery Sergeant Black blew his brains out. But surely that mission had nothing to do with whatever had happened here tonight?

The Chief was doing what cops always did—looking for somebody to blame. He didn't know the North Koreans were behind this, and he certainly didn't know that Raven had been part of the team who rescued Sarcone's granddaughter.

"You remember that flash we saw up in the meadow that was followed by what sounded like an explosion? That could have been from a bomb," Colton was saying.

"Hold on, Chief," Raven said, holding up his hands. "If that was a nuke, it would have been much louder than thunder and we would have seen more than a flash."

"Not if it was set off really high in the atmosphere. That would let the electromagnetic pulse cast a very large umbrella. Think of it like a massive lightning bolt that hits every house, car, and electrical device in a region. It would fry everything with microcircuits. That's why my car won't turn on and why my radio is dead. My cell signal is gone, too."

Colton jerked his chin toward the fires in the distance. "Your Jeep was built before the fancy computers were installed in cars."

Raven patted the hood of his Jeep and forced a smile, something he had practiced many times, but deep down he felt sick to his stomach. *This has nothing to do with you*, he told himself. *It's not your fault.*

"Must have been a really powerful EMP to drop those jets out of the air," Colton continued. "It could have also knocked out the grid in multiple states.

I'm pretty sure those jets were from Buckley AFB. They don't fly training missions this way. I had a buddy that worked with the 120th a few years back."

"You don't know what really happened," Raven said, choosing to ignore the fact that he'd been the one asking the Chief to theorize in the first place.

Colton nodded curtly. "You're right. And I won't know until I get back to town."

"And I'm guessing you need a ride."

"If it's not too much trouble," Colton said. "Otherwise, I could just commandeer your vehicle."

"Okay, but hurry it up. I want to check on my sister."

With another nod, Colton marched over to his truck and struggled to lift Melissa's body. Raven hadn't realized his Jeep would be serving as both taxi and hearse tonight, but he hurried over to help the Chief anyway.

Together, they carried her body out of the Explorer and put her in the back of the Jeep. Raven had added a second row of seats in the old vehicle, and the cargo space was cramped.

The blanket covering Melissa's face slipped down as Colton set her carefully inside. He pulled it back up to cover her with deliberate care. Then he walked back to his own vehicle and started pulling out heavy duffel bags, a shotgun, and his AR-15, stacking it all neatly in the back of the Jeep.

"What is all this stuff?" Raven asked.

"My war bag and my primary bug-out bag," Colton replied. "Plus my work gear. You tellin' me you don't carry a bug-out bag?"

Raven raised a brow. "I have some survival gear at home."

"That's the point. It's at home, not here when you need it."

Shrugging, Raven whistled at Creek, who jumped into the passenger seat of the Jeep. Raven shook his head and pointed at the back, and the dog reluctantly climbed into the second row.

"Thanks," Colton said.

"For what?" Raven asked.

Instead of answering him, Colton piled into the Jeep and tried his radio again. With Creek, Melissa, and Colton's gear safely inside, Raven climbed into the driver's side and fired up the Jeep again. It purred to life, the forty-three-year-old engine settling into a steady rhythm. Part of him still wanted to believe that Colton was wrong, that everything they'd witnessed tonight was just a series of unfortunate coincidences.

Colton suddenly looked up, an expression of dawning horror on his face. “Oh my God,” he whispered.

“What?” Raven asked.

“I just realized something.”

Raven remained silent, afraid to ask.

“Fallout,” Colton said quietly. “If that was a nuke, then the radiation could kill us all.”

— 6 —

Sandra panted heavily as she ran through the underbrush. Chokecherries and junipers scraped against her legs, tearing holes in her scrubs. She stepped in a pile of elk shit and cursed as she wiped it off in the dirt.

“Keep moving,” Nathan whispered.

Moonlight guided them deeper into the forest. The steep ground was slick and studded with sharp, moss-covered rocks. She was worried about Nathan’s ankle. One wrong move, and he could end up making it worse.

He stopped and gestured for Sandra to get down. She knelt next to him behind a maple tree and scanned the meadow they had left behind. Her breaths came out in icy puffs. She was wet, cold, and now she was bleeding from dozens of scratches.

“I don’t think he followed us,” Nathan said after a few moments of silence. “How far are we from town?”

“Half a mile from the first of the resorts, maybe a bit farther.”

Nathan looked over Sandra’s shoulder, squinting as if he was trying to focus. She turned and froze, heart punching her ribs when she saw a huge silhouette moving through the trees. As the creature moved up the embankment, she saw it wasn’t the soldier but an elk. After a moment, a second, smaller silhouette moved into the light.

They watched the majestic animals walk across the meadow, stopping to graze every few seconds. The male suddenly looked in their direction, mouth still chewing. Ears perking, the creature halted. A moment passed and it bent back down to eat, clearly deciding that the humans weren’t a threat.

Sandra envied the animals. They were protected by law in the park, so they didn’t have to worry about much. Most of them weren’t scared of humans anymore, and other predators were rare. Sandra still hadn’t forgiven Raven

for letting a couple of rich assholes kill a beautiful bull elk for money.

The babble of the Fall River, unseen beside the trail, did little to calm her nerves as she walked. She waded through the forest, pulling back limbs and stepping over fallen trees. The hardest part was feeling out the uneven ground. Rocks of all sizes peppered the forest floor, camouflaged with yellow moss and orange lichen.

For fifteen minutes they trekked deeper into the woods. Sandra checked behind them every few steps to see if the soldier was following, but she couldn't see much in the darkness. With only the glimmer of the half-hidden moon to guide them, she was having a hard time seeing ten feet in front of her.

But every time she stumbled, it only strengthened her resolve. She had to get back to civilization and figure out what was going on. Allie would be in bed by now, so that gave Sandra at least eight hours to find a ride to Loveland to pick her daughter up. She barely trusted Mark to watch Allie overnight, let alone in a crisis.

At last, they reached a grassy slope leading back up to Highway 34. The rooftops of a resort crested the pines down the road.

"Do you know where we are?" Nathan asked.

"We're past the park entrance and back in the city limits." Sandra looked to the east. "I don't think we can go much farther without returning to the road. It's too dark out here."

Nathan didn't hesitate. He continued up the hill, grimacing with each step. Sandra hurried after him. She wasn't used to being around men like this. Her brother was a strong man, but he never seemed to have much direction, especially after he left the Marines. He wouldn't tell her what had happened to him on his last tour of duty, but he had come back changed. Not so much that anyone other than his closest family would notice, but his smile had seemed more brittle, his behavior more reckless. The worst part was that he wouldn't tell her what was wrong.

Nathan grabbed the side of a tree and started working his way up the steep hill. She continued after him, feet sliding on pine needles. She reached out to grab a rock, skinning her palm.

"Ouch," she muttered.

"You okay?" He was leaning against a Douglas fir at the edge of the highway. There was a car a quarter mile away, but she couldn't see any passengers, and there was no movement at the first of the cabins along the

road.

“I’m fine,” she said.

“Let’s keep moving then,” Nathan ordered. He stood and waved her into the street as another voice echoed down the road.

“There you are!” The soldier with the shotgun stumbled out of the bushes.

“Dammit,” Nathan growled. He held up a hand. “Listen, sir, I don’t want any trouble. I’m just trying to get to town.”

“Should we run?” she whispered.

Nathan shook his head.

“I told you to wait up,” the soldier said, exhaling a cloud of cigarette smoke. He reached for the strap of his gun. “Is this some sort of terrorist attack? I need to know. I need to *prepare*.”

Nathan didn’t reply, and the man continued to walk toward them.

“You hard of hearing or what?” He flicked his cigarette onto the trail.

“Hey,” Sandra said. “Pick that up.”

The man looked down and then back at her like he didn’t understand what the problem was.

“I’m not talking to you, lady,” he said. Headlight beams swept across the road as the soldier hefted his shotgun. “Well I’ll be damned, looks like the cars are back on!” he shouted.

Nathan grabbed Sandra by the wrist and pulled her back. “Let’s go,” he said. She shook off his grip and started walking, but she could still feel the warmth of his fingers on her skin.

They made it a few feet before the soldier shouted after them. “Hey, who said you could leave!”

There was a clicking sound as the man pumped a shell into his shotgun.

“Just what I needed,” Nathan whispered. He reached for his gun again, but this time she was the one to grab his wrist.

“Don’t, please.”

The source of the headlights came around a bend in the road. It was an old Jeep Cherokee.

Sandra smiled for the first time since her car had died.

“Raven,” she said, letting go of Nathan.

“You know the driver?”

Sandra smiled. “He’s my brother.”

The Jeep stopped a few feet from the soldier. Two men stepped onto the road. It was Raven—and the person she least expected to see him with, Estes

Park Police Chief Marcus Colton.

“Evenin’, Chief,” the soldier said.

Colton grabbed a rifle and then shut the car door. He kept the muzzle toward the ground.

“Dale,” he replied. “Want to tell me why you got that shotgun out?”

Raven continued around the back of the truck to let Creek out while Colton approached Dale.

“Reckon we’re under attack. Just trying to get some answers,” Dale replied.

“These people aren’t a threat to you,” Colton said. “Why don’t you lower your gun?”

“Sandra, is that you?” Raven asked.

She ran toward her brother, moving in a wide arc around Dale. Raven reached out and folded her in a hug. Creek ran up and nudged Sandra’s leg.

“What the hell are you doing out here?” Raven asked.

“It’s a really long story,” she said. “Why are *you* here?”

Raven shook his head. “I’ll tell you later.”

Colton was approaching the irate soldier with his hand out. “I’m not going to tell you again to lower that shotgun.”

“You got your gun out,” Dale said as he raised the barrel of his shotgun from the ground. The muzzle swept past Sandra, and Raven pulled her out of the way, shielding her body with his.

“Watch it, asshole,” Raven snapped. Creek bared his teeth, reading his handler’s body movements.

“I’m just protecting myself,” Dale said. He turned to look at Nathan but found himself staring directly into the barrel of a pistol.

“I’d listen very carefully,” Nathan said in a firm voice. “This police officer asked you to drop your gun.”

Dale’s nostrils flared, and his eyes widened as he focused on the barrel.

“Drop the shotgun,” Colton repeated in a low voice.

Sandra wrapped her arms across her chest, shivering from more than the cold.

“Last chance,” Colton said.

“I’m a retired Army Ranger. Not a fucking terrorist,” Dale said. “You’re going to have to pry my gun out my cold…”

Colton directed the muzzle of his rifle at Dale’s head, pushing it against his skull. “I do not have time for this right now.” He looked to Raven and said,

“Take his shotgun.”

Raven didn’t hesitate. He pried the gun away from the soldier with little resistance.

“You’re going to regret that, Injun,” Dale said. Sandra scowled at him, struggling to hold back the torrent of insults she longed to shout at the racist prick.

Nathan backed away and holstered his pistol like nothing had happened. “I need a ride into town. Will that be a problem?”

“Nope,” Colton said as he took Dale’s gun from Raven and slung it over his back.

Raven was still glaring at Dale. “This guy is not getting in my Jeep.”

Dale spat on the ground. Sandra pulled on her brother’s hand, but he jerked it away, advancing on the soldier.

“Stop, Raven. Just walk away,” she said.

“Listen to your Injun girlfriend,” Dale said.

This time Sandra nearly hit the man.

“Dale, you just don’t know when to shut your mouth,” Colton said, stepping between them. “Back up toward the edge of the road, or I’m going to have to place you under arrest.”

That seemed to get through to Dale. He walked a few paces to the side of the highway. Colton nudged Raven, and Sandra pulled on his arm. He stood there, breathing heavily. Creek was at his feet, waiting for orders.

“You’re going to regret this, Marcus,” Dale said.

“It’s a long walk into town,” Colton said. “Use it to cool off.”

Dale spat on the pavement a second time. His face twisted into a scowl. “You’re going to leave me out here barehanded to fend off the wolves?”

“There are no predators up here, dummy,” Raven said. “Just you. What kind of man raises a gun toward a woman?” He shook his head and stomped away, muttering to himself.

When they got to the truck, Colton offered his hand to Nathan. “Chief of Police Marcus Colton.”

“Major Nathan Sardetti.”

They shook and Colton looked back at the mountains. “What happened up there?”

Nathan clenched his jaw and ignored the question. “You didn’t see my wingman eject, did you?”

“Afraid not, but I didn’t see you eject either, so he could have made it out.”

Colton looked toward the back of the Jeep. “This is going to sound crazy, but we’re transporting the body of a young girl back to town. It’s going to be a little crowded in the Jeep.”

“You found Melissa?” Sandra asked. She avoided looking in the back window. Her Allie was about the same age, and she couldn’t imagine the horror Melissa’s parents were going through. She didn’t *want* to imagine it.

“Let’s get going,” Colton said. He opened the front passenger door, put the seat down, and helped Sandra into the second row of seats. Then he scooted next to her. Raven opened the back lift for Creek. He jumped in and sat on his haunches.

Sandra twisted around to pet the dog on the head. A blanket covered Melissa’s body, but it did little to stifle the smell. Ten years as a nurse had taught Sandra about all sorts of foul odors, but this one didn’t make sense. It smelled like burned flesh, not decay. She held her breath and rolled down the window.

Raven fired up the Jeep and steered it away from Dale, who was standing in the middle of the road, hands on his hips. Colton pumped the shotgun shells out of Dale’s gun and dropped it onto the pavement as they sped away.

***

Charlize cursed a blue streak the moment she reached the lobby of her apartment. A few residents were downstairs in their pajamas, some with flashlights, all asking what was going on. Candles burned on a centrally-located wooden table, the glow dancing off the walls and illuminating the exhausted faces of her neighbors.

She tried to avoid their curious gazes. She rarely talked to anyone here, but she did recognize some faces. The last thing she wanted right now was to field their questions.

An elderly woman with a cane shuffled over towards Charlize. “Senator, do you…”

Clint met her halfway and redirected the question to himself.

“Do you know why the lights are out, sir? It’s cold in my apartment. When are they going to turn the heat back on?”

Charlize didn’t stick around to listen to the conversation. She heaved her backpack higher on her shoulders and continued across the lobby. The digital

clock on the wall had stopped at 9:45 p.m. It had to be after midnight now, but the streets were filled with people.

The double glass doors swung open, and Albert Randall rushed inside wearing his usual navy blue suit with a pair of tennis shoes instead of his polished dress shoes. He ducked his shaved head to clear the door and searched the room with the beam of a heavy flashlight, stopping when he saw Charlize.

“Damn, it’s good to see you,” Charlize said. Her eyes flitted to his shoes. On any other occasion, she would have cracked a joke.

Albert wiped his forehead. “It’s getting wild out there.”

“Is your family okay?”

“My wife Jane is taking our daughters Kylie and Abigail to her mom’s farmhouse first thing in the morning. It’s about a day’s walk out of the city. My brother Fred is going with them.”

“That’s probably a good idea,” Charlize said. She reached up to put a hand on Albert’s shoulder. “I appreciate you sticking with me, Big Al. I know you’d rather be with them.”

“Not abandoning you now, ma’am.” His southern drawl was strong and reassuring. Charlize was glad to have him by her side. The six-foot-six former football player had been on her security detail for five years, and he’d seen her through some hard times. She was more grateful than he knew for both his strength and his kindness.

“Good. I’m heading out,” she said. “I need to get to Capitol Hill.”

“Are you sure that’s a good idea? Maybe we should stay put for now,” Clint said, joining them.

“We trained for this, sir,” Albert said. “Remember Eagle Horizon?”

Clint nodded. “We’re supposed to be making a mad dash to the Capitol, I know. But the more I think about it, the more that sounds like a terrible idea.”

“We’re not going to fix anything by hiding here,” Charlize said. “Let’s go.”

Albert opened the door and waved them onto the sidewalk. He kept out in front, walking slowly, one hand inside his suit jacket, the other directing a flashlight on every civilian as if they might be a threat.

As they left the glow of the lobby, the darkness of the massive city closed in. The suffocating atmosphere made everything seem distorted, like Charlize was a lone fish exploring a coral reef.

“Stay close, ma’am,” Albert said. He centered his flashlight on the

sidewalk, pointing out hazards for Clint and Charlize to avoid. They worked their way down 12th Street, keeping away from people as best they could. Candles flickered in the windows of apartment buildings. On one stoop, residents were huddled around an oil lamp, talking in low, worried voices. Stranded drivers stood beside their cars, unsure whether to abandon them. Everyone was asking the same question: “Why are the lights off?”

Albert motioned for Charlize and Clint to cross the street as they approached a Walgreens. A throng of people had gathered outside the shuttered store. There were a few stragglers outside the nearby Radio Shack, peering into the window. If the power didn’t come back on soon, she feared there would be looting or riots.

Charlize’s gaze flitted to the sky. Where there should have been a steady stream of jets taking off from Reagan and Dulles, there were only clouds drifting aimlessly across the horizon.

“A couple thousand planes were probably airborne when the power went off,” she said. “The only reason we’re not seeing wreckage here is because of the no-fly zone over D.C.”

“Yeah, and think about all of the fighter jets we probably scrambled,” Clint said. “I’m guessing we lost…” His words trailed off when he saw Charlize’s face.

Dear God, please let Nathan be okay. Please let my son be okay.

Over the years, Charlize had prayed less and less often. Most of the time it didn’t seem like anyone was listening, especially after the accident. But deep down she still had faith, and she called on it now to steady her. Falling apart wouldn’t help Ty or Nathan. She would have to trust God to keep them safe until she could reach them.

Charlize looked away from the vacant sky. Ahead, a group of people had surrounded a police cruiser. Two officers were trying to reassure the crowd.

“What do you mean, you don’t know what’s going on?” a woman asked in a raised voice. “My car won’t turn on, my phone won’t work, and I don’t see a single light in the entire city.”

“I bet it was those Russians I read about on the internet!” a man cried.

“Idiot,” snapped another woman. “Haven’t you been listening to the news? If we were attacked, it was by ISIS.”

“Please, people, calm down,” one of the officers said.

No one was saying what she was thinking—that the North Koreans had hit D.C. with an EMP. She certainly wasn’t going to volunteer her opinion.

Charlize shook her head as more rumors began to fly from the crowd. Rumors would make things worse, escalating the fear and unease into outright panic. She recalled Hurricane Katrina, when New Orleans collapsed into pure anarchy. Without power, communication, and emergency services, things would fall apart here, too.

It was all the more reason they needed to get to the Capitol. The first objective was to get to her office and figure out what was going on. From there she would work with her colleagues to determine a plan, and finally, she would communicate that plan as far and wide as she could. With the plan complete, she would find a ride to Empire, Colorado, and pick up her son.

"We should cut across the Mall," Albert said. "Fewer civilians."

He walked out into the intersection of 12th and Pennsylvania. The block was mostly void of people, but a few teenagers were hanging out outside the Washington Wine and Liquor shop, eyeing the windows. Big Al walked past them, giving his best glower, and the teens thought better of looting the liquor store.

As she walked, Charlize went over scenarios in her mind, but the more she thought about it, the more it didn't make sense. Why would North Korea launch a preemptive EMP attack? Mutually assured destruction had stopped America and the Soviets from firing nukes during the Cold War, and it had prevented India and Pakistan from blowing each other to hell. So what had driven the supreme leader of North Korea to plan an attack against the US when he knew it would result in the death of his people?

Madness, Charlize thought. She had heard the intelligence reports on the North Korean leader. It was no secret the bastard was insane, but she didn't know he was *this* insane.

"Wouldn't go that way if I were you!" one of the teenage boys shouted. "Some dude got stabbed before the lights went out. You can see his guts!"

The teenagers were standing on the corner of the sidewalk now. They pointed toward an ambulance halfway down the street. Several people were lingering around the paramedics, who were working on a patient.

"Go home," Albert ordered.

"Whatever," said the teenager. The kids laughed and took off on their skateboards.

Charlize could see the wheels turning in Albert's mind, but he only hesitated for a moment. With a wave of his flashlight, he directed them onward. They kept to the side of the street opposite from the paramedics. As

they passed, one of them stood and pulled off gloves dripping with blood.

“Call it,” she said.

Charlize was focused on the scene and didn’t notice the blur of motion coming around the corner until it was too late. The front window of the CVS on their right shattered, sending shards of broken glass to the pavement.

“Grab the hard shit!” someone shouted as two black-clad figures rushed the pharmacy.

“Get back,” Albert said, waving Charlize behind him.

A woman screamed as the two hooded men used bricks to punch out the jagged glass. They dropped the bricks and climbed inside.

Albert held out a tree trunk of an arm and ushered her away from the broken windows. “Ma’am, let’s go.”

More people were watching now, including the two paramedics.

“Ma’am!” Albert repeated when Charlize didn’t move. He turned to look at her, his eyes widening as he saw the gun in her hands. “Where the hell did you get that?”

Pulling the M9 was almost a reflex. She was trained to protect herself, senator or not. The smooth handle of the gun felt reassuring in her hands.

The clatter of falling shelves and breaking glass came from the store, and a moment later the two men re-emerged cradling boxes of prescription drugs. Their faces were covered with skulls masks, but Charlize could see their wild eyes.

“Hey, you!” shouted a voice.

Two figures were approaching—police officers with shotguns shouldered.

“Agent Randall, Capitol Police!” Albert shouted back. He held out his badge, but both officers were already directing their guns toward the looters.

“Hands on your head!” one of them shouted.

Both of the men stepped forward, glass crunching under their shoes. The bigger of the pair dropped the boxes and turned to run.

“Don’t move!” the other officer yelled.

The looters took off in separate directions, prescription drug boxes tumbling across the concrete. The officers gave chase, and Charlize finally lowered her gun. She stuck it back into her waistband as the police vanished around the next corner.

“Ma’am,” Albert began to say.

“I know. Let’s go.”

The paramedics retreated to their ambulance and the crowd moved on, the

chatter of the shocked citizens echoing down the streets.

Albert kept his gun out as he crossed into Pennsylvania Avenue. The dome of the Capitol looked eerie in the moonlight, like something out of a dream—familiar, and at the same time, utterly strange.

They turned down 12th Street, heading for the Mall. Albert guided them around the dead vehicles, some of them still guarded by their owners, all waiting to be rescued or told what to do.

Charlize, Albert, and Clint didn't stop to answer their questions. The nighttime trek through the nation's capital reaffirmed her worst suspicions. Americans, in most cases, were not ready for a catastrophe. Most of these city dwellers wouldn't survive the month without cell phones and take-out dinners.

Pop, pop, pop.

Gunshots sounded nearby, and Charlize's hand went for her gun. There was no way to know if the officers were firing on the looters, or if the looters had been armed, or if it had anything to do with the robbery she'd just witnessed.

Waving with the beam of his flashlight, Albert said, "Come on, ma'am, we're almost there."

The familiar shapes of the Smithsonian Institution emerged in the darkness. Charlize kept pace with Albert as they neared the National Mall. They had made it to Constitutional Avenue when another sound rang out. It started off as a guttural booming not unlike a rocket blasting off, and it quickly rose into a thundering *vroom*.

Charlize halted in the middle of the empty street. Far beyond the edges of the dark city, something was rising into the sky above the ocean, leaving a trail of fiery exhaust. She followed the trail up, recognizing the nuclear-tipped ballistic missile. *Mutually assured destruction*, she thought. Intellectually, she had already accepted this could be the end of the world, or at least the world she knew. But actually seeing the launch of the retaliatory strike was different. She felt the shock like a physical blow, not unlike the times her F-15 Strike Eagle was shot at in Afghanistan.

The missile, joined by several others in the distance, streaked into the clouds as they curved away from an American submarine lurking somewhere under the chilly surface of the Atlantic Ocean. She had little doubt they were headed to turn North Korea into a smoking crater.

"My God," Clint said.

“God has nothing to do with this,” Charlize whispered. “This is mutually assured…” Her words trailed off, unable to finish her sentence. Somewhere inside of her she had held onto hope that things weren’t as bad as they seemed, but that, she knew, was a lie.

Albert lowered his gun and flashlight like a soldier surrendering to the enemy. “Were those nukes?”

Charlize nodded and said, “Fire from the clouds,” the motto of the 33rd Fighter Wing—a motto she never thought she’d use again.

She watched the final missile disappear into the sky, and then she took off running toward Capitol Hill.

— 7 —

Raven slowed as his headlights washed over a snaking line of people on the road. Hundreds of people from Estes Park had been out looking for Melissa Stone when the F-16s fell from the sky. Those that weren't with the largest group searching at Prospect Mountain were returning from a sweep of the foothills outside the park.

Raven was still attempting to process everything that had happened in the past four hours, and Major Sardetti wasn't helping matters.

"This is all confidential," Nathan was saying. "What I'm telling you should not be relayed to the public. It will only incite panic; that's why I was reluctant to tell you anything, Ms. Spears."

"Understood," Colton said. "But as police chief, I need to know what's going on."

"First Lieutenant Blake and I were sent on a combat air patrol earlier this evening at the governor's request. It seemed like a routine CAP. Thirty minutes in, the air traffic control from Tinker Air Force Base in Oklahoma contacted the two other pilots from the 120th to check out a Chinese commercial airliner heading toward Wichita over the Rockies. A few minutes after that, the Chinese pilots became unresponsive. The airliner changed course toward Denver and started climbing."

"Chinese?" Raven asked. "So this wasn't North Korea?"

"Let the major finish," Colton said. "I'm guessing there's more to the story."

Nathan nodded. "It wasn't a Chinese plane; it was a North Korean Ilyushin II-28 that was carrying a nuclear weapon. Best way I can figure it is the North Koreans used fake transponder codes to look like a Chinese plane. Those bastards are damn good at hacking. Blake and I turned around for support

when the plane went off radar. By the time we saw the blast, it was too late. The EMP fried our systems, and I lost all control of my Viper."

Raven wanted to pound the steering wheel but gripped it tighter instead. His jaw clenched as if he was trying to bite back the confession of what his team had done in North Korea eighteen months earlier. He already felt like the guilt was going to smash him flatter than roadkill.

Sandra caught his gaze in the rearview mirror. She had a hand over her mouth, and her eyes were shining with unshed tears.

"I have to find a working radio to contact Buckley AFB," Nathan said. "Do you have any ham radios at the station?"

Colton shook his head. "Afraid not. Everything went to digital."

"Great," Nathan said. "My nephew is near Empire, so if I can't find a radio here, my next priority is to reach him. How far is it from Estes Park?"

"A couple hours south of here by car," Colton said. "But on foot…"

Raven steered the Jeep around an abandoned car and continued toward the town, passing the cabins and resorts nestled along Fall River.

"Major, what about the nuke?" Colton said. "How much of the grid would it have knocked out?"

"Hard to say. Depends on how powerful the weapon was."

"Guess," Raven said.

Nathan scratched his chin. "From what I know about nuclear attacks, experts say it would only take one very powerful weapon set off at eighty thousand feet or so over Missouri or another central location to knock out our entire grid."

"How far up was that plane?" Raven asked.

"Over fifty thousand feet," Nathan replied. "My guess is that all of Colorado is dark."

Sandra gasped from the back seat. "The entire state?"

"What about radiation?" Colton asked. "Should we be worried?"

Nathan focused his green eyes on Colton. "It depends on the winds, and again, on the power of the weapon."

"I'll ask my officers to find the battery-operated Geiger counters as soon as I get back to the station."

"I have another question," Raven said.

Nathan looked over.

"Is it possible there were more nukes set off across the country?"

"I'm praying that's not the case," Nathan said. "But I think we should all

prepare for the worst."

A hard silence filled the vehicle. Raven wished he could turn on some tunes to lighten the mood, but none of the regular channels were broadcasting anymore. More than anything, he wished he could drown himself in a bottle of liquor. But if the country was at war, he would need his senses sharp.

He eased off the gas as they approached a group of people waving from the center of Highway 34 just outside of town.

"Keep driving," Colton ordered.

No one spoke for several moments. Sandra broke the silence with a whimper. She cupped her head with her hands. "This day just keeps getting worse. First that note, then…"

"What note?" Raven asked.

Sandra looked up and shook her head. "It's nothing. I just want to get Allie back."

"Don't worry, Sis. We'll get her after we drop them off at the station."

"Okay," she said, sucking in another breath. "Okay."

"Honestly, if I were you, I'd stay put," Nathan said.

Raven twisted to look him in the eye. "Why's that?"

"Aside from the threat of radiation? Look ahead."

Clicking the high beams back on, Raven steered down the final stretch of the highway before they hit town. The lights hit more figures trekking along the roadway, but he didn't see anything out of the ordinary. If there was one thing he hated more than being told what to do, it was being patronized.

"What, Major? Why don't you tell me what you see, 'cause I just see more people walking."

"That's the point," Nathan said. "There isn't a single other working car on the road right now. When people realize their cars aren't going to turn back on, they are going to be looking at this one with very envious eyes."

Raven reached for a cigarette and wedged it between his lips with shaky fingers. He didn't like Nathan's attitude, but the major was right. People were already stopping to look at his Jeep. If Nathan's theory was correct, then those curious stares were going to turn into something much worse in the coming days.

When they reached town, Raven turned onto the main street, a stretch of restaurants, jewelry and t-shirt shops, ice cream parlors, and hiking stores that was usually alive with tourists. Now it was empty save for a few pedestrians. One of them pointed at his vehicle, and Raven hit the gas.

The parking lot beside the town hall was mostly vacant, and the immaculate green grass of Bond Park was untouched by the usual couples and families. Raven pulled into the lot and put the Jeep in park. He tucked the unlit cigarette under the side of his baseball cap. If the world really was ending, then he'd need to ration his smokes.

"I'll help you with Melissa, then we're out of here," Raven said.

"You don't want to stick around to see what the Geiger counters say?" Colton got out of the truck and threw the strap of his AR-15 over his back.

Raven checked with his sister, but she shook her head. "I have to get to Allie."

"We're sure, Chief," he said.

"Suit yourself."

"Thanks for wrapping my ankle, Sandra," Nathan said, holding out his hand to her. Raven did not like the way the stuck-up major was looking at his sister. "Best of luck getting to your daughter."

Nathan glanced at Raven next. "Be careful out there. The roads are going to get dangerous. You drive to Loveland as fast as you can and don't stop for anything until you get there. That goes double for the trip back."

"Yes sir," Raven replied, barely keeping the sarcasm from his voice. Between Colton and this guy, he felt like he was back in the Marines again, being ordered around by a couple of bullies.

Nathan looked at Sandra one more time and then limped toward town hall. She climbed into the front seat and whistled for Creek to jump up with her.

Colton dropped his gear outside the front doors of town hall, propping one open with a bag. Then he returned for Melissa's body. With Raven's assistance, they hoisted her from the Jeep.

"Thanks for what you did up there. When you get back from Loveland, stop by the station. I'll make sure you get paid, plus a bonus for the extra trouble," Colton said.

Raven had completely forgotten about the check, which was very unlike him. Hell, he wasn't even sure the bank would be able to cash a check now.

"Thanks, Chief." He paused and then added, "I'm sorry we couldn't save her."

Colton picked Melissa up in both arms and carried the dead girl into the building. Several officers came to help. One of them was Don Aragon, who gave Raven a stern look. If it were up to the patrol sergeant, Raven would be sitting behind bars in the Larimer County Jail. Raven tipped his hat to him

with a wry grin as he walked away.

“You know where those Geiger counters are, Don?” Colton asked.

Raven didn’t stick around to listen to the conversation. He shut the lift gate after retrieving his crossbow and his Remington 700 rifle. He didn’t want to use them, but he was glad they were armed. Shit was about to get chaotic out here, and he had his family to protect.

Jumping in the truck, he handed Sandra the rifle. “Remember how to use this?”

Sandra stared at the rifle like it was some sort of alien artifact. He checked his sister’s dark brown eyes. They were wide and frightened, but not panicked. After a moment, she rested the stock against her shoulder and angled the muzzle toward the open window.

“Yeah, I remember,” she said.

“Good, because you’re riding shotgun tonight, little sister. Let’s go get Allie.”

***

Charlize wished she could climb inside a fighter jet and tear through the sky, dropping bombs on the North Korean bastards that had sent the United States back to the stone age in the blink of an eye.

She could still hear the rumble of the rockets in the distance, but by the time the nukes reached Pyongyang, most of the government leaders and their families would already be underground. Satellite images had showed the massive bunkers the North Koreans had built to shield the elite from nuclear attacks. There were entire cities built below ground.

The twenty-eight thousand American troops on the border, along with the innocent North Korean and South Korean civilians, would likely die from the blast while the madman who had ordered the strike against the United States sheltered in luxury. She closed her eyes, hoping that the soldiers and civilians had gotten evacuation orders in time.

“You okay?” Clint asked.

Charlize lied to her Chief of Staff with a nod and continued down Madison Drive NW toward the Capitol. There were only two cars on the entire road, and Charlize didn’t see a single person inside the dead vehicles. The soothing trickle of rain and the breeze whispering through the branches were the only

sounds. The silence of the usually vibrant city gave her the chills. It was like being in outer space.

Albert jogged down the road, gun still drawn but the muzzle pointed at the ground. He checked their six every few feet and scanned the park for any signs of civilians, but the National Mall was deserted. Nothing stirred in the shadows.

It took them ten minutes to move down Madison Drive. They passed the National Gallery of Art, where Richard had liked to take Charlize on dates when she had first been elected to Congress. That seemed like so long ago. How long would it be before power and normalcy was restored to Washington? She had the terrible feeling that nobody would be enjoying lattes at the museum café for a long time—maybe never again.

"Ma'am," Albert said, keeping his voice low. He pointed at the intersection of 3rd Street, and Charlize ran to catch up. Clint panted a few paces behind her.

"I told you to quit smoking," Charlize said.

Clint forced a smile between breaths. "Working for you is stressful, ma'am. I have to relax somehow."

When they reached the corner of Pennsylvania, Albert clicked off his flashlight and halted. A cloud swallowed the moon, and blinding darkness spread across the city like a blanket had been pulled over it.

"Why are we stopping?" Clint whispered.

Charlize strained to see through the wall of darkness. It closed in, suffocating, pressing on her in the silence.

"Stay back," Albert said. "Senator, get behind me."

Charlize made out shapes moving across Pennsylvania Avenue. Combat experience taught her that the eyes could play tricks on you in the dark. The shapes might have been hostiles, or they might have just been shadows.

She reached for her M9, but she didn't yet pull it from her waistband. She kept an eye on the moving shapes, waiting for the next break in the clouds.

"Big Al, can we get some light back here?" Clint asked.

Albert didn't reply, and Charlize slowly pulled her M9. Something had the big guy spooked. The sound of footfalls on the concrete sent a spike of adrenaline through her veins, the tingle prickling up her arms. The noise seemed to be coming from every direction, but that was impossible. Charlize hadn't seen anyone behind them.

"Ma'am, Clint, put your hands above your heads," Albert said, his voice

calm but firm.

A sliver of the moon suddenly emerged, and its glow fell over two dozen police officers surrounding them. They came from all directions, assault rifles and shotguns shouldered. Most of them were dressed in SWAT gear except for a squad of men moving up Pennsylvania wearing black suits and ties. The leader, a middle-aged man with a crew cut and solid jawline, shouldered a Knight's SR-16 CQB assault rifle.

"Drop your guns!" he shouted.

Albert quickly placed his pistol on the ground and said, "Albert Randall, Capitol Police. Badge number…"

An officer in SWAT gear kicked the pistol away from Albert and put his hands behind his back.

"Hands above your heads!" someone shouted at Charlize and Clint.

They both did as ordered.

"I'm Senator Charlize Montgomery, and I'm trying to get to my office," Charlize said.

The leader lowered his assault rifle as the SWAT officers patted Charlize and Clint down. One of the men yanked Charlize's M9 away. A flashlight shone in her face. She squinted at the bright light but didn't raise a hand to shield her eyes.

The man with the assault rifle kept the flashlight on Charlize. "I'm Special Agent Timothy Redline with the Secret Service. What's your security number, Senator?"

"1984Whiskey2001," Charlize quickly replied.

Agent Redline directed the light to a pad of paper and then glanced back up.

"My apologies, ma'am, but we've been moved to DEFCON 1 so I have to check everyone. My team will escort you to the Capitol."

Charlize wanted to ask a hundred questions, but there was just one that mattered right now. "How widespread is the power outage?"

Redline was looking over her shoulder, distracted.

"Agent?"

"Sorry, Senator, but I'm not sure. Things are chaotic and communication is slow," Redline said. "We need to keep moving. You will receive a full briefing once you get to safety. COOP has been implemented. We will be evacuating somewhere safe as soon as we have transportation. For now, we're heading to the Capitol."

“COOP, as in the Continuity of Operations Plan?” Clint asked, glancing at Charlize.

“Correct,” she said.

“So that means…” Clint began to say.

Charlize finished his thought. “We’re being moved out of D.C.”

The news wasn’t surprising, considering the nuclear missiles, but she had hoped this was a localized attack. Now she was starting to wonder. Could the entire grid be down nationwide?

“My gun, please,” she said and reached out for her M9.

The officer who had taken the weapon handed it to her. Across the street, another team wearing SWAT gear was setting up a perimeter to cover the south streets. There were other checkpoints already set up to the west and east.

Redline motioned for three of his team members as the rest of the guards fanned out across the National Mall. Albert dipped his chin, signaling it was okay for Charlize and Clint to follow. They continued down the street after Redline and his men, the moonlit dome of the Capitol rising in the distance. Dozens of Secret Service officers and Capitol Police with assault rifles patrolled the grounds as if they were preparing for an imminent attack.

Charlize was a combat pilot before she was a politician; she knew no one could guarantee her safety. But now she wondered if the Secret Service was aware of other threats from North Korea. Could the EMP have been an overture to something worse?

— 8 —

There were bad nights on the job, and then there were terrible nights. This one was shaping up to be one of the worst in Colton's years of law enforcement. He palmed the table and waited for the chatter and the questions to die down.

He had a hundred things he needed to do, and his mind was racing. His first order had been to activate the emergency operations center. Captain Jake Englewood, his right-hand man, had already handled that. He stood next to Colton in the conference room, his burly form and bright red beard making him appear too big for the small space. Jake had coordinated the response and recovery to the floods that had knocked out much of the town's water and power in 2013, and Colton trusted him to help with this disaster.

"Hold your questions and stay calm," Jake said in his authoritative voice. He rolled up his sleeves like he was preparing for a fistfight, revealing several tattoos—his way of telling everyone to shut the hell up. His size, his ink, and his booming voice had earned him the nickname "The Viking," but most people were too scared of Jake to say it to his face.

Officers Tom Matthew and Rick Nelson filed into the room. Both men were young, and Rick had a newborn at home. Colton had seen their frightened looks before on the faces of green soldiers in Afghanistan. He'd never thought he would see that kind of fear back at home. He nodded and gestured for them both to take a seat next to Margaret, the station's administrative assistant and dispatcher.

Next up was getting the battery-powered Geiger counters out to make sure they weren't about to all die of radiation poisoning. Once he figured out what they were dealing with, he would be better able to plan a response. After that he could handle the rest of his unpleasant to-do list, like contacting Rex and

his wife to tell them their daughter was dead. Finally, he needed to get home to his own family and start making preparations. His wife and daughter were probably worried sick.

“Has anyone been able to get ahold of Mayor Andrews?” Colton asked.

“You don’t really want her here right now, do you, sir?” Detective Lindsey Plymouth answered from across the table. Colton had recruited the feisty redhead from Denver as the newest member of his team, but sometimes he wondered if he’d made a mistake.

Colton acted like he hadn’t heard Lindsey, but she was right. Mayor Gail Andrews was a micromanager, and she was constantly getting involved with police business. He scratched at the space between his upper lip and nose and then exhaled.

“All right, everyone, listen up. It’s going to be a very long night. Here’s the situation. Raven Spears and I found Melissa Stone about two hours ago on Ypsilon. She…she didn’t make it. While we were up there, a pair of F-16s fell from the sky after a nuclear weapon was detonated at fifty two thousand feet.”

The gathered officers gasped, and Lindsey shouted “Bullshit!” Colton couldn’t give them a chance to digest the information. He continued before anyone could ask questions.

“Major Nathan Sardetti was able to eject from his F-16 before it crashed,” Colton explained. “He’s trying to get our radio to work and contact his base. The EMP knocked out every electronic in the city.”

Detective Tim Ryburn ran a hand through his hair. “A nuke? Are you sure?”

“I bet that’s what my wife and I heard at our ranch,” Matthew said. “Sounded like a massive explosion, but we just thought it was the storm.”

Lindsey was still shaking her head. “You’re absolutely sure, Chief?”

“Hold your questions until I’m done.”

She settled back into her seat and folded her arms.

“Most of you were here for the 2013 floods,” Colton continued. “We were cut off then, and it looks like we’re cut off now. But this is different. We may be at risk from fallout, and there’s a murderer on the loose.”

He scanned his officers. Several of the men and women in this room were rookies. Most of them had come here to avoid major crime in cities like Denver or Chicago. Estes Park was a quaint tourist town; the last murder had been years ago. But these were all good officers and he had to trust them.

“I’ve put Jake in charge of the EOC, but things are going to work differently than last time. For one, we probably aren’t going to have access to the Red Cross, National Guard, or other agencies. I’m hoping we can make contact with Sheriff Gerrard at the Larimer County Office, but he’s going to have his hands full.”

The officers began muttering anxiously again, and Jake stepped in to settle them down. “We’re lucky this happened off season. There are probably only around ten thousand people in town tonight, if you include all of the tourists.”

Colton nodded. “Jake, I want you to work with Lindsey and Margaret on an inventory of every resource in town. From food and water to vehicles that still work. If it could possibly be useful, I want it on the list.”

“Roger that, sir, I’ll start first thing in the morning.”

Colton shook his head. “Not in the morning. Right after this meeting.”

“Do we *have* a single working vehicle?” Lindsey asked.

No one replied. Colton thought of Raven’s Jeep and cursed himself for letting him take it to Loveland. He should have commandeered it when he had the chance.

“How about that guy on Moraine Avenue with the old Volkswagens for sale?” Ryburn asked. “I bet those will work. Maybe our H1 will start, too.”

“Someone check it out after this,” Colton said.

“I haven’t started up my 1952 Chevy pickup in a while,” Jake said. “I’ll try it when I get home.”

“Sounds good. Can someone check on Major Sardetti’s progress with the radio?” Colton asked.

“I’ll go,” Margaret said.

“What about refugees?” Jake asked. “If there’s fallout, then people are going to start leaving the cities. I’d be willing to bet some of them will make their way up here.”

Colton shared a meaningful look with Jake. They had served together overseas on two tours. Their first time out, they’d been National Guardsmen stationed in Kabul, Afghanistan. The United States and her allies had softened up the city with bombing raids. When ground troops had finally infiltrated the capital, it had been in complete chaos. That was just one of multiple examples he could think of, from Syria to Lebanon to the Gaza Strip. When basic services like power were cut off, the refugees fled.

“We’re going to have to set up shelters,” Colton said. “What about the Stanley?”

“I’ll talk to Jim,” Matthew said.

Colton and the manager of the iconic hotel had been friends for a long time. The place had become famous after *Dumb and Dumber* and *The Shining* miniseries had been filmed there, and the old buildings were large enough to house thousands. It was a start.

“Refugees and stranded tourists aren’t our only concern,” Colton said. “Once people figure out what’s going on, they are going to raid every supermarket, pharmacy, and hardware store.”

“Most of the perishable stuff is gonna be spoiled in a day,” Ryburn said. “Might as well eat it now.”

Colton stood up straighter and, using his most commanding voice, said, “The first thing I’m officially doing as Chief of Police is declaring a state of emergency. I want an officer stationed at every building we deem a critical facility, starting with food, water, and medicine.”

The order drew a few uncertain gazes, but he continued with his speech. “We are in a unique situation, folks. We have a constant water supply from the mountains, and we have a decent stock of food, but if that nuke knocked out power in several states, then we can’t expect help anytime soon.”

Several voices broke out around the table.

“What do you mean? Do you think there was more than one nuke?” Lindsey asked.

“Could there be more attacks?” asked Matthew.

“Chief, my wife and I have a baby at home,” Nelson said. “If there’s a killer on the loose, then…”

Colton sighed. “Everyone, please calm down.”

The questions kept coming until Jake finally pounded on the table. “Chief Colton said to calm down!” he boomed.

The room quieted like the President of the United States had suddenly walked in.

Rustling came from the hallway, and then the door opened. Don, his uniform drenched, stepped into the room holding a large plastic crate. He placed it on the table. Panting, he announced, “I found them!”

Lindsey scooted over to make room. “What are those for?”

“They detect radiation,” Colton said. He pulled out one of the Geiger counters and held up the probe. It had been years since he’d used one, and it took him a second to re-familiarize himself with the control panel. He found the audio switch. A clicking sound came from the device as he walked into

the hallway and out of the building.

His staff followed him outside. Several flashlights flicked on, spreading beams over the parking lot. It was eerily quiet, and a soft drizzle fell from the sky. Jake and Don flanked Colton as he stepped out into the street. Holding up the probe to the sky, Colton watched the needle. The machine hissed static as he waved the probe back and forth.

“That doesn’t sound good,” Jake said.

Don leaned closer. “What’s the reading?”

After making another pass, Colton checked the screen again and turned back to his staff.

“Looks like about .04 millrads per hour right now, which is normal. But the fallout might not have hit us yet. It could take a day or more depending on the winds.”

The front doors swung open and Nathan limped out. He eyed the Geiger counter and raised an eyebrow.

“Are you detecting any radiation?” the pilot asked.

“Not yet,” Colton said.

Nathan looked to the sky. “I’m not an expert, but I don’t think there would be fallout if the fireball from the nuke didn’t touch the ground, but that doesn’t mean we’re in the clear.”

“How do you mean?” Colton asked.

“It’s possible that a radioactive cloud might still be headed our way,” Nathan said. “Again, I’m not sure because I have no form of communication to confirm this. Everything digital is fried. What I really need is a battery-powered analog radio. Doesn’t anybody have a ham radio in this town? That’s my best shot of contacting Buckley AFB.”

“Bill Catcher is a ham radio operator,” Jake said. “He also used to be a technician for the power company, way back in the day.”

“And he’s a spook,” Lindsey said. “The guy signs his signature in blood.”

“Yeah, he’s not a big fan of the government and won’t help us willingly if we ask for assistance,” Jake said.

Colton lowered the probe and shut off the Geiger counter. “Don’t phrase it as a question then. Jake, once you get the EOC set up, why don’t you go pay Bill a visit? We’re going to need his help whether he likes it or not.”

“On it, Chief.”

“I’ll ride along,” Nathan said. “If that’s okay with you?”

Colton nodded at the pilot. “Whatever you need, Major. The rest of you

head back inside for your assignments.”

He lingered outside, gazing up at the moon hanging low over the mountains. It looked peaceful enough, but Colton had a bad feeling about all of this. He turned the Geiger counter back on and held up the probe toward the sky, hoping to God that something worse wasn’t heading their way.

***

Rocky bluffs arced over Highway 34, blocking out much of the moonlight. If it weren’t for the Jeep’s headlights, Raven wouldn’t have been able to see ten feet in front of him. He kept an eye out for stranded tourists or worse, a wandering elk. Hitting one of the beasts would be the end of his Jeep—and likely his and Sandra’s lives.

His sister was staring blankly out the passenger window. “I still can’t believe Melissa is gone. Could her killer really be the same person that was talking to Allie outside my house a few weeks ago? And what about that weird note I got? Could it be connected?”

“I don’t know. According to Colton, the suspect was driving a blue F-150 pickup. That’s the same type of truck you saw outside your house, right?”

“Yes,” Sandra said. She looked away from the window, her face drawn and haggard. “How could any of this happen?”

Creek let out a low whine and then tucked his head back under her arm. She scratched him behind the ears, and the dog settled.

“What did that note say again?” he asked.

“*The storm is coming*. What is that even supposed to mean?”

“Honestly, I don’t think it’s connected to what happened to Melissa. One of your crazy neighbors or a lovesick patient you turned down for a date probably wrote it.” He twisted the steering wheel to avoid a minivan stalled partway in his lane. The headlights captured a man putting gas into the van with a red canister. He looked toward the Jeep, shielding his eyes with one hand.

Raven glanced at the fuel gauge; the Jeep was down to less than half a tank. It would get him to Loveland, but not all the way home.

“My heart hurts, Raven. I’m truly scared right now.”

“It’s okay, Sis. We’ll get Allie, and I won’t let anything happen to either of you.” He pulled the cigarette from his hat and placed it between his lips,

trying to hide his anxiety. Sandra hated it when he smoked around her and flat-out refused to let him light up around Allie, but he was having a hard time focusing without it.

It was already ten p.m. and it would take another forty-five minutes to get to Loveland, maybe more. He was driving slower than normal on the winding roads. That would put him back in Estes Park around one, as long as everything went smoothly.

“Think Mark is going to let her go willingly?” Raven asked.

Sandra’s shoulders tensed, but she didn’t reply immediately.

“It’s okay,” Raven repeated.

The moon cast an eerie blue light over the tips of the trees. It was normally a beautiful drive, with rocky cliffs framing the highway on both sides with forests of ponderosas and aspens climbing up the inclines. The Big Thompson River rushed alongside the road.

Most of the houses out here belonged to preppers and survivalists that wanted to live away from civilization. There were a few million-dollar houses nestled between the shacks powered by solar panels and geothermal energy, but most of the resorts and vacation cabins were clustered on the other side of Estes Park.

The tires thumped over the road as they approached a bridge. The Big Thompson River roared in the distance.

“Bad spirits,” Sandra muttered.

Raven took his eyes off the road for a second to look at her. “What?”

“The bad spirits have finally come to reclaim the Middle World. The storms, Melissa, now this attack.”

Raven chuckled, but then he saw the serious look on his sister’s face. She wasn’t kidding.

“Remember what Grandma and Grandpa used to say about the way we treat the earth? They used to talk about the myths from *The Origin of Disease and Medicine*. Remember?”

Raven recalled the stories. The Cherokee viewed the world as having three parts: the Middle World, where plants, animals, and humans lived; the Upper World, where the protective spirits lived; and the Under World, where the bad spirits dwelled.

“Yes,” Raven said. “I actually told Colton something similar when we found Melissa. The signs of the apocalypse have been here for a while, but __”

“But nothing. Maybe nature is finally reclaiming what we have destroyed. Maybe the animals and plants have had enough.”

“Those are just stories.”

Sandra shook her head at him like she used to when they were kids after Raven had said something stupid.

“No, big brother. They aren’t. Remember the Water Cannibals?”

Raven sucked on the cigarette hanging from his lips. God, he wanted to light it and take a drag.

“I know you remember,” Sandra said. “You used to crawl into my bed when we were little because you were so scared.”

He tried to laugh. “Never happened.”

Raven had been terrified of those creatures when he was younger, but tonight his fear had become real. He could still smell the little girl’s charred flesh lingering in the back of his Jeep. Sandra didn’t need to know that particular detail. It had to just be a coincidence. There was no chance that the man who killed Melissa would have known the Cherokee story. He shook the thought away and looked at Creek.

“What do you think?”

Creek glanced up and growled.

“There you have it,” Raven said. “Creek agrees with me. Just stories, Sis. Water Cannibals aren’t real.”

Sandra turned away, stroking the barrel of the rifle with a finger as she stared out the window. They were silent for the next ten minutes. Raven was okay with that. He needed the silence right now.

Every time he saw a stranded vehicle, he put his foot on the brakes, but he didn’t stop. Not even for the family walking on the side of the road. A man and his wife were holding the hands of their two kids as they made their way toward Loveland, guided only by a tiny flashlight.

“Maybe we should help them,” Sandra said.

“We can’t. We need to get to Allie.” Raven hated to agree with Major Sardetti about anything, but he was right about one thing. Once people figured out what was going on, his Jeep would be a prime target. They had to pick up his niece and get to safety before the shit hit the fan.

A few minutes later the beams fell on the jagged bluffs of Big Thompson Canyon. Here the road twisted out of the mountains and into the foothills. They passed several ranches and small shops selling jam and pies. The dense woods thinned and the pines were replaced by shrubs and bushes in the arid

landscape.

They were almost to Loveland.

Raven had kept his foot on the gas as they climbed a steep incline, but he eased off the gas when he saw the crimson glow of a fire rise over the foothills. Sandra saw it at the same time. She leaned forward in her seat.

“What is that?” she asked.

“Looks like a pretty big fire to me.”

Raven gently pressed down on the gas. They drove for several minutes in silence, both of them looking out the windows for a better view around the twists and turns of the road.

The fiery glow was coming from the east, not too far from Loveland. Tendrils arched away from a fire, licking the sky. The smoke drifted into his open window. He rolled it up almost all the way and wedged his cigarette back under the side of his baseball cap.

“That looks really close to the city,” Sandra said.

“Don’t worry, it’s on the outskirts. Far from where Mark lives.”

As they approached it, the fire increased in size until it was a massive, flaming ball.

“I bet it was a plane,” he said, taking his eyes off the road to look at Sandra. “The EMP would have knocked them out of the sky. Anything with modern electronics like that…”

“Watch out!” Sandra screamed.

Raven swerved just in time to avoid a motorcycle abandoned in the middle of the lane. The tires squealed as he fought for control. He almost overcorrected, but training from his days driving a Humvee in Iraq kicked in.

“I’m sorry,” Raven said, body numb from a shot of adrenaline. “I didn’t see it.” He checked his sister with a glance. She was gripping her chest as if she was suffering a heart attack. As soon as Raven looked back to the road, he could see why.

They were coming up on the wreckage of a plane just off Highway 34. The pilots appeared to have attempted a landing on the road, but had missed and crashed into a field instead. A wing protruded from the blazing wreck. Whole groves of trees were ablaze, and the fire was spreading.

“Holy shit,” Raven said, shaking his head in awe.

There were several people on the shoulder of the road watching the flames, but no one seemed to be approaching it to help. Not that they could have done any good. Even if someone had survived the crash, they would have

perished in the inferno.

“Where are the emergency crews?” Sandra asked.

“Probably stranded at their stations.” Raven forced his gaze back to the road as they passed the wreck. There still wasn’t a single working vehicle in sight.

“I should really get back to the medical center as soon as possible,” Sandra said. “They are going to need me.”

“It’s going to be chaotic, Sis. Think about it. Anyone who was on life support isn’t going to last.”

Sandra’s hand fell away from her breast and she sank in her seat. “Teddy,” she whispered.

“Who’s Teddy?”

“A five-year-boy who lost his right arm to Necrotizing Fasciitis.”

“Necrotizing what now?”

“Flesh-eating bacteria.”

Raven bit the inside of his lip. He had seen a Marine with that in Iraq. Poor bastard lost half his leg. It was nasty stuff.

“He’s on a ventilator,” Sandra said.

“How about I take Allie back to my place while you go to the hospital? I’ll come get you after your shift.”

Sandra wiped away her tears and put a hand on his arm. “Thank you, Sam. I don’t know what I would have done if you hadn’t found me. I love you.”

“I love you, too.”

It felt awkward saying those words after so long, but if there was one good thing that had come out of tonight, it was bonding with his sister. He hadn’t always been a great brother, but at least he had the chance to be there for Sandra and Allie when they needed him most.

Raven tossed his unlit cigarette out the window. His urge to smoke was gone. All he could think about now was how he was going to protect his family when the bad spirits from the underworld really did emerge.

It was almost midnight by the time Raven drove through the city limits of Loveland, and the place was wide awake. The plane crash on the edge of town had roused what looked like half the population. People were out on the sidewalks and standing in the streets. Some pointed or waved at Raven’s Jeep, but most seemed too preoccupied with the fire.

“I can’t believe how many people are outside,” Raven muttered. “Don’t they have the sense to stay at home?”

Sandra pulled the bolt back in Raven's rifle to check for a round. "Let me do the talking when we get to Mark's," she said.

Raven wasn't sure why, but he smiled. His little sister was a healer at heart, but that didn't mean she wasn't also a fighter. When it came to Allie, she was as fierce as any mother lion. He just wished she cared about herself as much as she did her daughter. Raven had watched her go from one bad boy to another.

"You sure know how to pick 'em," he said.

Sandra grunted. "At least I got Allie out of the deal with Mark. More than I can say for you. Last girl you dated was a stripper, Raven."

He chuckled. "Scarlet was a professional dancer."

"Oh, that's what they call them these days?"

"That's what she said. Who am I to disagree? You wouldn't call a Marine a soldier, would you?"

He slowed as a pair of kids no older than ten darted across the street. They stopped to gawk at Raven's Jeep.

"Where the hell are their parents?" he grumbled.

"Hurry up," Sandra said.

"I'm hurrying, but I don't want to hit anyone."

Sandra stroked Creek's head and leaned forward, as if she could make the car go faster by sheer willpower. They passed the rundown middle school, and Raven turned onto Mark's street.

A pair of headlights shot around the corner as a small car putted down the street from the opposite direction. Raven eased off the gas and pulled to the side to let an old Volkswagen Beetle by.

"Looks like we're not the only ones on the road after all," Raven said. "Which house am I looking for again?"

"Green one on the corner."

Raven gripped the steering wheel tighter and scanned the street. He had only been here once before, a few months back when Mark needed to be taught a lesson about respecting his baby sister's boundaries after the divorce. He would have killed Mark if he had gotten there before the police. He wasn't happy about leaving his only niece with the bastard, even if Mark wasn't drinking anymore, but that was Sandra's decision. Still, if he harmed Allie, they'd be finding pieces of Mark for weeks.

"That one," Sandra said. She pointed at a large ranch-style house at the next intersection.

“Remember, don’t say anything to piss him off, and leave the rifle in the truck,” Raven said. “We’re just gonna get Allie and haul ass back to the car, okay?”

He turned off the Jeep, stuffed the key in his pocket, and reached under his seat for his Glock. With the gun in hand, he stepped out onto the pavement. Whistling at Creek, Raven checked the street again for any onlookers and stuffed the gun behind his shirt. By the time he had turned back to Sandra, she was already fast walking to the front door.

“Hey, hold on,” Raven said, keeping his voice low. “Watch the truck, Creek.”

The dog whined but settled onto his hind legs when Raven held his gaze. Creek was as loyal as a dog could be, but sometimes he was a little too anxious to get into trouble.

Kind of like me, Raven thought.

He caught up to Sandra at the front step just as she knocked on the door. It creaked open, and the silhouette of a large man appeared. Mark stepped into the moonlight, his blue eyes flitting from Sandra to Raven. “What the hell are you two doing here?”

Raven faced him, catching a whiff of what smelled like whiskey on his breath. It took everything in Raven’s power to not punch Mark in the face right then.

“Evening, Mark,” Raven said calmly. “We’re here to pick up Allie. I know it’s late, but—”

Mark cut him off with a grunt. “Like hell. I have rights, you know. This is my night with her.”

He stepped closer, looming over them both. Raven stood his ground, keeping his hands at his sides. Mark was nothing but a drunken coward, the type of man who preferred to push around women because he was too afraid to fight a man—even when he outweighed his opponent by fifty pounds.

“You want to keep those rights?” Sandra asked. “Because I can smell liquor on your breath. You reek of it. You said you were sober, Mark. You *promised* you were sober.”

“I am,” Mark said. He ran a hand over his thinning hairline. “I haven’t had a drink since…” He looked at the fire on the horizon, squinting like he hadn’t noticed it before.

“Mommy?” whispered a voice.

Sandra wrenched the screen door open. “Allie! Come here, sweetheart.”

Mark stepped in front of the girl, blocking her and holding up a hand to stop Sandra from entering. “Like hell you’re taking her in the middle of the night. She’s supposed to be in bed right now. And you,” he shook a finger at Raven, “No way I’m letting you in my house after what you did. I haven’t forgotten.”

Raven ignored him and smiled at his niece. “Hey, kiddo. Do you want to go home?”

Allie nodded and clutched her stuffed pony closer to her chest. “I want to go with Mommy. It’s dark here, the lights are all out.”

“Just a power outage. Now go back up to your room.” Mark looked toward the horizon, his eyes unfocused in his drunken haze. “Is something on fire?”

A low growl came from the street, and Raven turned slightly from Mark to see several large men walking down the sidewalk. Creek bared his teeth at them.

Great. Just what I need.

When he turned back to the door, Mark was already closing it. “Come back tomorrow—without your brother.”

In a swift motion, Raven stuck his foot in the door, put a shoulder into it, and pushed his way inside. Mark sprawled backward to the floor, letting out a muffled cry.

Reaching for Allie’s hand, Raven said, “Time to go.”

Allie ran past him and wrapped her arms around Sandra.

Mark was already getting to his feet. Some bastards never learned.

“You’re trespassing, you mother—”

Raven dropped Mark a second time with a punch straight to the nose. The crack of breaking cartilage was followed by a thump as Mark crashed back to the floor.

“You never were good enough for my sister,” Raven said, rubbing his knuckles.

— 9 —

Capitol Hill was a madhouse.

Charlize followed Clint and Albert through hallways lit by emergency lamps. Agent Redline led the way. He hadn't said another word to them, despite being peppered with questions.

Capitol Police, Secret Service, and metro police officers wearing SWAT uniforms stood every ten feet, cradling automatic rifles across body armor. The sight of all that firepower did little to relieve the anxiety she felt. While most of the country slept in blissful ignorance, WWIII was well underway.

Charlize thought of Ty, hoping he was sleeping peacefully in his cabin at camp. She wouldn't be able to focus on anything else until she knew he was safe.

The entourage continued through the busy halls. With a start, she realized they were only a few doors down from her office.

"Can I make a stop?" she asked. "I just need to grab something."

Redline turned to one of his men.

"Harrison, have you heard anything about the vehicles?"

"ETA about fifteen minutes, sir."

"You got five minutes, Senator," Redline said.

Albert opened the door to the reception area and holstered his pistol. "Ma'am, I'll be right outside if you need me."

"Thanks, Big Al. You did a fine job getting us here."

Clint entered, sweeping his flashlight over the space as Charlize walked to her private office. The room was furnished with two chairs in front of the desk, a larger oval mahogany table behind those, and two white couches facing one another in front of the window across the room. Bookshelves lined the walls. On the top shelf was a model F-15E Strike Eagle.

Charlize sat down at her desk and took a deep breath. Her office smelled like leather and books, and its familiarity comforted her. She'd spent countless hours here, burying herself in her work after Richard had been killed. She let her eyes close, and for a moment she could pretend this was just a normal day.

"We really should hurry," Clint reminded her.

Framed pictures of her family rested on the middle shelf of the bookcase behind the desk. Her favorite was the one taken at the National Mall six years ago when she had first been elected to Congress. Richard, Nathan, and Ty had all been with her that day. In the picture, they had all been sitting on a bench in front of D.C.'s famous cherry blossom trees. Charlize almost didn't recognize herself with short hair and a wide, untroubled smile.

She grabbed the picture and stuffed it into her bag, along with a framed snapshot of her and Richard on their honeymoon in Mexico.

"Okay, I'm all set," she said, joining Clint at the door. They returned to the hallway to find Senator Mack Sarcone waiting for them. He was an old-school politician who had held his seat for three decades. He also happened to be the grandfather of one of the girls taken prisoner in North Korea over eighteen months ago.

"Please tell me this shit isn't true," Sarcone said in his heavy Brooklyn accent. Using his fingers as a comb, he parted his thinning black hair to one side.

"We don't know anything more than you do," Charlize replied.

"This was definitely an attack by the North Koreans," came a voice. Senator Jack League, one of the oldest members of Congress, was walking down the hallway with several of his staffers. Despite the hour, the old Southern Republican looked as if he'd just come from the Senate floor.

"My staff just confirmed it," League said.

Sarcone's fingers slipped down his wrinkled forehead. "Those *were* nukes we launched, weren't they? And they were heading toward North Korea, right?" He didn't give League a chance to reply. "I sure as hell hope they kill every single one of those bastards. After what they did to my…"

Charlize didn't blame Sarcone or his granddaughter for what was happening, but she couldn't help but wonder if that raid had played some role in the events unfolding around her.

"We're at war," League said, stroking his long mustache. "Power is out all along the East Coast, not just here. I'm—"

“Where else?” Charlize interrupted.

League shook his head. “That’s all I know right now.”

“We have to find out,” Charlize said. “Virtually every aspect of American society depends on power. Without it, our cities will descend into chaos.”

The hallway quickly filled with more Congressmen and their support staff, party lines forgotten as they scrambled for every scrap of news. Lanterns and flashlights lit up the frightened faces of colleagues Charlize had worked with—and sometimes against—for years.

“It’s time to move, Senator Montgomery,” Albert said. He had his gun drawn again.

A dozen Capitol Police Officers rushed down the hallway, all of them armed with automatic rifles or shotguns. Flashlight beams danced across the marble pillars and stenciled walls like strobe lights. Halfway down the passage, Special Agent Redline was talking to Senator Jamie Ellen. She stood there in heels, a Coach bag in one hand and a briefcase in the other, her cream-colored suit accented with tasteful gold jewelry. Leave it to her to get dressed up for the end of the world.

“Everyone, please come with us,” Redline said. “We’re evacuating.”

Sarcone grunted. “And going where?”

“Please follow me, sir,” Redline said, avoiding the question. Passing through the rotunda, he led the group away from the Senate chambers. Charlize couldn’t help but wonder if this was the last time she would ever see the place. Two sentries were standing guard at the back exit, earpieces hanging uselessly from their ears. The man on the left propped the door open, allowing Redline to advance with his assault rifle shouldered. Charlize half expected to hear the whoosh of a Black Hawk as they left the building, but as soon as they were outside, the stillness of the night closed in.

It was raining again, just a drizzle compared to before, but Charlize was already cold and the rain made her shiver. She hurried after the group. She was doing her best not to fear the worst, but all she could think of was Ty’s innocent giggle and perfect little smile. He was such a happy kid, despite everything that had happened to him.

Redline waved the group toward a half dozen black Suburbans. Even more officers waited around the vehicles.

“Senators Montgomery and Sarcone, with me,” Redline said. He moved to the sixth truck and opened the rear passenger-side door. Clint and Albert tried to follow, but Redline shook his head. “I’m sorry, gentlemen, but this is a

priority transport.”

Charlize halted and asked, “What do you mean?”

Sarcone elbowed passed her and climbed in, sliding his bulk over the seats.

“We don’t have room to evacuate everyone right now,” Redline said woodenly. “We will come back for the others.”

Charlize watched other ranking senators pile into the vehicles ahead, but when she turned, Ellen and League were still standing with a small group behind the SUVs.

“We need to hurry, ma’am,” Redline said. There was an urgency to his words that scared Charlize. Secret Service Agents rarely lost their nerve. The threat, whatever it was, must be imminent.

“It’s okay,” Clint said. “You go.”

“No,” Charlize replied. “I’m not leaving them. There’s room for everyone if we squeeze in.”

Redline cursed under his breath. At first Charlize thought she was going to have to pull rank, but Redline must have known better than to argue. He jerked his chin at the vehicle.

“Thank you,” Charlize said.

“Why are we not being moved?” Ellen asked. “I want to go with them!”

She rushed past Redline, but the convoy was already moving. Several staffers ran after her, and Charlize forced her gaze away.

“Hold on,” the driver of her vehicle said. “We’re going to be moving pretty fast in a minute.”

Officers at the barricades moved back as the SUVs raced away from Capitol Hill.

“Where are we going?” Sarcone asked.

The driver, a middle-aged Secret Service Agent, turned the wheel slightly and pulled out onto Pennsylvania, providing Charlize with the answer. She knew exactly what building was in that direction.

Clint leaned closer to Charlize and said, “I thought we would be leaving D.C.”

“I did, too, but there must not be a way to get us out in time,” she whispered back.

The convoy picked up speed as they moved down Pennsylvania, weaving around stalled cars, tires squealing. Charlize didn’t bother asking how the Secret Service had procured functional vehicles. They could have been in an underground location, or perhaps they were hardened to begin with. She

didn’t care, as long as they kept running. Stranded motorists got out of their cars and waved from the side of the road, but the driver didn’t slow.

Within minutes, their headlights shot across the White House lawn, capturing Secret Service and Marines running to set up positions. Behind them was Marine 1, a magnificent VH-3D Sea King helicopter, rotors idle.

The trucks rolled to a halt on the southwest side of the building. Albert jumped out and opened the back door, holding out a hand for Charlize. She grabbed her backpack, climbed out of the Suburban, and followed the group toward the dark building. She had the bizarre impulse to run for the chopper, fire it up, and fly all the way to Colorado. Charlize blinked the fantasy away. If the Sea King helicopter still worked, it would already be in the air.

“This way, Senator,” Albert said. He directed her toward the heavily guarded back entrance. Inside, the West Wing was lit with lanterns. Flanked by Albert and Clint, she rushed after the group of politicians and staffers who were on the list to be evacuated first. Charlize tried not to think of Senator Ellen running after the convoy, her hair mussed and her Coach bag forgotten. The truth was that some people in Washington were considered more essential than others in an emergency.

They were directed through several vault doors. A Secret Service agent instructed them to wait as he punched biometric access codes into the control systems and swiped his card. The final door opened to an elevator.

“Single file. The elevator can only hold twenty at a time,” he said. He gestured toward Charlize, and she quickly stepped into the elevator and hugged the left wall. Sarcone wedged inside and used a handkerchief to wipe his forehead.

“Why is this elevator working when the lights aren’t?” he asked.

No one replied to Sarcone’s question. There was only the sound of labored breathing and a muffled cough. The doors sealed, and a slight jolt rocked the elevator as it descended. In her mind’s eye, Charlize pictured them moving down six stories to the Presidential Emergency Operations Center. It hardly seemed deep enough to survive a direct hit from a nuclear bomb, but that was what it had been designed to withstand.

A few seconds later the doors whispered open, and two guards waved everyone out into a brightly lit hallway. The White House had been hardened after all, or at least the grid connecting to the PEOC had been spared. Either way, there was light underground.

Footfalls echoed down the tile floor as the group continued toward the East

Wing. With every step, Charlize felt a seed of hope blooming inside of her. Maybe the government was more prepared for an EMP attack than she had thought. She couldn't wait to see President Brandon Drake. If anyone could lead the country after a catastrophic attack, it was the decorated Vietnam veteran. Drake wasn't just a respected war hero—he was a leader who brought people together from both sides of the aisle. She felt sure their foreign allies would rally to America's aid at his call.

Charlize picked up her pace at the sight of the red blast doors sealing off the PEOC. The double doors parted, revealing a room she had only seen in pictures.

The walls were lined with large monitors, data scrolling across some, video footage playing on others. In the center of the room was a long table that seated at least thirty people. Senator Ron Diego stood at the head of it. He was the President Pro Tempore of the Senate, and one of the only Senators Charlize didn't get along with, even though they were from the same party. Dressed in a pinstriped suit, he stood with his hands clasped behind his back as he surveyed the newcomers.

Charlize quickly avoided his gaze to search the room for President Drake or his Vice President, Christy Pederson. Neither of them were in the main chamber.

The blast doors clanked shut behind Charlize. She walked toward the table with Sarcone and Clint. There were already a dozen people seated there, including Secretary of State Denise Loyola and Secretary of Defense Carl Smith.

"Welcome to the PEOC," said Diego in the crisp voice that normally made Charlize shudder. She took her baseball cap off and loosened her ponytail, black hair falling around her shoulders. She ran her sleeve across her wet forehead.

"Where's President Drake and Vice President Pederson?" she asked.

Diego lowered his head, and for a moment, everyone in the room stopped what they were doing. The non-response was the only answer Charlize needed. She slowly took a seat in the closest chair, her brief feeling of hope deflating like air from a punctured tire.

"Air Force One went down a few hours ago somewhere over Nebraska. It was taking President Drake to Offutt after a public event in South Dakota," Diego said. "Vice President Pederson's plane was taking her to Raven Rock Mountain Complex when it disappeared from radar."

There were a dozen other conversations going on in the background, but Charlize blocked them all out. If the EMP had knocked Air Force One out of the sky above Nebraska, then it would have likely hit Colorado, too.

“How?” Senator Sarcone asked. “How were these EMPs set off?”

“We’re still trying to piece together the evidence, but it appears the North Koreans used fake transponder codes to get several Ilyushins into our airspace,” Diego said. “We managed to take out two of them, but the other three were able to detonate nukes at altitudes ranging from fifty two thousand to sixty five thousand feet at strategic points over the United States.”

Charlize balled her hands to keep them from shaking. Nukes? The North Koreans had detonated nuclear weapons?

“Where?” she managed to ask.

“Above Iowa, Virginia, and Colorado.”

The last word sent Charlize into a tailspin like she was in a jet that had just been hit by a missile. The faces in the room blurred, and voices became garbled.

She fought her way back to the present moment. She did not have time to fall apart right now. She walked away from the table to the radar stations across the room. Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Jay Pennington glanced at her with crystal blue eyes under thick gray brows.

“Senator Montgomery,” he said with a nod.

“I need to know two things. One, where was that bomb set off over Colorado? And two, were any of our fighter jets in the air at the time?”

Pennington relayed her questions to a young female officer named Jennifer, who was monitoring the radars. Charlize waited anxiously as Jennifer filtered through the data. After a moment, Charlize felt a presence to her right. Clint stood beside her, offering his silent support.

Chaos continued throughout the PEOC as staffers and military personnel gathered information. A colonel Charlize didn’t recognize motioned for Pennington to join him.

“Excuse me, Senator,” Pennington said.

Charlize felt her hands shaking again. She clenched her fists and held in a breath.

Jennifer had her answer another moment later. She pointed to a map on her screen. “Senator, the bomb looks to have detonated at about fifty-three thousand feet over this area.”

The air hissed out of Charlize’s lungs when she saw the blast wasn’t far

from Denver.

“The National Guard had four F-16s in the air at the time, and the Air Force had—”

“Which squadron?” Charlize interrupted.

“The 120th, ma’am,” Jennifer replied. She looked back at her screen. “Looks like they lost First Lieutenant Swanson, First Lieutenant Blake, Captain Negan, and Major Sardetti.”

“Oh my God,” Charlize said. She felt a hand on her shoulder.

“Charlize, I’m so, so sorry,” Clint said.

“Have we heard from any of the pilots?” Charlize asked.

“No, ma’am, they all went off radar shortly after the blast,” Jennifer said.

Charlize felt like her legs were going to give out. Her brother was dead, and her son was perilously close to the blast zone.

Behind her, a shout echoed through the room. It sounded strangely far away, as if she was listening from the other side of a thick pane of glass.

“Attention, everyone!” It was Pennington, and he looked like he had aged a decade in the last five minutes. All eyes centered on him.

“We just got word that Speaker of the House Catherine Hamilton was also in the air during the time of the attacks.” Pennington blinked, as if he was considering the full meaning of his own words even as he said them.

“We have to assume that the president, vice president, and speaker are dead or at least missing, until we learn otherwise…” Pennington said. He stepped to the side so everyone could get a good look at the Acting President of the United States, Senator Ron Diego.

— 10 —

Colton froze like someone had just pointed a gun at his head. Rex and Lilly Stone were outside, and they didn't know yet that their daughter was dead. He stood and grabbed the lantern off his desk. Exhausted and unprepared to talk with the Stones, he walked out of his office like a soldier heading home after losing a battle. Jake walked with him, his head bowed.

The anxiety built with every step as Colton made his way through the station. He unlocked the door leading to the lobby beyond their office. Rex stood just beyond the door, holding his wife. Lilly trembled in his arms. Behind them, outside the glass doors, there were people gathering in the streets and in Bond Park, waiting for answers.

"Rex, Lilly," Colton said, slowly walking toward them. "I'm so sorry. We did everything we could, but we were too late."

Lilly burst into tears, burying her face against her husband's swelling chest.

"Where is she?" Rex said, his voice surprisingly strong.

"She's here at the station, but I don't think you should see her like—"

"I want to see my baby girl, Marcus. Don't make me beg."

Colton hesitated, exchanging a glance with Jake. The captain nodded back.

"Follow us," Jake said.

Side by side, the two officers led Rex and Lilly into the office. Colton stopped outside the door to the empty room where they had stored her body. Normally they would have had the medical examiner transport her to the morgue, but with communications down, he'd had no choice.

He didn't ask the Stones if they were sure a second time; he simply inserted the key and opened the door. The glow from the lantern spread through the room, washing over the blanket-draped form on the table.

Rex and Lilly slowly walked into the room. Halfway across, Lilly collapsed to her knees. Rex put his hands under her and helped her stand. They continued to the table.

"Please, you shouldn't see her like this," Colton said.

"My God," Lilly whimpered. "What's that smell?" She looked over her shoulder, eyes pleading with Colton to tell her that it wasn't anything to do with Melissa.

He put a hand on Rex's shoulder. "You shouldn't remember your daughter like this."

Rex pulled from his grip. "What happened to her, Marcus? What the hell happened to our baby?"

Colton set the lantern down on the floor. "Your daughter was murdered, Rex. I don't know who did it, or why, but I promise you I will do everything in my power to find that person."

Rex pulled the blanket away from Melissa's face, his hand shaking. His expression twisted into a mask of horror in the dim light. There was a moment of silence before the big man broke into tears. Lilly screamed, and the sound seemed to go on and on in the unnaturally quiet night.

***

It was one in the morning by the time Raven pulled up to the Estes Park Medical Center. Sandra studied the building as they drove into the parking lot.

"You see any lights?" she asked.

Raven shook his head. "The generators must have been knocked out."

Sandra continued running her hand through Allie's hair. Her daughter was sleeping peacefully and Sandra hated to wake her, but her patients needed her now.

"Baby, wake up," Sandra whispered in Allie's ear.

It was amazing how dark it was, even with the moon high in the sky. Sandra could hardly see Allie's face as she blinked around groggily.

"You can go back to sleep in a little bit," Sandra told her. "But I have to go to work for a while."

"I want to come," Allie said.

"You sure you don't want that hand looked at? It looks pretty swollen."

Sandra looked at Raven's knuckles, which were indeed swelling from the punch he'd thrown at Mark. He shook his head, pulled his baseball cap off, and put it on Allie's head.

"You get to stay with me for a bit, *Agaliga*," he said playfully.

The nickname, Cherokee for "sunshine," made Sandra smile. Raven pulled the bill of the hat over Allie's eyes. She giggled and pushed the hat up so she could see.

"Can we go to your house? I want to see the chickens," Allie said.

Raven grinned, his teeth so white they seemed to glow in the faint moonlight. "Yeah, and you can play with Creek as much as you want."

"Okay," Allie said. She pulled the hat off and suddenly looked down. "Daddy said he was going to get me a puppy just like Creek."

Sandra and Raven shared a meaningful look. If she had a dollar for every time Mark had broken a promise, she'd be able to retire tomorrow.

"She'll be safe with me and Creek," Raven said. "What time should I come back to get you?"

"What time is it right now?"

Raven looked at his analog watch. "A quarter after one," he said with a yawn.

"That thing works?"

He shrugged. "I guess so."

"Stop back around noon then."

"Sounds good."

Sandra slid Allie off her chest and buckled her in.

"I really wish you'd get a car seat, Raven," Sandra said.

"Sis," he huffed. "She's fine, and I'm tired. I promise I'll drive safe."

Sandra leaned in and kissed Allie on the forehead. "I love you, sweetie. Be good to Uncle Raven."

Sandra locked eyes with Raven one more time, and he offered a reassuring nod. Holding in the tears, she jogged toward the emergency room. There was a lantern set up in the small lobby. Several people were sleeping in chairs with blankets draped over their bodies. "Sandra, thank God you're here."

A woman with tattoos on her upper chest hurried out from behind the reception desk. It was the nursing supervisor, Kayla Clark. She repositioned a candle on the counter and motioned for Sandra to come through to the small office.

"I'm so sorry," Sandra whispered, keeping her voice low so she didn't

wake the sleepers in the lobby. “I was in the park when…” Sandra caught herself from revealing what she knew about the EMP attack. “When my car died. My brother picked me up and took me to Loveland to get Allie.”

Kayla, in her usual rapid-fire manner, explained that the generators had never come on after the power outage. There were only two doctors in the ER and one in the skilled nursing facility, and only four of their usual ten nurses had shown up for work.

“We lost two of the patients on life support,” Kayla finished, looking at the floor.

Sandra turned toward the doors leading to the ICU and ER. She was afraid to open them. There were only three patients hooked up to life support, and Teddy was one of them.

“None of the key cards work. You’ll have to use this,” Kayla said. She grabbed an extra key from a ring on the wall and handed it to Sandra. The room beyond was eerily quiet, all of the bright LEDs, beeping machines, and other equipment gone dark.

“Sandra, about time you showed up,” Doctor Newton said. There was frustration in his tone, but Sandra couldn’t blame him for that. He was sitting next to Teddy’s bedside, carefully pumping air by Ambu bag. The boy was still intubated and in a chemically-induced coma. The stump of his right elbow was wrapped to protect it from further infection, but she could see the dressings needed changing.

Sandra put her hand on her heart. She was relieved to see Teddy still alive, but the odds of his survival were grim. It was almost impossible to bag a patient for the long term.

“Do you have news from the outside?” Doctor Duffy chimed in. He was supervising another patient with two nurses across the room in an area cordoned off by curtains. “We heard Chief Colton found Melissa, and there’s talk of some sort of attack.”

“Are we really at war?” Newton asked.

The truth almost rolled off Sandra’s tongue, but she hesitated. No, telling the truth now would only make things worse. She needed to focus on saving lives, not spreading gossip.

“The police are doing everything they can,” she said at last.

She crossed the room and pulled up a stool next to Teddy’s bedside. His closed eyelids fluttered ever so slightly.

“Let me take over,” Sandra said.

Newton and Sandra changed hands, and she immediately began squeezing the bag in a slow, steady rhythm.

“We lost Charles and Monica,” Newton said after trying and failing to hold back an exhausted yawn. “I hear things are bad in the nursing wing too. Already lost a patient there that was on a breathing machine. A CNA apparently didn’t know how to bag.”

Sandra closed her eyes for a brief moment, saying a silent prayer for the people they’d already lost.

“We can’t keep this up for long,” Newton continued. “Teddy needs more than air. He needs medicine that requires refrigeration. We have everything on ice right now, but I’m not sure how long we can keep it cool.”

Sandra looked up and met Newton’s gaze. “What are we going to do?”

He heaved a sigh. “Honestly, I have no idea. But if the power doesn’t come back on soon, I’m afraid we’re going to lose him.”

***

Nathan sat in the operations room of the Estes Park police station, staring at the radio equipment. Everything was destroyed. Even the two-ways didn’t work.

He ignored the officers that rushed through the area to gather equipment and gear from their lockers in the other room. Several of them stopped to chat, but Nathan wasn’t in the mood to answer any questions.

Never in his life had he felt this defeated. His wingman and friend was dead, his nephew was close to a nuclear blast zone, and his sister was half a country away.

He ran his fingers up and down his scalp and bowed his head, trying to think. He needed a plan, but what could he do without a radio or a vehicle?

“Sir?” came a soft voice.

He turned to see the female detective with freckles and red hair from the meeting earlier. She held out an ancient-looking radio in a wood box.

“This is a vintage tube radio that I got from my grandma. I had the six vacuum tubes replaced a few years back. The batteries were museum pieces and cost me a small fortune, so use it sparingly.” She pushed the box toward Nathan. “Go ahead and try it out, Major.”

Nathan tried to remember her name. “Thank you, Detective…?”

“Lindsey Plymouth,” she said with a smile. “Here, let me show you how it works.”

She set the battery-operated tube radio on the table in front of the oil lantern and leaned over to work the dials. Colton joined them a few minutes later. The police chief’s shoulders sagged slightly with defeat and despair.

Nathan had heard the scream a little while earlier, and he could guess Colton had just told that little girl’s parents their worst nightmare had come true.

“Any updates on the equipment?” Colton asked.

“I can’t get anything to work, but Detective Plymouth brought in this old tube radio. We can’t contact anyone with it, but we can listen and see if we can get any news.”

Lindsey leaned over the table and continued to scroll through the stations. White noise crackled from the old speakers. She moved the dials with deliberate care until there was a beeping sound.

Colton stepped closer, hovering behind her. She slowly twisted the dial until a voice came over the speaker.

“This message is transmitted at the request of the Federal Emergency Management Agency. At 7:21 p.m. Pacific Standard Time, NORAD detected multiple foreign threats in American airspace moving east over the country. It is believed that these aircraft were carrying weapons of mass destruction.”

The message ended and, after a pause, began again.

“Multiple threats?” Lindsey asked.

Nathan caught Colton’s gaze. Both soldiers knew what the message meant. The bomb over the Rockies hadn’t been the only one.

“Keep this between us three for now,” Colton said. “I don’t want to raise any more alarm. If there were more bombs, then help might be farther away than we thought. It’s that much more vital to maintain the peace.”

Nathan nodded curtly, but he wondered how long the police chief expected to keep people from the truth. It had a way of getting out—and when it did, all hell would break loose.

— 11 —

Charlize wanted to scream and run for the blast doors, but instead she forced herself to remain seated at the conference table, the only outward sign of her distress the tapping of her fingertips on the wood. Until she saw otherwise with her own eyes, she had to keep believing that Ty was alive.

Secretary of Defense Smith and Secretary of State Loyola sat down at the table next to her. More staff filed in behind them. Leon Crosby, one of the leading experts on North Korea at the CIA, wedged between Loyola and Charlize.

Last time she had seen Crosby was at an Armed Services Committee hearing about current North Korean nuclear capabilities. He had claimed they were still far from developing weapons that could threaten the continental United States.

Charlize didn't take any pleasure in seeing him proved wrong.

Acting President Diego shut the door and walked to the wall-mounted monitor.

"As I'm sure you're all aware, I launched a nuclear attack against Pyongyang approximately two hours ago," Diego said, his voice brisk and seemingly free of regret. "The duty fell on me when we weren't able to contact President Drake, Vice President Pederson, or Speaker Hamilton. The twenty warheads I authorized were plenty to turn their targets into radioactive craters."

Leaning forward in her chair, Charlize focused on the screen, which was streaming a feed from an aircraft. Clouds blocked the view, and although digital telemetry scrolled across the bottom, she couldn't make out the data.

Diego pointed to the screen. "This is the live video from one of our drones over North Korea. You're about to see what's left of Pyongyang."

The clouds peeled away to reveal a glimpse of hell.

“My God,” Loyola said, her face going ashen.

Charlize didn’t blame her. She’d flown bombing runs over Iraq, and the knowledge that she’d killed civilians along with militant insurgents weighed heavily on her conscience. But to order a nuclear strike that would kill millions? That was a call she wasn’t sure she could make.

The clouds muddied the video feed again—no, not clouds, Charlize realized. The drone was passing through smoke, ash, and the atomized remains of over two point five million people.

Diego moved away from the monitor and took a seat at the head of the table. “I’m showing you this footage so you understand the gravity of our situation. World War Three is well underway,” he said, tapping the table with a finger for emphasis. “On our very soil.”

A knock rapped on the door, and General Pennington stepped inside carrying a laptop.

“Sir, we have a situation,” he said. “We just got a report from the Washington Navy Yard of a container ship on the Potomac River. I had a Marine unit call it in.”

Pennington set his laptop on the table and flipped it open. “This feed is being broadcast from a special unit we deployed to keep an eye on the river.”

“How are their cameras working?” Loyola asked.

“Several units in D.C. had equipment designed to survive an EMP attack,” Pennington replied. “This is one of them. We also have several F-22s in the area that are on standby. They have been notified and are en route.”

The camera was positioned on a bridge over the Potomac. Marines shouldered their M4s at a container ship downstream. Several Humvees with mounted M240s rolled onto the bridge and set up position.

Pennington looked up from his laptop. “We just got confirmation that ship was outside of the blast zone of the EMP. It was spotted sailing in from the Atlantic a few hours ago. Pretty convenient timing, if you ask me. The country of origin appears to be China, and whoever is at the helm seems to be ignoring those Marines.”

Everyone in the room fell silent but Crosby. He rose from his seat, breathing heavily. “This could be a second attack. I’ve said it once, and I’ll say it again. Container ships are one of the biggest threats to our national security. We already know the North Koreans spoofed the transponder codes of Chinese planes to get their Ilyushins into our air space. They could have

hijacked a Chinese container ship much more easily.”

“I could have my men fire across the bow,” Pennington said.

“No,” Diego said. “Order them to board that ship right now.”

Pennington nodded and gave the order. Several minutes passed before a video feed was transferred to the main monitor that showed a Zodiac carrying a small fire team of six Marines launch from the shore. The men loaded their suppressed M4s as the boat raced to catch up with the container ship. Audio crackled from the wall-mounted speakers in the room.

“Eagle’s Nest, this is Kilo 1, preparing to board bogey.”

Kilo 1 directed his helmet-mounted night vision camera at the container ship as the Zodiac ferrying the men came up along the starboard side. Another Marine tossed a rope up to the deck. One by one the team climbed up. Charlize watched the rattling green-hued image as Kilo 1 stormed past the containers and toward the superstructure.

“No sign of contacts,” Kilo 1 reported. “We’re heading to the bridge.”

The team started up a ladder that led to the command room. Kilo 1 was halfway up when the sound of gunfire cracked from the speakers. The Marine looked up at a platform where one of his team lay face down. Another Marine took a knee next to the fallen man and fired at a contact out of sight.

Charlize felt helpless as she watched the battle unfold. She laced her fingers together to keep from tapping on the table.

On screen, Kilo 1 continued climbing and followed the other men across the platform in stealth movements. He directed his muzzle at a large window peppered with bullet holes, and then bent down to check the pulse of the fallen Marine.

“Kilo 3 is KIA,” Kilo 1 said. “Proceeding to the bridge.”

The team shouldered their weapons and approached the next corner cautiously. The Marine on point flashed a hand signal and then peeked around the corner. A gunshot sounded, and a round hit him in the helmet. He dropped woodenly to the platform.

Two of the remaining men pulled him back to safety, but Charlize knew it was already too late for the man. Kilo 1 hurried past them just as another Marine pivoted around the corner and opened fire. He took a round to the chest and crashed into a railing.

The crack of automatic gunfire barked from the speakers as all hell broke loose. The feed bobbed up and down while Kilo 1 moved from position to position. He stopped to fire at contacts Charlize still couldn’t see, and then

continued on. His team was gunned down one by one in front of him until there were only two Marines remaining.

She gripped the side of the table as Diego gave his next order.

“Tell those F-22s to go weapons hot and to prepare to fire on the ship.”

Pennington looked up from his laptop, unable to hide his alarmed expression. “But sir, we still have men…”

“That’s an order, General.”

Kilo 1 passed another dead Marine and followed the only other survivor toward the hatch outside the command room. Three North Korean soldiers lay on the platform. Kilo 1 put a bullet into the skull of one of the men, who was trying to crawl away. Then he put a hand on the back of the other Marine and prepared to storm the bridge.

“F-22s are thirty seconds out, sir,” Pennington reported.

Charlize bit down on her lip. Thirty seconds for Kilo 1 and his teammate to take control of the ship. They burst inside the room and were immediately fired upon by a contact inside. The Marine next to Kilo 1 took several rounds and crashed to the deck. Kilo 1 took the North Korean soldier down with a three-round burst to his chest.

“Eagle’s Nest, bridge is clear. Kilo 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6 are all KIA,” he said heavily.

Pennington didn’t reply, but he did look over at Charlize. They both knew Kilo 1 was seconds away from joining the rest of his team. The Marine quickly ran over to the dead North Korean man and pulled a small device from his hand. He held it up toward the camera. It was a clock or timer of some sort. Kilo 1 slowly turned to the windows of the command center as the rumble of F-22s sounded.

The rumble turned into a roar, the speakers in the PEOC crackling as the birds raced toward the Potomac. The fighters swooped low to fire their payloads on the ship. Kilo 1 ducked down just as the missiles streaked toward the ship. Fiery blasts sent containers cartwheeling into the sky.

Charlize held in a breath as a blinding explosion bloomed out of the center of the ship, instantly killing the feed.

“Did we take it out?” Diego asked.

Pennington nodded solemnly. “Target destroyed.”

There were several seconds of silence, every head in the room bowed to contemplate the loss of the brave Marines. A deep and raucous roar shattered the quiet. Charlize knew right away the sound wasn’t from the F-22s.

At first it was like a screeching runaway freight train, but the sound grew into a growl that made it seem like a hundred trains were headed toward the White House. Loyola's eyes widened in fear, and she grabbed Charlize's hand as they shared a look of terrified realization.

The timer from the container ship had been counting down to a final attack, and it was now screaming straight toward the White House in a fiery blaze that would vaporize everything in its path for several miles.

The room shook violently. The walls, floor, and ceiling were all in motion, and for a moment Charlize felt almost weightless. Dust rained down from the ceiling, and the Presidential Seal affixed to the wall rattled and then fell to the ground. The main screen went next, shattering.

"The PEOC was designed to take a direct hit from a nuclear—" Pennington said. He stopped, all color draining from his face. "Everyone under the table!"

All around her, the top officials of the United States government were screaming and crawling under the table, but Charlize remained where she was, staring at the broken Presidential Seal.

Someone grabbed her, dragging her under with everyone else. To her surprise, it was Crosby. The policy expert was calm in the midst of the chaos, a brave smile on his face.

"Pray with me," he said. Charlize locked her fingers with his. If anyone had asked her twenty-four hours earlier whether she'd ever hold hands with Leon Crosby, she would have laughed in their face. Now she was just grateful for the simple human connection.

This is it, she thought. *This is the moment I die*.

Shockwaves pounded the room. There was a cracking sound, and then a terrible groan as the steel beams that were supposed to hold the bunker together gave way, bending and ultimately snapping like bones.

"Ty, I'm so sorry. I love you," Charlize whispered. In her final moments, those words seemed more important to her than any prayer. She closed her eyes and pictured her baby boy as the ceiling collapsed.

Blood ran down her arm, but she didn't feel any pain.

How odd, she thought, filled with relief that dying did not, apparently, hurt.

Her eyes snapped open as she felt Crosby's hand go limp in her own. In the swirl of emergency lights, she saw what was left of the CIA advisor. There was a chunk of concrete where his head had been. A storm of smoke and dust swirled through the operations room. She covered her mouth,

coughing, and tried to move.

From every direction came the cries of her colleagues. Diego's voice was the worst, rising several octaves higher than normal. The grinding of rock against concrete and steel did little to drown out the screams.

She saw a figure make a run for the door, only to vanish into a hole in the floor. The horrified scream was swallowed by the shifting walls and ceiling.

Darkness flooded the room. It was followed by a massive heat wave that stole the air from Charlize's lungs. The exposed skin on her arms, legs, and face prickled with pain, like she was strapped inside the burning cockpit of a jet fighter.

Damn, she thought. *I guess dying does hurt after all.*

***

The sun didn't rise over Rocky Mountain National Park on Saturday morning. Police Chief Marcus Colton didn't expect it would. Holding his Glock in one hand, he pulled back the curtain covering the window to his bedroom while his wife and daughter slept in the bed behind him. Rain drizzled down the window, and a haze drifted off the rocky slope in their backyard. In the distance, clouds obscured the mountain peaks, blanketing the sky.

It all seemed so peaceful, but Colton knew the truth.

He secured his pistol in the holster on his duty belt. Then he sat on the edge of the bed, trying not to wake his girls. Despite his efforts, Kelly sat up, her braided hair falling over her Estes Park Police Department t-shirt.

"What time is it, Marcus?"

"Little after six."

Risa stirred and rolled from her side onto her back. She blinked and looked at him. "Can we have pancakes?"

The sound of his daughter's sleepy voice almost brought Colton to tears. Rex and Lilly would never hear their daughter speak again, and he vowed never to take a single minute with Risa for granted.

"Not this morning," Kelly said. "Your dad has to go to work."

The excitement faded from Risa's face, her face contorting into a frown. "It's cold in here," she said. "Why's it so cold?"

Colton tucked the comforter around his daughter and studied her in the

faint light of dawn—the brown pigtails that matched her mother's, the dark brown eyes, and the freckles on her button nose. She was too young to be told the truth, but just old enough to know something was wrong.

He looked at his wife for support.

"Just a power outage. The lights will be back on in no time," Kelly said.

Risa grabbed a pillow and hugged it. She had given up her teddy bear a year ago when Colton had said she was too old for it. Now he wished he'd let her keep it.

"C'mon, let's have pancakes," he said. Colton didn't really have time for their Saturday morning ritual, but he couldn't bear to say no to her, not today.

Using one of their precious bottles of water and an old kerosene camping stove, Colton managed to whip up some halfway decent pancakes. Risa dug in, smacking and grinning and carrying on like they were the best things she'd ever eaten.

Colton didn't have much of an appetite. He nibbled on a piece of bread as he checked over the kitchen for anything he'd forgotten to do. He'd spent several hours last night making preparations at the house, including filling up the bathtub and sinks and saving what was left in the water heater. He and Kelly had taken their supply of meat from the freezer in the garage and salted it, too.

While Risa ate, she punched at the home button on her iPad. "It won't turn on," she complained.

"If you're done eating, why don't you go make your bed?" Kelly said.

"But I don't want to do chores. I want to go play."

"Make your bed, and then you can go play," Kelly replied calmly.

Risa narrowed her eyes as if she was being tricked.

Colton forced down the last of his slightly stale breakfast. "Listen to your mother, honey."

Risa carried her plate to the sink, but Kelly stopped her before she could plunge the dirty dish into the reservoir of clean water. Puzzled, she set it on the counter and ran upstairs. Once her footfalls had echoed away, Colton laced his fingers together behind his head and sighed.

"This could go on for months, maybe longer. We don't know how much of the country was affected yet. After Melissa…"

Kelly put a finger to her mouth. Colton nodded, understanding. They still hadn't figured out how to tell Risa that her friend was dead, or that the power wasn't going to come back on anytime soon.

“There’s a killer on the loose and the country’s been attacked,” Colton said heavily. “I don’t even know where to start today. The whole town is looking to me for answers, but all I have is bad news.”

Kelly grabbed his hand. “You start by going to town hall and doing what you always do. You lead, Marcus.”

“Thanks, Kel,” Colton said. “I’ll find the man that did this to Melissa, and I’ll get the town’s affairs in order. I just need time. It’s going to be a hard winter, love. We need to conserve everything and plan for the long haul. That means rationing food and water.”

“How much do we have?”

Colton did the math in his head. He had squirreled away an entire crate of MREs in the basement, plus gallon jugs of water, some kerosene, and plenty of canned vegetables and preserves, thanks to Kelly. His little family would be fine for a few months, but he doubted most residents would be in as good a shape.

“I want you to walk to Safeway with Tim and Linda next door. Take the cash from the safe and buy canned food, water, and anything else with a long shelf-life. We’ll also need more batteries, toilet paper…” Colton sighed, frustrated. “You know what to get.”

“It’s just like preparing for a camping trip,” she said, trying to lighten the mood.

“I need to get to town hall and meet with Mayor Andrews.”

“Knowing Gail, she’s probably already there.”

“She’s going to be mad.”

“Because you declared a state of emergency?”

“Because I didn’t consult with her first.”

Kelly came up behind Colton and put a hand on his shoulder. Goosebumps prickled up and down his arms. Even after all these years, she could still give him the chills.

“You’re going to have to make some very unpopular decisions,” Kelly said. “But stay strong and trust your instincts.”

Colton kissed his wife, jotted down a few more tasks on his ever-growing to-do list, and then went to his office to get the rest of his hardware. The room was small and furnished only with a desk and a comfortable chair. A bookshelf took up most of the wall to the right, and a window with wood blinds looked out over their rocky backyard.

He walked over to the closet. A Western-Style duty belt hung from a clip

on the wall. It was the one his father had carried during his thirty years of service as Sheriff of Larimer County.

Colton removed his duty belt and exchanged it for his father's. After securing it around his waist, he took a knee in front of the gun safe in the corner. Inside were some of his most prized possessions, including an M14 rifle with a scope. He grabbed the rifle and set it against the wall before he turned back for his favorite gun.

The Colt Single Action Army revolver was another gift from his dad. He held the gun across the palms of both hands like an offering, admiring the beautifully engraved metal and scrimshawed ivory grips.

"*Morior Invictus*," Colton said, reading the motto on the barrel. "Death before defeat."

It was his father's favorite saying, one that Colton had adopted after losing the man who had meant the most to him. He holstered the revolver and then grabbed the M14.

When he turned to leave, Kelly was standing in the door. "Be careful, Marcus. Please, by God, be careful out there."

"Do you have your Glock?" he asked.

She lifted up her shirt and turned, cocking a hip. The black grip of the pistol was sticking out of her waistband.

"Good girl," Colton said with a grin. "Got any more moves like that?"

Before she could answer, they both flinched at the sound of a horn honking outside.

"What in the hell?" Colton said. He hurried to the living room and looked through the window. In their driveway was Jake Englewood's red 1952 Chevy pickup.

Colton grabbed his backpack with a smile on his face. Risa came thundering down the stairs a split second later, crying out, "Uncle Jake!"

Kelly and Risa followed Colton out to the driveway.

"Mornin' Kelly," Jake said. He tipped his Stetson at Risa. "How you doin', little lady?"

Colton almost laughed when he saw Jake had shaved most of his bushy red beard, leaving only a handlebar mustache.

"Can't call me a Viking anymore," Jake said.

"You never were good at history," Colton chuckled. "Vikings had mustaches, too."

"Whatever you say, Chief."

“You’re a cowboy Viking,” Risa chirped.

That earned a bellowing laugh from Jake.

Colton looked over the vintage truck. The windshield had a major crack, but it was at least on the passenger side. The chrome grill was off, and only two of the tires had hubcaps, but the tread was good and the lights all seemed to work.

Jake put his hands on his hips and turned to look with Colton. “She may be old, but she runs,” he said. “Rebuilt the engine with my own hands.”

“I didn’t say anything,” Colton said, laughing. “In fact, I think we’re looking at our new squad car.”

Jake patted the hood fondly. “You’re beautiful, baby. Don’t let anyone tell you different.”

“We better get going. Mayor Andrews is probably on her way to town hall.”

“Actually, she’s already there. I dropped her off before coming to get you. She isn’t happy.”

Kelly laughed. “Told you, Marcus.”

Colton kissed his wife on the cheek. “I’ll see you tonight.” Then he crouched down and hugged Risa. “I love you. Be good while I’m gone.”

“Love you too, Daddy.”

He grabbed his gear and rifle, and forced himself to walk away. Leaving them suddenly felt wrong, but he had a duty to his town. With threats coming from all sides, he had to get to work. Colton climbed into the passenger seat of the truck. Jake wedged his bulk behind the steering wheel and turned the key. The engine coughed to life. Both men waved at Colton’s family, smiling as if this was just another ordinary day, but as soon as they were out of the driveway, their conversation became serious.

“You got any updates for me?” Colton asked.

“Detective Plymouth has been checking the Geiger counters every hour. Looks okay so far. Still trying to contact all the reps for the EOC. Other than that, we’ve got officers stationed at all critical facilities, including the YMCA.”

“The YMCA?”

“I thought we could use the pool as an additional water source.”

“Good call,” Colton said. “But that won’t last very long. We need to think long term here.”

“I know. Once I drop you off, I’m heading to Bill Catcher’s with Major

Sardetti. Maybe he can get some answers from his base.”

Colton pointed at the dashboard of the truck. “Have you tried this radio yet?”

“Yeah, but I didn’t get anything but static.”

“You mind?” Colton asked, reaching for the tuning knob.

“Knock yourself out.”

Colton spun the dial as they pulled out of the driveway.

“We’re going to need to hold a town hall meeting,” Jake said. “Tell people what’s going on.”

“Let the mayor handle it. I have other shit to do.”

Jake took one hand off the steering wheel to scratch his mustache. “You’ve never been a man of many words.”

“There’s a killer out there, and I—” Colton paused as the sound of a garbled transmission came over the radio. He slowly twisted the knob back to the left. “Pull over a minute.”

Jake drove onto the shoulder, kicking up a storm of dust. He shifted into neutral and waited.

White noise broke from the old speakers.

“I don’t hear nothing—” Jake began to say.

A robotic voice from the radio cut him off.

“At 5:05 a.m. Eastern Standard Time, a second attack…”

“Second attack?” Jake asked.

Colton raised a finger and waited for the message to continue, but there was only the hiss of static.

“Dammit,” Colton said. He fiddled with the knob, turning it ever so slightly to the left. Through the storm of crackling came a beeping sound, and finally a barely audible voice.

“This is a national emergency. Important instructions will follow…”

The beeping returned for several agonizing moments.

Colton stared at the knob. “Come on, come on.”

“The following message is transmitted at the request of the United States government. This is not a test. At approximately 7:21 p.m. Pacific Standard Time, three North Korean planes detonated nuclear warheads above Iowa, Virginia, and Colorado. The subsequent electromagnetic pulse knocked out power across the continental United States. At 5:05 a.m. Eastern Standard Time, a second attack took place. A nuclear bomb was detonated from the Potomac River just outside of Washington, D.C.”

“Holy shit,” Jake muttered.

Colton stared at the radio in disbelief. “D.C. is gone?”

“All residents within a four-hundred-mile radius of the attack should seek a fallout shelter. Fallout is a product of nuclear attack. Prolonged exposure will result in certain death. If there is a nearby fallout shelter, go there now. Otherwise seek shelter in the interior of a building on the lowest floor. Do not leave the shelter until an all clear has been issued.”

The annoying beeping began again.

Jake went back to stroking his mustache with his index finger and thumb, muttering a slew of curse words.

“This is an emergency action notification. All networks and cable systems shall transmit this action message.”

Colton couldn’t believe what he’d just heard. Thanks to Major Sardetti, they’d already had some idea of how bad the situation was, but this? This was Armageddon. How could it have happened? And why had the North Koreans followed up their devastating EMP attack with a direct nuclear strike on Washington?

Jake pounded the steering wheel and then grabbed it with both hands, squeezing until his knuckles were white. The tattooed image of a coiled rattlesnake and the words “Don’t Tread On Me” showed on his forearm.

“That’s it,” Colton said as he noticed that the snake’s head was lost in a mass of pink scar tissue from an old shrapnel wound. “Cut off the head of a snake and it can’t strike.”

Jake’s eyebrows drew together in a single, heavy line. “What the hell, man?”

“D.C. was the snake’s head. With the seat of our government gone, we will have a hell of a time managing any recovery efforts.”

“So what you’re saying is that help ain’t coming,” Jake said. “Shit, Marcus, I coulda told you that. We handled our own problems back in the flood of ’13, and we’ll take care of ourselves again now.”

He pulled back onto the road and punched the accelerator. The metal bones of the old truck groaned.

Colton looked to the mountains in the distance. He had always felt isolated all the way up here away from society. It could be a lonely feeling, but maybe now that isolation wasn’t such a bad thing.

As they drove through Estes Park, Colton saw a crowd gathering outside town hall. At the front, facing the others, was Major Sardetti. He had his

hands up like he was fending off questions.

“Shit,” Colton said. “Should have told him to lay low. Now they’re going to want to know why a jet pilot is wandering around town.”

Jake waved at the major and pointed to the parking lot. Nathan nodded, said something else to the crowd, and then limped over to the truck. Colton opened the door and stepped out to let Nathan inside.

There were no good mornings or hellos, just a simple nod between three soldiers.

“Good luck today. Bill Catcher’s a crazy, paranoid son of a bitch, so I’d bet he’s feeling pretty twitchy right now,” Colton said. He patted the passenger door of the truck. “Play that message for Major Sardetti on the way up to Prospect Mountain.”

“What are you going to do, Chief?” Jake asked.

Colton took a deep breath, still not sure if he was making the right call. “I’m going to tell everyone the truth.”

— 12 —

As Jake steered up the twisty roads around Prospect Mountain, Nathan held the probe of a Geiger counter out the window and watched the needle while the words of the emergency broadcast repeated inside his head. This was the worst-case scenario. Not only had he lost his brothers from the 120th when their planes fell from the sky, but he'd lost his only sister to a damned nuclear strike on the nation's capital. The only thing keeping him going now was the thought of his nephew. But if the device in his hand detected high amounts of radiation from the first wave of nukes, then Ty would probably be doomed, too.

The big officer picked at the bottom of his handlebar mustache. "What's it say?"

"We're good for now," Nathan said.

Jake drummed his fingers on the steering wheel and then said, "Look, I know you've been through the wringer in the past twenty-four hours, Major, but you landed in one of the best towns in America. You're welcome to stay if we're not able to get you a radio. We could use a good man like you."

"Thanks, but I have to get to Empire to find my nephew after I reach Buckley AFB," Nathan said.

"I understand. Kids are the light of the world. If my girls weren't safe at home in Estes Park with their mom, I'd be trying to get to them, too."

Jake took a swig of bottled water and offered it to Nathan.

"No thanks."

"Suit yourself," Jake said. He set the water back down and pointed up the steep road.

"Bill Catcher lives off the grid up here. He's a paranoid bastard and doesn't care much for law enforcement."

“Or the military?”

Jake grinned. “You got it. Let me do the talking. If I don’t end up with a gun pointed at my head, I’m going to offer Bill some diesel in return for his help looking over our recovery plan and letting you use any radio he might have.”

He parked on the side of the road and killed the engine. Nathan limped after Jake up the dirt road. That pretty nurse had done a good job wrapping his ankle, considering the circumstances, but it still hurt.

“Remember, let me do the talking,” Jake said.

Prospect Mountain towered over them like a castle. A small cabin was set up high on a clearing peppered with rocks and clusters of pine trees. They approached slowly with their hands by their sides, held away from their holstered pistols.

To the east stood a small barn that looked like it had been made from salvaged wood. Nearby was a well with an old wood bucket hanging from a rope. There were rows of solar panels, plots of well-tended crops, and a chicken coop topped with a faded blue tarp. Rain barrels flanked the front porch, but one of them was knocked over.

That seemed odd. Everything on the property was rough and ramshackle, but it was all carefully maintained. Nathan could tell at a glance that this Bill Catcher took a lot of pride in his homestead, so why wouldn’t he have righted the rain barrel?

“You see anything?” Jake asked.

Nathan shook his head. “Looks like no one is home. But I’ve got a bad feeling about this.”

“Bill!” Jake said in a loud but non-threatening voice. “It’s Jake Englewood and my buddy Nathan.”

They stood about a hundred feet from the porch, a breeze gusting against them. Besides the wind, the only sound came from the squawk of chickens.

Two of the birds waddled over and began pecking at the ground by the spilled rain barrel.

“That’s weird,” Jake said. “Bill wouldn’t leave them out here alone. Too many coyotes around.”

Nathan squinted at the cabin, trying to see inside. Curtains were pulled across all the windows.

“Bill, you home?” Jake said.

The answering silence was unsettling. A particularly strong gust of wind

slammed the screen door on the porch open. It creaked, whined, and then slammed shut again, the impact echoing through the property.

“Maybe he walked into town,” Nathan said.

“Doubtful. The guy’s practically a hermit.” Jake jerked his head toward the porch. “You stay out front. I’m gonna see if he’s around back.”

Jake walked around the side of the house, leaving Nathan alone.

The screen door opened and slammed shut again. A bead of sweat dripped down Nathan’s forehead. He walked up to the porch furnished with a rocking chair and a small table. An empty bottle of whiskey rested next to a pack of smokes on the table.

Nathan reached out to knock on the door when he noticed it was slightly ajar, providing him a glimpse inside the cabin.

“Mr. Catcher? Bill?” Nathan said. He stepped into the single room cabin, holding his arm to his nose at the strong smell of body odor and barbeque, half expecting to get a shotgun barrel pointed at his face. The space was divided in two by a long brown curtain. A kitchen table cluttered with empty bottles sat next to a fireplace on the right. In the center of the room was a desk topped with radio equipment.

What the hell is that smell?

He pulled his M9 with one hand, grabbed the curtain with the other, and yanked it back to reveal a bedroom. A shadow moved in the corner of the room and he almost blasted a cat, which hissed at him from the top of a dresser. The cat jumped onto the floor and dashed around him, vanishing out the front door a second later.

“Major, out here!” Jake shouted.

Nathan looked around one last time, grabbed a ham radio, and then retreated to the porch. Jake was waiting outside, his face pale.

“Thought I told you to stay put,” Jake said. “Doesn’t matter now. You’re going to want to see this.”

Nathan followed him around the side of the house. They halted in the knee-high grass to stare at the body hanging from the branch of a massive ponderosa tree.

Head bowed, the dead man swayed slowly in the wind. The front of his shirt was drenched in blood, and his legs were burned black to the knees.

The scent of charred flesh caught Nathan’s nostrils a moment later. He covered his nose with a sleeve, realizing that this was what he had smelled in the cabin.

The remains of a bonfire lay just below the corpse. Blood from a dozen different wounds had darkened his plaid flannel shirt, and his bare feet were charred down to the bone. Whoever had killed Bill had strung him up and left him to burn. Fortunately for the surrounding woods, the rain had put out the fire. Nathan tried not to think about whether the poor man had died from blood loss, suffocation, or the flames.

"What kind of sick bastard did this?" Nathan asked.

Jake shook his head. "I don't know, but I got to get back to the station to tell Colton. Whoever killed Melissa didn't stop with her."

***

"We're at war," Colton said. He braced himself for the response from the six town officials that were sitting in the Sundance conference room.

Across the table from him was Mayor Gail Andrews, a sixty-year-old woman with long white hair that she wore in a tidy braid. When she wasn't trying to micromanage every aspect of the town, she ran a gallery that catered mostly to rich tourists. To her right was the town administrator, Tom Feagen, a thick-set man with silver hair and a nasal voice that Colton couldn't stand. Tom was officially Colton's supervisor, but most of the time he worked directly with Gail. There was also the city engineer, the town clerk, and several officers from Colton's staff, all of whom were trying to talk at once.

"What do we do?"

"Who's in charge?"

"The government is really gone?"

"The power can't be out everywhere, can it?"

"What about the murderer? If we're stranded here, then so is he."

Colton decided he'd had enough. He raised a hand and said, "Listen up, everyone. What we discuss stays in this room for now."

For the next several minutes he reported everything he knew about the attack. By the time he had finished, the room was in chaos again. Feagen's voice was the loudest of them all.

"What are we going to do?" he kept repeating.

"If you'd give me a chance to explain, I'll tell you," Colton snapped.

Gail glared at Colton. He wasn't normally one to lose his cool, not even with Feagen, who had a law degree from some school in the Midwest and

thought he was smarter than everyone in the room. However, the administrator had been hired after the 2013 floods. This was his first disaster, and he was already falling apart.

Well, if the municipal government couldn't handle things, Colton would.

"I've already put my people to work," he said. "I've declared a state of emergency and activated the EOC. We still haven't been able to reach anybody from the sheriff's office, but we're working on it. Now, what I need you to do is—"

The mayor cleared her throat. "Marcus, you know I respect you, but I'm not going to just let you take over the town. There have to be checks and balances," she said.

"I know, Gail, which is why I need you folks to step up. I'll take care of the policing, but I'll need you and Tom to work with Jake on the administrative and recovery stuff. If we all work together, we can keep our people safe, fed, and warm this winter."

"What about the fallout?" Feagen asked. "How are you going to protect us from that?"

"It's technically not fallout," Colton replied. "So far we haven't seen a spike in radiation, and if that changes we have a plan in place to evacuate people to emergency shelters. They're already stocked with supplies. For now, we have to keep everyone calm. We can't let them know what's going on until we're prepared."

A knock pounded the door, and Jake pushed it open without waiting for a response. He took off his cowboy hat and looked at Colton.

"Sir, I need to talk to you," he said firmly.

"Give me a minute," Colton replied. Then he noticed the blood on Jake's uniform. "Actually, if you'll all excuse me, I'll be right back."

Feagen stood and waved a finger at him. "Whatever news Captain Englewood has, we all deserve to know."

"Tom is right," Gail said.

Colton scanned the frightened faces in the room and then looked back at Jake. Nathan was standing in the hallway, his arms folded across his chest. With a reluctant nod, Colton gave Jake the okay to speak.

"It's Bill Catcher, Chief." Jake let out a breath and cradled the cowboy hat against his chest. "He was murdered. Looks like the same person that killed Melissa."

The room erupted into panicked, angry shouting again. Colton cursed

under his breath. If things weren't already bad enough.

"What are you going to do, Marcus?" Gail glared at him over the top of her green-rimmed glasses. "And what do you expect *us* to do? The town needs to know what's going on. We can't keep people in the dark."

"I think we should hold a town meeting," Feagen said. The other city officials began nodding and muttering their agreement.

"Fine," Colton said. "I'll be there, but I have something to do first."

As he turned to leave the room, Gail called after him. "Where are you going? We haven't adjourned yet!"

"Sorry, Gail," he said. "I've got a killer to track down."

Although he hated the thought of owing the man a favor, Colton knew he couldn't do this alone. He was going to have to convince Raven Spears to help him again.

— 13 —

Raven had hardly slept since he got back to his house. He lay in his bed replaying everything he knew about the attack while Allie played in the other room. Just as he began to doze off, a knock pounded his door.

Creek bolted away from his spot at the foot of the bed and raced down the stairs to the living room. His claws slid as he scrambled for traction on the wood floor. When he got to the door, he started barking.

“Shit,” Raven said, rubbing his eyes. Akitas hardly ever barked unless there was something wrong. He jerked upright and reached for the crossbow next to his bed.

“Allie, where are you?” he said.

His niece poked her head around the door. Her hair was pulled back with one of Raven’s skull bandanas. He would have laughed if he wasn’t so worried.

“Someone’s at the door, Uncle Raven,” she said.

“Yes, I know.”

Swinging his feet over the side of the bed, Raven crept up to the window. With the utmost care, he pulled the curtain back. There were two men on the front stoop. The taller of the pair wore a black suit. The other was in a gray sweatshirt. He was much shorter and heavier set, and he was looking around the property as if scanning for threats.

“Shit,” he muttered. They were from Redford’s posse, the loan shark he had borrowed money from. He pulled the Glock from under his pillow and tucked it into his pants before Allie could see it. Then he grabbed the crossbow from the wall and said, “Allie, we’re going to play a game, okay?”

Creek was scratching on the door now, barking even louder.

“We know you’re in there, Raven!” one of the men shouted.

Allie walked into his room, clutching her stuffed animal against her chest. “That man sounds mean. Why is he yelling?”

Raven set his crossbow on the ground, put a finger to his lips, and took a knee in front of his niece. “Go hide in the closet, kiddo. Don’t come out until I tell you it’s okay. I promise you can feed the chickens later.”

Allie tilted her head like she wasn’t sure if she could trust him. At last she seemed to make up her mind and climbed into his closet, settling cross-legged on the floor. Raven closed the sliding door and hurried back to his crossbow.

“Open up! I’m not going to ask again!” the goon shouted.

Redford apparently wasn’t going to let a little thing like the end of world stop him from collecting on his debts. Raven had planned on paying them with the money he made from finding Melissa, but without any cash in hand, they weren’t going to be happy. He couldn’t exactly run down to the ATM and get the money, either.

“Creek, get back,” Raven said. The dog obeyed and moved out of the way. Raven propped his crossbow beside the door, unlocked the deadbolt, and took a step back.

“Gentlemen,” Raven said with a grin.

Neither of the two men returned the greeting. He recognized Redford’s enforcers now.

“How’s it going, Theo?” Raven asked the taller of the two goons. “And Andy! You’re looking…short.”

The smaller man growled. “It’s Alex,” he said. “Cut the shit and pay up.”

“We’re here to collect what you owe Mr. Redford. And we’re not leaving until we do,” Theo added.

“Figured that much,” Raven said, looking at his feet. He had forgotten to put on shoes, which would make leading these guys away from the house—and his niece—more difficult.

“I’m a little short right now—no offense, Alex.”

“You’re not funny,” Theo said. He nodded to Alex, who punched Raven in the gut with surprising force.

“For a little guy, you pack quite a punch,” Raven wheezed. Creek came barreling from his hiding spot, but Raven waved him back. The dog snarled at the two men.

“Call off the dog or I’ll put a bullet in his head,” Theo said.

Raven got his breathing under control and stood up straight. “You’d shoot

a dog? That's low, even for you."

"I said cut the shit," Alex said. "Just give us the cash, and we'll leave."

"Does Mr. Redford understand that cash is no longer going to be of value after last night?" Raven asked. He flexed his abs and waited for another gut punch, but it didn't come. Instead, Alex and Theo exchanged a confused look.

"You walked here, yes?" Raven said, jerking his chin toward the muddy cuffs of their pants. Both men nodded.

"Your cars don't work because an EMP fried everything with microcircuits in the whole state, maybe the whole country," Raven continued. "The banks are closed. The ATMs are useless. And you can't even call your boss because your cell phones have no signal."

"*Bullshit*. You're lying," Alex said, licking his lips. He inched forward, but Raven held his ground.

"You guys can't be that stupid," Raven said. "Look around. The lights are out, and nothing works. Trust me, I was over in Loveland last night, and it's the same deal there."

Theo was still shaking his head. "What's an EMP?"

"Hey, how were you in Loveland last night? You couldn't have walked there and back," Alex said.

Raven's grin faltered. *Shit, I should not have said that. Sandra always told me my big mouth would get me in trouble*.

"Um," Raven said, his mind racing. If they drew their guns, would he be able to take them both down before Creek got hurt? And what if he couldn't stop them? What would they do to Allie?

"You got a working car, huh?" Alex said. "Tell you what, we'll take that old hunk of junk as a down-payment now. Give me the keys."

"Okay, okay." Raven held up his hands like a magician revealing a trick. "Keys are inside, I'll be right back."

He turned, but the click of a hammer being pulled back on a revolver made him freeze. His eyes flitted to Creek. The dog was quivering, anxious to leap at the bastards. All Raven needed to do was blink, and Creek would be on whoever was pointing the gun at Raven's head. There was just one problem: If he started a fight, he couldn't be sure of the outcome. If Raven got himself killed, he wouldn't be able to protect Allie. And there was also the risk of a stray bullet punching through the floor of his closet.

Raven couldn't break his promise to Sandra—but he couldn't lose his Jeep,

either.

“We’ll come inside with you,” Alex said.

“Don’t make any sudden moves,” Theo added.

Time slowed to an agonizing halt as he heard a round being chambered in a second gun. Raven used the stolen moment to plan his next move.

“What’s going on?” asked a high-pitched, innocent voice.

Raven’s eyes flicked to Allie. She was standing on the stairs, her stuffed pony still tucked in the crook of her arm.

“Didn’t know you had a daughter,” Theo said.

Raven gritted his teeth. “She’s my niece.” He slowly turned to see both men aiming guns at his head. Theo had a Glock, and Alex held a revolver that looked massive in his small hand.

“Come on guys, let’s put the guns down. There’s a kid here.”

“Give us the keys,” Alex said, holding out his other hand.

Raven slowly nodded and looked at Allie. “Go back upstairs, kiddo.”

Squawking chickens broke the momentary silence that followed. Allie’s eyes tracked the birds from the stairs. Then another sound came from the road. A sound Raven wasn’t expecting.

Tires were crunching over the driveway.

Theo and Alex both looked away as a red pickup truck rumbled up to the house. In the passenger seat was Raven’s least favorite police chief, looking like even more of a hard-ass than usual.

Raven used the opportunity to whisper a command to Creek. Of the hundred or so commands the Akita knew, about a dozen involved tearing out throats. The dog was on Theo before the man could react. As Alex turned back to the door, Raven knocked the gun from his hand and punched him in the temple. The smaller man crashed to the dirt like a felled tree, and Raven plucked the gun from his fingers.

“Get him off me!” Theo yelled as Creek ripped the sleeve of his jacket with a vicious snarl.

“No can do,” Raven said, grinning again. Colton was here to arrest someone else for a change, and it felt great. He kicked Theo’s Glock away and had just turned around to deal with Alex when the little debt collector yanked a second gun from an ankle holster and pulled the trigger.

***

Charlize stood in the waiting room of the Saint Luke's Hospital emergency room, trembling uncontrollably as she waited for her husband and son to get out of surgery. She never lost it like this. At least there weren't many people around to see her. Just Clint, her right-hand man, and her mother. Both of them were crying, so it didn't seem as shameful for her to fall apart.

Wait, that wasn't right. Clint hadn't been there that night, and her mom had been dead for fifteen years.

The emergency room vanished, replaced by darkness so black it was like her eyes had been plucked from their sockets. At first Charlize thought she was dead, but as the pain swept over her skin like burning acid, she found herself wishing she were dead.

There was so much pain.

She tried to scream, but all that came out was a strangled noise. She tried to move, but just blinking her eyelids required a monumental effort.

Where am I? What happened? Why does everything hurt?

It was difficult to focus on anything but the pain. Her skin was tight on her arms and face, and even the slightest movement resulted in another wave of searing agony. She drew in a breath of hot air that filled her nostrils with the unmistakable scent of burned hair.

She reached up to touch her face. It felt…wrong. Blisters popped as her nails grazed her cheeks. Every inch of exposed skin was burned.

"Hello," she choked, her voice a low rasp. "Hello?"

The only reply was the drip of water and the groan of structural supports in the bunker walls.

The bunker. Charlize remembered now. She was in the PEOC, deep beneath the White House, along with what remained of the federal government.

She sucked in another hot breath. Exhaling, she steadied her shallow breathing and focused on Ty. Her son was still out there, halfway across the country. He *had* to be. She refused to consider any other possibility. Ty was okay. He would be scared and lonely, but he was okay.

The pain and the terror faded, replaced by determination. She had to get to her son.

Digging her fingernails into the debris-strewn carpet, she began dragging herself across the room, stopping when she bumped into a body. She groped blindly and felt an arm, then a chest, and as she reached for a face her hand brushed the jagged piece of concrete that had crushed Leon Crosby's skull.

She continued on, frantic now to find another survivor. Clint and Albert had been in the other room, and Charlize considered calling out to them. If they'd survived, she knew her loyal team would be helping anyone they could while searching for her. But she couldn't hear anything besides the sporadic crack of concrete or a snapping pipe. If they were still alive, they were on their own for now. She would just have to rescue herself.

A steady flow of water dripped onto her exposed skin as she crawled out from under the broken table. The cool liquid felt good on her burns, but she quickly shivered from the cold. Stars rolled across her vision.

Teeth chattering, she called out a second time. "C-can—anyone—hear—me?"

"Help," someone answered. "God, it hurts. Please, someone help me."

Charlize recognized the voice. It was Acting President Diego.

"Sir, hang on. I'm coming," Charlize said.

She fumbled across the floor on all fours like a blind dog, pulling herself over debris.

"Trapped," Diego groaned. "Please, I can't move."

"I'm coming," Charlize said. As she moved toward the voice, she tried to think of a plan. Even if she could free him, they were stuck down here. And even if they could somehow escape, the surface above would be hell. If the fire and ash didn't kill them, the radiation would.

You have to try, she thought. She pushed herself to her feet and fell, landing on a body. Charlize scrambled to her feet. This time she made it all the way up, bumping her head on something hanging from the partially-collapsed ceiling.

A jolt of pain rushed down her back, but she pushed on, groping the air with her hands. She stumbled over a chunk of debris and then blundered into a curtain of cold water falling from a broken pipe.

"Sir, where are you?" Charlize said. "This is Senator Montgomery."

"Over here." Gasp. "Stuck."

She turned in the direction of his voice. He sounded like he was having trouble breathing.

"I'm almost there," Charlize said. "Just hang on."

The room replied with a tremor that shook the walls. Charlize froze, closing her eyes and waiting again to be crushed. These walls were built to withstand a direct hit from a nuclear weapon, and yet they were falling down around her. What the hell had the North Koreans hit them with?

Charlize carefully waded through the darkness, hands moving through the air in front of her in wide arcs, desperate to save a man she didn't even like.

The walls continued to creak as she moved. With every step, she wondered if it would be her last.

An agonized groan reverberated through the room.

"Hang on, sir. I'm almost there," Charlize said.

She froze as something began pounding against the walls or ceiling—she couldn't tell where exactly it was coming from. Whatever was causing the noise sounded deliberate, like someone was hitting a drum over and over.

Charlize twisted around, straining to see in the darkness. The pounding stopped, replaced by a scratching and then a crunching, like the walls were being pried apart. Then she heard voices in the other room, faint but unmistakable.

Charlize didn't dare breathe as she listened.

"Over there!"

"This one's gone."

The door to the operations room crashed to the ground, and beams of light penetrated the inky darkness. Charlize held a hand up to shield her sensitive eyes, but she kept her gaze on two men in full CBRN suits who came barreling into the room.

"There," one of them said, pointing in her direction. His voice still sounded strangely muffled, and Charlize wasn't sure if it was from her own damaged hearing or the breathing apparatus inside the man's suit. "Ma'am, it's going to be all right. Help is coming."

Charlize's legs began to shake, and with her last ounce of energy, she pointed toward where she'd heard Diego's voice.

"Help the president," she said before collapsing to the ground.

— 14 —

Colton and Jake crouched behind the back of the pickup truck as another gunshot rang out. The bullet punched through the fender. Whatever situation Raven had gotten himself into, it was quickly escalating.

“That guy is going to pay for hitting my truck,” Jake growled.

Colton reached out and held Jake back, and took in a breath of mountain air that stung his nostrils. He was regretting several things right now, especially his decision to ask Raven for help. He should have brought more backup, but how the hell was Colton supposed to know he was driving to a gun fight? He should have known better—this was Raven, after all.

“Put down your weapon!” Colton shouted. He considered trying to grab his M14 from the passenger seat, but he didn’t want to risk moving.

Colton snapped open the cylinder of his Colt .45 and checked the ammo. There were six rounds loaded.

He slammed it shut and cocked the hammer back. The revolver would have to do.

Another shot cracked through the woods outside Raven’s house, and the bullet kicked up the dirt by his left boot. Colton resisted the urge to jump from his position and return fire.

Be smart, Marcus. You can’t get shot. You have too much to do.

Every move from here on out was the difference between life and death. Not just for him, but for his family and maybe the whole town. Even a flesh wound could end up killing him now that medicine would be hard to come by.

With his back to the truck, he waited for a third shot. In the respite came Creek’s snarls and the grunts of the man the dog had pinned down. Raven was somewhere inside the house with his niece. That was good. Colton didn’t

want him to get in the way of what happened next.

After another long, tense moment, Colton and Jake exchanged a nod. Colton held up three fingers, then two, then one.

Jake fired his shotgun into the woods and then immediately ducked back down. The shooter was momentarily focused on Jake, giving Colton his chance. Moving to the other end of the truck, Colton raised his revolver, aimed the sights at the shooter, and fired. The shot went wide. A short man in a gray sweatshirt roved his gun toward Colton, and Colton squeezed the trigger again. The shot clipped the man in the shoulder. He let out a screech of pain and took off running in a hunch toward a cluster of trees.

“After him!” Colton ordered.

Jake was already on the move.

Keeping low, Colton bolted in the direction the shooter had run. He still wasn’t sure exactly what the hell was going on, but his guess was that Raven had pissed off some bad people.

“Stay in your house, Raven!” Colton shouted.

There was no reply and Colton glanced at the man wearing a suit to the left. He was on his back in the dirt, hands up in a defensive position. There wasn’t time to put him in cuffs, but Colton could see the guy wasn’t going anywhere. Not if he wanted to keep his throat. Saliva dripped from Creek’s maw as the dog snarled at the man.

The ground, slick from the rain the night before, mushed under Colton’s boots as he ran into the woods. They moved for several minutes side by side in combat intervals, just like they were trained.

Colton flashed a hand signal and Jake took up position behind a rock a few hundred feet to the right.

Silence washed over the woods. Colton listened for the crunch of footfalls or the groans of their injured chase, but there was nothing besides the wind rustling the canopy and a bird calling out in the distance.

He signaled for Jake to take point. An instant later, Colton saw a flash of gray moving on the ridgeline right toward Jake.

“Watch out!” Colton shouted.

There was an earsplitting crack, and Colton knew the short man had gotten off the first shot. The retort from Jake’s shotgun never came. Colton watched his friend crash to the dirt.

“NO!” Colton shouted. He aimed his Colt .45 toward the man, but by the time he found his target, the shooter was already on his knees, pawing at his

neck as blood drenched the front of his shirt. An arrow protruded from the center of his Adam's apple.

Colton raised his pistol at an approaching figure. As soon as he saw it was Raven he lowered his gun and ran toward Jake.

The burly officer was on his back, clutching his gut and sucking in labored breaths. Colton holstered his pistol and dropped by his friend's side.

"Son of a bitch, that bastard got me," Jake wheezed.

"Don't talk." Colton felt around Jake's chest and stomach for the wound so he could apply pressure, but Jake slapped his hand away.

"It's okay," he grumbled. "I'm wearing a vest today."

Colton pulled his hand away. "Jesus, Jake. You about gave me a heart attack."

"Hey," Raven shouted from the top of the hill. "Is he okay? This little prick is dead."

Colton helped Jake sit up and then ran over to Raven and the dead man. Dark, wide eyes glared up at cloudy sky, a look of shock still painted on his face.

"Thanks, I owe you one," Colton said to Raven, hardly believing the words as they left his mouth.

Raven nodded and rose to his feet. "Actually, I owe *you* one. You got here just in the nick of time. This guy and his friend would have killed me and my niece if it weren't for you two."

"What happened to the other guy? Did you—"

"No, I didn't kill him. Creek is still watching him."

Colton had a dozen questions running through his head, but instead of asking them, he reached down and grabbed the dead man's pistol. He wedged it in the pocket of his jacket.

"Goddammit, Raven," Colton said. Now that they were out of danger, he found his usual impatience with Raven returning. "Why can't you stay out of trouble?"

Jake staggered over to them, gripping his chest. "Nice shooting," he said to Raven. "But how about you explain why this guy just tried to kill me?"

"I swear I didn't start this shit. They came for some money I owe their boss." Raven slung the crossbow over his back. "When I told them about the attack, they tried to take my Jeep, and then they pulled guns on me right in front of Allie."

Colton's eyes flicked to Jake. The hulking officer looked okay, but he'd

probably have a hell of a bruise come morning.

"Look, if you came here to arrest me, then just get it over with, man," Raven said, holding his wrists out. "Go ahead, put the cuffs on again."

Colton sighed. "I didn't come to arrest you, Raven."

"Oh? Did you come for my Jeep?" He lowered his hands. "Sorry, I'm not handing it over for good…but you can borrow it if you really need it."

"I didn't come for your Jeep either," Colton said. "I came for your help. We found Bill Catcher's body this morning, hanging from a tree in his backyard."

"Oh shit," Raven said. He patted his jacket pocket, drew out a crumpled pack of cigarettes, and then seemed to think better of it.

"Bill's legs were burned, like Melissa's," Colton said quietly. He paused, listening to the wind rustle the branches of the ash trees. "We've only got two bodies so far, but I fear we might have a serial killer on the loose, and with everything else going on, I need your tracking skills to find him."

***

The world was burning.

Charlize was lying on her back, too hurt and exhausted to move, in a place that looked a lot like hell. Fires raged in every direction, flames licking at a sky the color of bloody mud. Or was that the ceiling?

I'm dead. I've gone to hell for all those innocent civilians I killed during the war.

Intense terror ripped through her. She could sense the rush of adrenaline, but she still couldn't feel her limbs. She couldn't feel any pain either, and somehow the numbness was worse than the burning agony.

You're dead. You failed Ty, and you won't ever see Richard again.

But if this was hell, shouldn't she feel pain? Wasn't she supposed to suffer?

The blurry forms of other sinners were moving around her. Their skin looked like dark plastic, wrinkled and deformed.

Burned. Everyone was burned.

Lightning flashed overhead. So that was the sky after all. And she seemed to be rising toward it. The burning pyres seemed to be falling away, growing ever smaller as she rose out of hell. She could see other shapes now, skeletal

things like the bones of whales jutting out of the scorched dirt.

The sensation of motion grew stronger, and a fierce, hot wind whipped at her body. Beyond the dull ringing in her ears, she heard a strangely familiar sound.

This wasn't hell, but she wasn't ascending into heaven either.

I'm in a chopper, she realized. How had she gotten here? All she remembered was burning pain and then darkness. Had her F-15 crashed? Was she being airlifted to safety?

She sucked in a breath of sharp air that stung her lungs. A hand touched her shoulder, and she turned away from the burning world to see a man in a space suit looking down at her.

Her vision suddenly sharpened. It wasn't a space suit; this was a soldier in a CBRN suit.

"Ma'am, can you hear me?"

"How…?" she started to say. Her mouth was so dry. She licked her lips and tried again. "How did my plane crash? Where's the rest of my squadron?"

To the masked man's right was a familiar face—a face that reminded her she wasn't in some foreign warzone. She was in D.C. What was left of it.

Albert nudged the soldier out of the way and managed to open his cracked, bloody lips. A single tear rolled down his face. It was the first time Charlize had ever seen the big man cry.

"You're going to be okay," Albert said. "We're going somewhere safe."

Charlize tried to respond, but all that came out was something that sounded like a witch's cackle. She tried to move again, managing to palm the metal floor with her burned hands. Her skin stuck to the surface.

Two more soldiers in CBRN suits closed the door to the helicopter, sealing off the view of the burning landscape below. Charlize scanned the troop hold, trying to see who had made it. Diego was on a stretcher with two soldiers working on him. There was another person in the corner of the troop hold whose flesh was so badly burned she couldn't tell who it was.

"Where's Clint?" she asked.

Albert's mouth moved in reply, but a raucous clap cut him off.

Charlize twisted to look out the window, half expecting to see North Korean fighters tearing through the skies. Instead of hostile jets, there was only the electric blue crackle of lighting.

She made herself sit up to look out the window. Her body seemed distant,

like it had been unplugged from her brain. Probably morphine, she realized. Either that or shock. The view outside really was like looking down into hell. Fires burned across the horizon. Husks of buildings were all that remained in some areas, but ground zero was a flat, smoldering field. The shockwaves from the strike had pounded the city into a blackened pancake.

Near the epicenter of the destruction lay what remained of the Washington Monument. Blackened blocks of stone littered the smoking dirt not far from where the other symbols of American democracy and freedom had once stood. The White House, the Capitol, the National Mall…they were all gone. From now on, Washington would be nothing more than a radioactive night light.

"Ma'am. Can I look at your arm please?"

She forced her gaze away from the window. The soldier in the CBRN suit was back, holding a medical kit.

Charlize ran a hand over her head, and a clump of hair came out in her burned fingers. She held it up and examined the shriveled ends of what had been her favorite feature. Charlize wasn't a vain woman, but she had loved her long, glossy black hair.

A tear crept down her cheeks, the salt searing her skin. Lips trembling, she looked to Albert and asked again, "Al, where's Clint?"

Albert wiped his forehead and then slowly pointed toward the horribly burned body in the back of the troop hold.

***

Raven was late.

That normally wouldn't have surprised Sandra, but today she needed her brother more than ever before. It had been a rough morning, with several new patients showing up throughout the early hours. One man had suffered a mild heart attack on the walk into town after being stranded on Highway 34. He claimed to have trekked ten miles to get to the hospital. They had him stabilized now, but another man who had gone into cardiac arrest hadn't been so lucky.

Sandra sat next to Teddy's bed, her hands tingling from the constant motion of pumping air into his breathing tube. She had traded off the duty with other nurses and doctors throughout the night, but they were all busy

with other patients now.

Everything that required power was offline: ventilators, feeding tubes, dialysis machines. Feeding tubes and saline drips could work by gravity, but the pumps were offline. ECG monitors were dead. The labs, the CT and MRI machines…none of their expensive equipment worked. Sandra and the other nurses and physicians were practically working in the blind.

The doors were propped open to let in light from the outside. It also helped with the airflow. Without ventilation, it was already getting hot despite the chilly temperatures outside. And the smells…

Sandra breathed in through her surgical mask. It helped block some of the stench, but not everything.

The curtain cordoning off the small space peeled back and Newton looked in. He closed it and asked, “How is he?”

“The same,” she said.

Newton examined Teddy. Sandra wasn’t sure what was going on in the doctor’s mind, but she could tell by his calculating look he was probably factoring Teddy’s chances of survival.

He looked away and tapped his iWatch several times before giving up.

“Damn thing still doesn’t work. Does anyone know what time it is?”

“Little after noon,” someone yelled back.

Newton wiped sweat from his forehead with a sleeve. “Doctor Duffy and I have asked Kayla to put together a handwritten schedule for the staff. We’re going to need everyone to work double shifts until the power comes back on.”

Sandra wanted to tell him that the power was never coming back on, but she held her tongue. Instead, she pumped another breath into Teddy’s lungs, his chest rising with the oxygen. He looked so peaceful, drifting in his medically induced coma. Sandra realized with a jolt that she hadn’t slept for more than a few minutes for over thirty hours.

“My daughter is with her uncle, but I’m sure he can watch her longer. I just need some rest, maybe an hour.”

“Of course,” Newton replied. “Everyone is going to get—”

The sound of a commotion in the lobby cut the doctor off. Several raised voices echoed into the ICU. One of them was Kayla’s, but Sandra didn’t recognize the others.

“I better check this out,” said Newton.

“Does anyone know where I can find Sandra Spears?” someone called.

Sandra nearly forgot to help Teddy breathe. She carefully squeezed the bag, but her heart was running wild. Had something happened to her little girl?

Newton glanced at her and reached out for the bag. “Looks like you have visitors. Why don’t you let me take over?”

Coordinating the shift with the utmost care, Sandra and Newton changed places. She stepped onto the floor of the ER, terrified about what she would discover.

“Momma!”

Allie was standing at the entrance to the room, holding Police Chief Marcus Colton’s hand. She came running and grabbed Sandra around the waist.

“Allie! What are you…?” Exhausted and confused, Sandra looked to Colton for an answer.

“Ma’am,” he said, inclining his head. Before she could ask him what he was doing there, Doctor Duffy approached. Sandra hugged Allie and then knelt to look her over.

“Are you okay?”

Allie nodded.

“Where is Raven?”

She nestled her head against Sandra’s shoulder and whimpered.

Hospital staff watched Colton as Sandra worked to calm Allie. People from the lobby tried to follow the police chief into the ER, but Kayla shooed them away before sending the curious nurses back to their tasks.

“What can you tell us? Will the power be back on anytime soon?” Duffy asked Colton. Then his eyes went wide. “Damn, Chief, what the hell happened to you?”

Colton glanced down at his uniform, which was covered in blood.

“There was an incident,” he said dryly, before reassuring the doctor that the blood wasn’t his. He looked toward Sandra and said, “Ma’am, we need you to come outside.”

“What did my brother do now?”

Colton jerked his chin toward the exit. “You can ask him yourself.”

Sandra grabbed Allie’s hand and led her through the lobby and outside into the parking lot. Between the lack of sleep and her rapidly firing heart, Sandra felt like she was going to faint.

The first thing she saw was Jake standing next to Raven’s Jeep, guarding

the rear door with a shotgun. A man in a black suit that Sandra didn't recognize sat inside.

Raven was sitting on the tailgate of a red pickup truck next to Nathan. Sandra wasn't sure what to think when she saw the two men fiddling with a radio. She had expected to see her brother in handcuffs.

Creek trotted over and nudged up against her leg. He let out a whine and then sat on his haunches.

"Sis!" Raven shouted when he saw her. He jumped onto the pavement and strode over. Nathan carefully set the radio down and then limped over.

As she walked over to meet them, she noticed the shape covered in a bloody blanket on the bed of the truck. She moved in front of Allie to block her view.

"What happened? Who is that?" she asked.

"Stay calm," Colton said. "Your brother was attacked at his place. One of the men didn't make it."

"Attacked by who? And why?"

"Redford's goons," Raven said. "Don't worry, they didn't hurt Allie."

Anger boiled up inside of Sandra, warring with the relief she felt at having her daughter back. If Raven had needed money so badly, why didn't he ask her or get a loan from the bank like a normal person? No, he had to get in deep with a loan shark and put her little girl in danger.

She would have yelled at her brother, but she didn't want to scare Allie any more than she was already.

"We're just here to drop Allie off," Colton said, looking nervously at her. Sandra hoped she looked as furious as she felt. "Sorry for the trouble, ma'am, but I need your brother's help."

Sandra regarded Colton with a scowl. "Help? I figured you'd be taking him off to jail again. Maybe he deserves it."

Colton looked around, seemingly checking to see who else was in earshot, and then stepped closer to Sandra to whisper, "Someone murdered Bill Catcher sometime this morning or last night. I think it's the same person that killed Melissa. I need your brother and Creek to help me find him."

Sandra wasn't ready to be friendly or forgiving. "Don't let him get you shot," she said.

Colton nodded as if this was good advice. "Yes, ma'am. Is there someone else who can watch your daughter while you're at work? If not, my wife could—"

“That won’t be necessary,” Sandra said. “I’d rather keep her with me.”

Colton nodded, smiled warmly at Allie, and then made his way back to the vehicles. He gestured for Nathan and Raven to join him.

“This man needs medical attention,” Sandra said as Nathan started to walk away. “Come here, Major, let me take a look at you.”

The handsome pilot actually blushed. “I’ll be fine, Ms. Spears.”

She gave him her best nurse’s glare. “You’re going to permanently damage yourself if you keep running around with my fool brother.”

“I heard that,” Raven said. “I swear, I didn’t do anything wrong.”

“You never do anything wrong, Raven,” Sandra said with a sigh. “You never take responsibility for anything either. What if those men had hurt Allie, or Creek?”

Raven stuck his hands in his pockets, and his eyes flitted to the ground. He wore the same wounded look that Sandra remembered from their childhood after their dad would yell at him. Her heart hurt at the sight, but her brother was going to have to grow up sooner than later.

She joined the men by the trucks as Colton gave them orders. Nathan would take Jake’s battered truck and see if he could get the ham radio working. Colton and Jake would transfer the corpse to the morgue in Raven’s Jeep, drop off their prisoner at the jail, and then head out to the high school, where Colton would address the people of Estes Park at a community meeting.

He pointed at Raven. “What do you need?”

“Well, since you’re borrowing my Jeep, I could use a million bucks, a couple cases of top shelf whiskey, and a couple of supermodels.” Raven glanced up at Prospect Mountain. “And how about a helicopter?”

Colton flared his nostrils, clearly not amused.

“I’m just kidding, Chief,” Raven said. “I just need Creek, my crossbow, and a ride up to Prospect. I’ll try to pick up the trail at Bill Catcher’s place.”

“I’ll send an officer with you,” Colton said.

Raven shook his head and looked at Sandra. “I’m better off on my own. Don’t want anyone else to get hurt.”

The dig was aimed at her, but she wasn’t going to apologize for her earlier words. Raven had promised he would protect them, and instead he had gotten her daughter mixed up in a gun fight that ended with at least one man dead.

“Suit yourself,” Colton replied. “Let’s move out.”

Raven hesitated and then put his arms around Allie. “I’m sorry, *Agaliga*,”

he said.

“Sunshine,” Sandra said after a snort. Her brother always was the charmer. He pulled away from Allie and reached out for Sandra. The knuckles of his hand looked even more swollen, and a bruise was coming up on his cheek. She clicked her tongue, remembering all the times she’d held makeshift ice packs against his bruised face while they were growing up. Their dad had thrown a lot of punches in that house.

“I’m sorry,” Raven said again, turning to her. “Seriously. I’m really sorry, Sis. I promise I’m going to change. I’ll be a better man.”

Sandra wrapped her arms around her brother as her anger at last thawed. “You’re still the best man in my life. Be careful, okay?”

— 15 —

Nathan drove the Chevy up Trail Ridge Road, following a map Chief Colton had drawn him. He hoped that the higher elevation would help him get a clear signal. The old pickup was having a hell of a time with the climb, rattling and shaking. Going from an F-16 Viper to this old clunker was one hell of a change. He wasn't used to seeing the snow-kissed mountains and evergreen forests from the ground, either. Was this what his sister had felt like when she gave up her wings for a seat in Congress?

The long, winding road provided him plenty of time to think. He realized how lucky he'd been to run into Sandra in the woods. Her face appeared in his mind's eye with her proud, high cheekbones and dark eyes full of compassion and fire. Although they looked nothing alike, something about her reminded him of his sister.

It didn't seem likely that he'd see Charlize again, at least not in this life. His poor nephew was almost certainly an orphan now. Ty was the bravest kid he'd ever known, but he was still just a kid, and Nathan wished more than anything that he'd ignored orders and gone on to the Easterseals camp.

At least he had finally found a radio. The battery-powered analog shortwave radio was his best shot at reaching the outside world. He just hoped it worked. So far the damn thing wasn't getting a signal. His plan was to rig up the antennae he had borrowed from the police station. The highest point of Trail Ridge Road was just over twelve thousand feet. If it still didn't work there, then he was shit out of luck.

Then again, if there was a radioactive cloud from the high-altitude nuclear blast, they were all out of luck. He didn't know much about how the radioactive particles were spread, but he knew it was highly dangerous in the short term. If they blew east, then Estes Park might be okay, but he wasn't

sure about Empire. The small city was much closer to the blast zone.

The truck chugged along, and he had to weave around several abandoned vehicles. The drivers were long gone. He didn't envy them the long trek they must have made into town.

As the road looped around the peaks, Nathan looked out over the valley below. His heart stuttered when he saw the black pockmark on the sheer face of a nearby mountain. Below, the burned skeletons of pine trees poked out of the ground. Nathan couldn't see the debris from his wingman's wreckage from this vantage, and part of him didn't want to.

He pressed down harder on the gas pedal. The truck jolted forward, the chassis protesting with a shriek. Ahead, the road cut through a narrow pass in the mountains. On the other side, snow carpeted everything from the treetops to the pavement.

"Almost there," he said, patting the wheel.

The road curved past a large open meadow with drifts of snow. A herd of elk raced away from the sound of the truck. In the distance, a storm was moving in. Dark, bulging clouds rolled over the mountains. Lightning flashed in their swell.

Nathan parked the truck on the side of the road and looked for a place to set up. After a quick scan, he picked the slope to the east. He would make the easy trek across the snow and rig the antennae up there.

Lugging his bag over his shoulders, he limped across the road and into the snow. He was still wearing his rumpled, dirty flight suit, topped with an Estes Park Police Department sweatshirt. He'd never cared much about his appearance, but this was bad even for him. He made a mental note to find some clothes when he returned to town.

The snow was only shin-deep at first, but it quickly got deeper as he made his way across the meadow. By the time he reached the top of the slope, it was halfway up his legs. His ankle throbbed in the cold, and he wished he'd taken Sandra up on her offer to rewrap it.

A gust of wind bit into his side, nearly throwing him off balance. The cold crept through his layers. He raised his cupped hands to his mouth and blew in them before setting up the radio. The sharp peaks of the Rocky Mountains lined the horizon. It was a beautiful sight, but the storm clouds were growing in size and strength.

Nathan bent down and unloaded his gear. He spent the next few minutes attaching the antennae. When he had finished, he set the radio on a rock and

pulled the receiver. Then he dialed to all the even numbers to listen for chatter. There wasn't much, and what he did hear wasn't helpful. Just a lot of panicked-sounding civilians asking for information or begging for help.

"CQ, CQ. This is Sierra Tango Foxtrot Niner in Iowa City, Iowa. We've got refugees streaming in from I-80 with signs of radiation poisoning. Is anyone out there? We need help. FEMA, the military, anybody. Someone, please answer!"

He decided to search for a clean frequency instead and see if there was someone out there from Colorado that would respond to him. After he found one, he checked to make sure it was open. Since he didn't have a ham call sign, he used his rank. "CQ, CQ, Major Sardetti, US Air Force, CQ, CQ. Is this an open frequency? This is Major Nathan Sardetti calling CQ and listening."

He waited a few minutes but didn't hear any chatter. He continued his call. "CQ, CQ this is Major Nathan Sardetti, United States Air Force. My Viper was shot down over Estes Park, Colorado. Anyone out there?"

"That's affirmative, this is Whiskey Foxtrot Zero Zero Niner. Located at Colorado Springs. Sorry about your Viper, Major. Glad you made it out."

The wind howled, and he covered the receiver to protect it from the gust.

"Say again? My noise level is horrendous," said the other operator. "I hope you're not outside, Major. There's a radioactive storm heading your way."

Nathan's eyes darted to the bulging storm clouds on the horizon. "Come again, Whiskey Foxtrot Zero Zero Niner?"

"Radioactive cloud heading your way, Major. I'm holed up at Cheyenne Mountain. We're tracing the radioactive patterns, and I've been tasked with relaying that information over analog."

Nathan allowed himself a breath and tried his best to remain calm while the operator continued speaking.

"You all need to stay indoors for at least a couple of days just to be safe, and even after that the radiation might be too high to leave shelter if it's as bad as we're predicting."

Nathan pulled the mic away from his mouth and looked out over the valley. Colton was down there somewhere preparing to talk to a high school gym full of civilians, all of them unaware of the threat barreling down on them.

"How long do we have?" Nathan asked.

"Two and a half, maybe three hours."

“Is Empire, Colorado, in that storm pattern?”

“Afraid so, Major. They have been for the past few hours.”

Nathan’s bottom lip quivered. He held the mic away, hesitated, then brought it back to his lips. “Whiskey Foxtrot Zero Zero Niner. I need you to do me a favor. Two actually.”

“Why don’t you call me Jeff, sir? Senior Airman Jeff Main at your service.”

“Okay,” Nathan said. “Right now I have to get back to town to warn everyone, but please see if you can contact anyone listening in Empire and warn them. Tell them there are kids and staff at the Easterseals camp that need help. I also need you to reach Senator Charlize Montgomery in D.C. She’s my sister.”

“Sir, that’s not going to be easy.” There was a pause, and then the airman continued, “Washington was destroyed in the second wave of the attack. I’m sorry, Major.”

Nathan fell to his knees in the snow, his body giving out as all hope faded. Charlize was really gone. He missed the next several messages as his mind filled with grief.

A beeping sound drew his attention back to the present. He glanced at the radio, but the noise wasn’t coming from the device. The Geiger counter in his bag was chirping as the needle ticked higher toward the red zone.

Nathan pushed the radio’s receiver back to his mouth. “I have to get back to town. I’ll transmit again as soon as I can.”

“Copy that, Major. Good luck.”

Nathan stuffed the radio back in his bag and hurried back to the truck, his eyes on the growing storm. One thing was certain: They were going to need more than luck to survive this.

***

Two hours after throwing Theo in jail, Colton stood in the high school gymnasium, staring at the purple Bobcats flag hanging from the wall. Over a thousand people had shown up, despite having to walk there. The natural light coming in from the open doors was hardly enough to illuminate the entire gym.

Looking out over the crowd, he saw people of all ages ranging from a baby

clutched against her mother's chest to an elderly woman hanging on the arm of her son. There were plenty of faces he didn't recognize in the dim lighting, probably tourists who were stranded here. If the worst came to pass and the power grid was never restored, those strangers would probably become permanent residents of his town.

No matter where he looked, everyone had the same fearful gaze. What he said next would need to reassure these people enough to prevent them from panicking, but he couldn't bring himself to lie to their faces, either. The burden of his position began to sink in as he walked toward the platform to face the crowd.

Sergeant Aragon and Mayor Andrews' entire staff were standing on the platform. Kelly and Risa were up there with them. Colton smiled at his wife and then nodded at the Mayor. She had convinced him that whatever was said today needed to come from him.

The chatter in the room died down as he stepped up to the podium, but some conversations continued. He stuck his fingers in his mouth and whistled, a trick he'd learned in the National Guard from his commanding officer. It took several more seconds before the room was silent.

Over sporadic coughing, Colton could hear the wind howling outside the gym's open doors. The sound seemed fitting for what he was about to say.

"We are at war," he said in a commanding voice. "Today, we stand together in the aftermath of a devastating attack. North Korea set off a series of nuclear weapons in the skies above the United States, triggering an electromagnetic pulse that knocked out our power grid and crippled our electronic devices."

The gasps, shouts, and voices that followed didn't surprise Colton. He could feel Gail glaring at him, and he didn't blame her. He wasn't following the narrative they had discussed, but part of being a leader was knowing when to improvise.

"Many of you remember the 2013 floods. This is much, much worse. Estes Park is a small but proud community. We will be one of the last cities in Colorado to receive aid, if help is even available. You deserve to know what we face in the coming days, weeks, and months. It may sound like this is the end of the world, but I assure you, if we stand together as one, we will get through this. Our isolation isn't a bad thing. We have plenty of clean water up here, and we can hunt, fish, and forage when our food supplies run out. But…"

It wasn’t the best time to pause, but his words trailed off when Colton saw Rex and Lilly Stone standing near the front, holding on to each other.

Don coughed into his hand, a subtle message to get on with it. Colton grabbed the sides of the podium and leaned forward.

“But we need to follow some basic rules or else there will be chaos in our streets. Anyone who breaks the peace will answer to me.”

“What are you going to do about the murder of that little girl, Chief?” someone shouted.

“I heard Bill Catcher was murdered too!” yelled another man.

Colton held up his hand. “As many of you have obviously heard, we have had two homicides in the past twenty-four hours, but I promise you that I will find the person or people responsible.”

He could still feel Rex staring at him, and he didn’t avoid the grieving father’s gaze. Colton held it for several seconds before continuing.

“Make no mistake. We are at war, and life is going to dramatically change. That’s why we need to stick together and help one another.”

Several shouts rang out through the room, and Colton heard more than one person crying. Terrified faces stared back at him. Families clustered together. Children were sobbing, and some parents seemed too shocked to comfort them.

The burden of Colton’s duty to protect these people was nearly overwhelming, but instead of slouching, he stiffened and looked to the American flag hanging from the northern wall, a symbol of freedom and justice that he had fought and bled for. It gave him the strength he needed to finish his address.

“I know you’re all scared,” Colton said. “I’m scared too, but we’re Americans. We have overcome great adversity in our history. We have come together to fight for our independence, we healed after a devastating Civil War. We united after Nine-Eleven, and we must remain united now.”

The room quieted.

“We have survived attacks in the past, and we will survive this.”

Several heads began to nod.

Colton pointed at the flag. “We’re all citizens of this great country, and as long as we work together we will prevail.”

The sounds of panic and crying in the audience faded. People wiped away their tears. That was the American way. Grieve, and then get up and fight. These people were ready to do just that.

“Moving forward, I’m going to need your help protecting our town. I’m talking to all of you, residents and visitors alike. Last night each tourist became a citizen, too, and we need your help.”

John Palmer, a volunteer firefighter, stepped forward from the crowd. “I’ve got your back, Chief!” he shouted.

Within seconds, half of the gymnasium was offering their help and support.

Even Dale, the belligerent soldier he had disarmed the night before, was pumping his fist in the air and bellowing *Ooh Rah*. Colton couldn’t help but smile at that.

Don began clapping, and others soon joined in. But there was also another noise, a commotion coming from the side of the room. A sea of bodies parted to make way for two men rushing to the platform.

“Chief,” Jake said, gasping for air. “Chief, we need to talk to you.”

Looking back over the crowd, Colton said, “Can’t this wait?”

Jake stared back, eyes blazing with something he didn’t usually see in the burly police officer.

Fear.

“What is it?” Colton asked, keeping his voice low.

“I made contact with a senior airman out of Cheyenne Mountain,” Nathan explained. “He said there’s radiation heading our way in that storm. We have to get everyone to shelter.”

Colton’s heart hammered as he glanced back over the crowd.

“How long do we have?” he asked.

Nathan shook his head. “Not long. A little over two hours at this point.”

“Shit,” Colton said. He waved Gail over and relayed the news.

“We have a shelter here at the high school, another at the hospital, and a third back at town hall,” she said. “But what about people in the rural areas?”

“Jake, go get the bullhorn from the station and take your truck out to notify people they need to get indoors. They should put plastic sheets and tape over their windows, if they can, and get their livestock and pets under cover. They should protect their water wells, too. Tell them to stay put until we give them the word.”

Jake nodded. “I’m on it.”

The large officer kept his hand on his cowboy hat as he hurried away.

Colton stepped back up to the podium. The only good news he had to offer was that these people wouldn’t have far to go to reach the nearest shelter. He

took a deep breath and spoke in a calm, deep voice.

“Everyone, you all need to listen to what I say next very carefully.”

He felt the stares of a thousand people like a physical onslaught, but Marcus Colton would not let that deter him. What these people needed was a leader, and he was the best they were going to get.

“There’s a storm heading our way, and it could produce radioactive rain,” Colton said. Then he explained the basic steps to secure their homes for the people who wanted to return to their families. Everyone else would take shelter in the well-stocked basement of the high school. People began moving right away, and he stepped away from the podium to give orders to his officers. He’d need all of them on the streets, directing people to the closest shelters. He asked Don to remain behind at the school, and he directed Mayor Andrews to head back to town hall with her staff.

Kelly and Risa rushed over to him, and Colton reached for their hands.

“Dad, was that little girl you were talking about, Melissa?” Risa asked, tears welling up in her eyes. “One of my friends said she was killed.”

Colton shared a stricken look with Kelly. They’d wanted to protect their little girl from the harsh truth—and, if he was honest, to protect themselves from the heartache of seeing her innocence fade. But by doing so, they’d ended up hurting her even more.

“Sweetheart, I’m so sorry…” Colton realized he didn’t have time to explain anything to Risa right now.

“Chief Colton,” said Nathan, limping over to them. “What about Raven?”

“What about him?”

Colton cursed when he remembered that he had sent Raven out to Prospect Mountain. They had left him up there without a vehicle, and he was likely deep in the woods, out of range of the bullhorn. Raven was a cunning son of a bitch and a former recon Marine, but that wouldn’t save him from radiation-laced rain.

***

Wet gravel crunched under Raven’s boots. He was in tracking mode, completely alert and aware of his surroundings. He had put every other concern out of his mind, including the guilt he felt for the North Korean attack.

The spectacular views up here helped, with the Rocky Mountains to the west and Lake Estes to the east. But the oncoming storm ruined the picture. It was rolling west across the horizon, and Estes Park looked to be directly in its path.

"Great," Raven muttered. He was itching for a cigarette, but he pulled his Seattle Mariners hat and his poncho from his backpack instead. He threw them on and then jogged after his dog. The road twisted up the mountain, curving off onto private drives that he hadn't even known existed. Many of the properties were blocked off by high fences with elaborate metal gates, but he could make out the enormous houses beyond.

So this is how rich people live, he mused.

Not everybody up here was rich, of course. For every mountaintop mansion, there were trailers and ramshackle cabins tucked onto parcels of heavily wooded land. He continued to climb, and soon he reached a black metal gate across the road. Pulling out the laminated map Colton had given him, he checked his location. The road beyond led to the aerial tramway on the other side of the mountain.

He was a tracker, but if he was going to find the killer, he was going to need to think like a cop. Melissa was seen getting off her bus near here before she vanished, and Bill Catcher's place wasn't far. It seemed likely that the killer had a base around here somewhere, but there were too many possibilities. He could be squatting in someone's summer vacation home or holed up in a camper out of sight from the main road.

He forced himself to see the world as a two-dimensional canvas again, summoning up his force recon training. So far he had found nothing. No sign of the blue F-150, or a camp. Without any other clues, he was at a loss.

No way in hell am I going back to Colton empty-handed, he thought.

He raised his crossbow and whistled at Creek. They turned and made their way back down the road toward Bill Catcher's place. Thunder boomed in the distance, and lightning flashed in the black fortress of clouds.

A yellow mist seemed to lead the mass of clouds as they rolled over the mountains. It reminded him of a dust storm in Iraq, but the odd part of this storm was the black swell in the meat of the clouds.

Raven stopped to listen as something that sounded like a bullhorn squawked in the distance. The noise continued for another minute, but it was so faint he couldn't make out any of the words.

He started walking again, and then fell into a jog with Creek by his side.

They ran for nearly twenty minutes, keeping low and quiet along the side of the road. Raven put every worry out of his mind and focused on the hunt. His first stop was Bill Catcher's place to search for clues that Colton's people might have missed.

The distant clap of thunder followed them as they ran down the road leading to Bill's house. Raven crouched by the fence and scanned the area. There was no movement other than a few loose chickens.

Creek sat on his haunches, waiting for orders. Raven gave a low whistle, and the dog took off running into the woods framing the property. He trusted the Akita to leave the poultry alone; the dog had more self-discipline than most people he knew, including himself.

Raven shouldered his crossbow and ran across the front yard. When he got to the porch, he took a deep breath and kicked open the door.

The cabin was clear.

He hurried back outside, checking the sky. Sheets of rain were coming down on the mountains now. If he wanted to stay dry, he'd have to wait the storm out here.

Raven continued to the field behind the house where Jake and Nathan had discovered Bill's body. Creek was sniffing the ground under a tree, exploring the remains of a bonfire. Overhead, a severed rope hung from a thick branch, swinging in the wind. Creek moved on to another, smaller tree nearby. The dog sat beneath it and looked at Raven expectantly.

"What? What did you find, boy?"

Raven checked his six and then walked over. Creek pawed at something on the ground, and Raven knelt to check it out. A square of paper, grimy at the edges, was half-hidden in the tall grass.

Setting his crossbow on the ground, Raven knelt and picked the paper up. It was a crude drawing, partly obscured by a tear near the top. Raven glanced around and noticed a hunting knife sticking out of the hanging tree; the killer could have used it to pin the paper beside the dead man, but the wind must have ripped it away.

He returned his attention to the drawing. Two male stick figures stood in the center, and he could clearly make out their long, dagger-like teeth. More figures lay at their feet, their prone bodies riddled with arrows. A wavy line curved around them, and he realized it was supposed to be a stream or river.

Goose flesh rose across his arms and legs when he realized what the scene meant.

This chase wasn’t just a killer. He was acting out a story from Raven’s childhood, a story that had haunted him for years.

The Water Cannibals had come to Estes Park.

— 16 —

Charlize Montgomery stood at the top of a grassy hill, gripping the handle of her son's toy truck. Ty sat inside, holding onto the steering wheel, his eyes glued to the slope that probably looked like a mountain to him.

"Go, go, go!" he shouted.

Smiling, Charlize growled to mimic the sound of an engine. Ty slapped the side of the steering wheel with delight.

That was her signal to get moving.

She pushed, and the plastic wheels rolled over the fresh-cut grass toward the playground below. Charlize kept a strong grip on the handle and sped up. The other kids were playing and laughing. Some were climbing on equipment, others were running and throwing a football. All things Ty would likely never do, but for a few moments he was having more fun than all of the other kids combined.

"Faster, Mom!" he yelled.

The truck jerked up and down over the lumpy ground, but Charlize kept up their speed. Whenever Ty spun the wheel to the right or left, Charlize turned the car in that direction. She continued growling to imitate the sound of a motor. Overhead, a jet echoed the noise, roaring across the heavens. She searched the sky out of habit to see if she could identify the aircraft.

They were almost to the bottom of the hill when a flash of blinding light bloomed over the Denver skyline. Charlize nearly lost her grip on the handle at the sight of a fireball climbing into the air. She dug her heels into the grass to stop their descent and fell on her butt.

The truck fishtailed, and Ty screamed. She had to let go to shield her eyes from the light. A wave of blistering heat pressed her body to the ground as Ty continued screaming, his voice rising into a high, eerie wail like a klaxon.

“Ma’am, can you open your eyes?”

The voice was unfamiliar, and it sounded both far away and close at the same time.

Charlize forced her burned eyelids open, squinting at several blurred figures standing above her.

“Where…where am I?” she asked. The words came out as a whisper.

“You’re safe, Senator,” said the voice. It was familiar. Richard? No, Big Al! Her fingers quested over the blanket covering her body, and they found the huge, warm hand of her bodyguard.

“Where’s Clint?” she asked. Charlize had a vague memory of asking the question before, but she couldn’t remember the answer. She struggled to sit up. She had to find her chief of staff. They had to get that bill filed before the next session of Congress, and she needed him to set up a meeting with the agriculture board.

“Don’t try to move,” a woman’s voice said. “You were severely injured.”

Her vision finally cleared enough to make out the faces of the people looking down on her. Albert was wrapped in so much medical gauze that he looked like a mummy, but he was smiling at her. Not his usual megawatt grin, but a smile nonetheless. The other two people were strangers. A man and a woman, both of them wearing scrubs and lab coats.

“Where am I?” Charlize repeated. “And who are you?”

The woman answered. “You’re aboard the USS John C. Stennis,” she explained. “I’m Dr. Huppert. This is Dr. Rodriguez.”

“Where’s Clint?” she asked.

Albert’s smile faded away. “He didn’t make it, ma’am.”

Charlize took in a long breath and winced. “No,” she whispered.

“I’m sorry,” Albert said. “They did everything they could for him, but he was just too badly burned.”

Charlize pushed the grief aside for later. For now, she had to focus. But her body hurt so badly, and stars moved across her vision. She felt like she was going to be sick.

“Where are we?” she managed to say.

“Three hundred miles east of Maryland, sailing south to avoid fallout from the ground detonation,” Huppert said.

“My son, he’s in Colorado. I have to get to him.” She palmed the bed and attempted to sit up again, but she was immediately hit by a wave of agonizing pain.

Huppert raised a hand. “Ma’am, you’re not going anywhere. You have first degree burns on over twenty percent of your body, second degree burns on your face, and third degree burns to your right hand. You’re also being treated for radiation sickness. You’re lucky you were evacuated when you were, or you might not have made it.”

“I have to get to Ty. He can’t run from the fire.” In her mind, she was back in her nightmare as the hellish flames of nuclear blast swept toward her son. She struggled against the hands now holding her down. Why didn’t they understand? She had to get to her baby.

“Calm down, Senator,” Huppert said. “I’m going to sedate you now for your own safety.”

“My baby,” Charlize mumbled. “I have to…”

A heavy numbness began to spread through her body. She fought to hold her eyes open for a few minutes longer before giving in to the darkness.

***

Colton felt like a bus driver as he drove through downtown. The Jeep was packed full. Mayor Gail sat in the passenger seat beside him, while his wife and daughter huddled in the back seat with Nathan. Tom Feagen had gallantly volunteered to ride back in the cargo area, but he seemed to be regretting the decision now.

Risa was crying, and Kelly was stroking her hair in an attempt to calm their daughter.

“It’s okay, Risa,” Colton said, wishing he could pull over and hold his baby girl. “Everything’s going to be fine.”

His words felt like a lie. The town he was sworn to protect was falling into chaos. Citizens ran toward the shelter at town hall. An old man fell, but no one stopped to help. People were yelling and trying to wave his vehicle down. To the west, the storm was growing.

“This is madness,” Feagen said.

“We’ll be okay,” Colton said, trying to sound as though he believed his own words. “The shelters are well stocked. They can take care of the whole town for a few days.”

“And if we have to stay longer than that?” Feagen asked.

“We make do,” Gail said.

Colton caught her gaze in the rear review mirror. The mayor was handling this surprisingly well. They'd clashed often, but he was beginning to think that she might actually be a capable leader.

"Okay fine, but what about when we come out? What if everything is poisoned?" Feagen asked.

Colton tried to remember the FEMA certification he'd done several years ago, but he couldn't recall the specifics for dealing with the aftermath of a nuclear event. Honestly, he'd thought the scenario was so far-fetched that he hadn't given it enough attention.

"That's a possibility, but we will figure it out," he said. "Everything outside will need to be scrubbed down, and we're going to have to clear the soil before we can plant anything in the spring."

Suddenly, Gail screamed. Colton whipped his head around to find her pointing at the storefronts that lined the main street. Somebody had thrown a rock through the window of her art gallery. The plate glass window lay in shards across the sidewalk.

"I'm sorry, Gail," he said, returning his focus to the road just as a woman darted in front of him. He slammed on his brakes, and the tires skidded to a stop, the bumper just a foot away from her. She gave him the bird and then continued after the mob of people running for town hall through Bond Park.

Colton took in a long breath and said, "Is everyone okay?"

Kelly nodded and put her arms around Risa. Slamming on the brakes seemed to have shocked their daughter so much that she'd stopped crying. Colton drove around the throng of citizens toward the rear of town hall. The back door to the station opened as soon as he pulled up to it, and Detective Lindsey Plymouth rushed out to meet them.

As everyone got out of the Jeep, Colton prepared for more bad news.

"We're headed to the shelter," Gail said, casting a backward glance at her store. She took off with Feagen, leaving Colton with his family and Nathan.

Lindsey brushed a lock of red hair away from her face as she approached the Jeep. "We have a situation at the grocery store, Chief. People are trying to stock up on food before the storm, and apparently things are out of control."

"Who do we have stationed there?"

"Just Nelson," she said. "We're spread pretty thin."

Colton thought of the rookie officer with a wife and a newborn at home. Then he looked at his own family.

"I need to go check this out, Kelly," Colton said. "Make sure everyone gets

to the shelter safely, Lindsey."

The detective nodded and motioned for Kelly and Risa.

"Marcus…" Kelly began to say. Her dark eyes pleaded with him to reconsider.

"I'll be right behind you." He kissed her on the lips and then Risa on the forehead before jumping back into the Jeep. The passenger door creaked open, and Nathan looked in.

"You need some backup?" he asked.

Colton nodded. "Hop in, Major."

They squealed out of the parking lot and raced up the street. He took a left toward the Safeway. Colton had been afraid to ask Nathan what else he had heard over the shortwave on the drive from the high school, and Nathan didn't seem to be up for talking right now. His features were set in a stony mask. He stared out the window, his hand gripping his chest like he was in pain.

"You good, Major?"

It took Nathan a long moment to reply. "Not really. My nephew is in the middle of the radiation zone, my sister was in D.C., and I'm trapped here."

Colton had been through some heavy shit in his life, but if he lost his family, he wasn't sure he could go on.

"If we make it through this storm, I'll find you a working vehicle and give you enough food, gear, and ammo to make it to Empire," Colton said. "I've got a few CBRN suits at the station. After the flood, we applied for a grant and bought all kinds of disaster equipment."

Nathan pulled his hand away from his chest and patted Colton on the arm.

"Thanks, brother."

Colton would have replied, but when he pulled into the parking lot of the Safeway, he saw Officer Rick Nelson standing with his shotgun shouldered. He jerked the muzzle back and forth at two rail-thin men and an even skinnier woman dressed in a tank top and denim skirt despite the cold. Colton didn't recognize any of them.

He assessed the situation quickly as he drove toward the crowd. The man on Nelson's left wore a red poncho and was twirling a baseball bat. His friend had on an Old Navy sweatshirt covered in mud and held a large duffel bag. The woman was carrying a pair of bulging plastic shopping bags.

Behind them stood a group twenty- or thirty-strong. More people filed in and out of the front doors, some of them pushing carts loaded to the brim

with food and supplies. He didn't see any Safeway employees.

"Goddammit," Colton said. "Looters. *Just* what I need right now."

"I've got your back, Chief," Nathan said. He un-holstered his M9 and pulled the slide back to chamber a round.

Colton parked the Jeep and pulled his Colt .45. The three civilians surrounding Nelson all looked at Nathan and Colton.

"Drop the bat and the bags," Colton said.

"They raided the pharmacy," Nelson said, his voice shaky. He kept his shotgun aimed at the man with the bat.

"We took our fair share," the man in the poncho said. He twirled the bat in one hand.

The other man smirked, revealing blackened teeth. He centered a crazed gaze on Colton. There was no mistaking the wide eyes and sweat pouring down the man's forehead. These three were all opiate addicts—dangerous, unpredictable, and an increasingly common sight in Estes Park. People like this were going to be a problem as their supplies of prescription drugs dwindled.

"You better do what Chief Colton told you to do," Nelson said. The guy with the bat stepped toward the officer. Both of his friends followed, but Nelson held his ground.

Behind them, another group of shoppers pushed full shopping carts out of the store. Colton couldn't let this situation continue. With the storm approaching, they had less than an hour to get these people to safety. They couldn't afford to leave the food out where it might be contaminated by the storm, either.

"Drop your bat and your bags, last warning," Colton said. He pulled the hammer back and directed the Colt's barrel at the man's head.

The bat clattered on the ground and Colton nodded at Nelson, who lowered his shotgun.

"Watch them, Officer Nelson," Colton said. "Nathan, follow me."

Side by side, they approached the entrance, weapons angled at the ground.

"Turn those carts around and get your asses to town hall. There's a radioactive cloud coming!" Colton yelled. He didn't bother telling them what radiation did to a body; there wasn't time for a public service announcement.

He didn't know most of these people, and many of them simply stared back at him or kept pushing their laden carts toward the street.

Colton raised his gun and fired it into the sky.

Every person in the parking lot froze as the crack reverberated through the town.

“Carts back inside, and then get to a shelter!” Colton yelled.

There was no movement at first, the shock of the gunshot having paralyzed the residents of Estes Park. Colton almost felt bad. Instead of yelling, he said, “Now, everyone. Get those carts back inside.”

He corralled everyone back to the store with Nathan’s help, while Nelson stood guard. Inside, they discovered two store employees who helped push the carts together near the cash registers. Just as Colton felt like he’d gotten a handle on the situation, the glass front door shattered.

People in the parking lot were shouting, and then a woman screamed.

A shotgun blast rang out.

Colton and Nathan ran back outside to find Nelson twitching on the ground, blood pooling around his head. A brick lay next to his body, and a halo of glass surrounded a second brick near the entrance to the store. The baseball bat was gone, and so was its owner. Colton bent down next to his fallen officer and saw the meth heads running away, bags of drugs still in hand.

Nathan limped after the trio but they were already halfway across the parking lot, and in another moment they were lost in the fleeing mob.

“Nelson?” Colton said. “Nelson, can you hear me?”

A few of the civilians that had remained hovered around them, blocking Colton’s light. He didn’t need much to see the officer was in bad shape. His skull was cracked open.

“Stay with me, Nelson.”

Colton glanced up and recognized Lisa and Brad Banks, the owners of a t-shirt shop on Main Street. “Help me get him to the Jeep, and be careful.”

Together, they cautiously picked Nelson up and carried him over to the vehicle. Nelson’s skull was Colton’s primary concern, but he was also worried about the man’s spine.

“That guy in the poncho just picked up a brick and brained Officer Nelson with it,” Lisa said.

“There wasn’t anything we could do,” Brad added, panting from the weight. “I’m sorry, Chief.”

Nelson groaned feebly as Lisa opened the back lift gate and Brad helped Colton set him inside.

“Get to the shelter at town hall,” Colton said, wiping the blood on his

pants. He shut the door and looked for Nathan. The pilot was already limping back across the parking lot. He sucked in a breath when he saw the severity of Nelson's injuries.

"Jesus," he said. "I'm sorry, Chief, but the bastards got away."

Colton cursed, but he had bigger problems on his hands. The storm was almost overhead. It wouldn't be long before the skies opened up and killer rain began to fall.

Nathan jumped in the back to ride with Nelson, while Colton climbed into the driver's seat. As soon as Nathan pulled the gate shut, Colton pushed down on the gas and raced toward the hospital. There was less than an hour left to get Nelson some help and return to his family at town hall before the storm hit.

"Be strong, Nelson," Colton said. "You can't die. That's an order."

***

Rain battered the cabin's roof and streaked down the windows. Raven sat on the bed with Creek, slowly stroking the dog's fur. Eight hours earlier, the first drops had begun to fall on Prospect Mountain.

He had decided to return to Bill Catcher's cabin to search for clues, and the decision had saved his life. Raven had discovered an old, home-built radio tucked away in one of the kitchen cabinets and fired it up. The thing couldn't send messages, but it did pick up a station playing an emergency message:

Seek shelter immediately. Put plastic and tape over the windows and doors. Don't go outside until the storm has passed.

It had taken an entire roll of Duct tape and all the tarps and plastic sheeting he could find in Bill's well-stocked cabin, but in the end, Raven had sealed the place tight. There were definitely benefits to riding out the storm in a crazy old prepper's stronghold. Bill had laid in plenty of water and food, although he seemed to favor brisket MREs that tasted like dog food. At least Creek hadn't seemed to mind it when Raven gave most of the meal to the dog.

He had also discovered a small Faraday cage built out of an old microwave tucked under the bed. The cage had protected a pair of walkie-talkies from the effects of the EMP blast. He turned on one again to the sound of static.

What Raven really wanted right now was a cold beer and a cigarette, but

there wasn’t a drop of booze in the house—just a bunch of empty bottles.

He got up from the bed and walked over to the window. Creek followed him across the room. Pulling back the tarp an inch, Raven looked at the sky. Lightning cut through the darkness, backlighting the mountain and the gondolas of the Estes Park Aerial Tramway stranded mid-air. At least it was the off-season, so no tourists had been riding on the damn thing when the power went out. He’d ridden it once with Allie and Sandra, and there was a breathtaking panoramic view of Rocky Mountain National Park, Lake Estes, and the Big Thompson River Valley when you got to the top.

Raven longed to be up there again, looking out over a place he loved. There was something about the mountains that had always called to him. But instead of being out there, or sheltered with his family, he was trapped in this cabin because of Police Chief Marcus Colton.

No, you’re here because of your choices, Raven thought. *You didn’t have to volunteer for this mission. Colton had nothing to hold over your head this time.*

As he went to sit back down, he heard a rattling from the chimney. He walked over and bent down to put his ear against the tarp.

The sound didn’t come again; all he heard was the pitter-patter of radioactive rain. He paced back and forth in the cabin’s small main room, hoping to wear himself out so he could get some sleep. Creek watched him from the floor, his head on his paws, eyes following Raven back and forth.

He sat on the bed again and closed his eyes, but his head was filled with stories of the Water Cannibals. As a kid, he’d been so scared of them that he’d slept at the foot of Sandra’s bed on nights like this, when the storms raged and the demons walked the earth, looking for human meat. At the time, he’d pretended he was only doing it to protect her, but they both knew the truth. It had always been him and Sandra against the world, ever since their mom had left them, and he liked to think that they took turns protecting each other.

He walked back to the kitchen to search the bottles of liquor again but stopped halfway there. Deep down he knew booze couldn’t save him from his tormented thoughts. He felt like his world was closing in around him and there wasn’t anything he could do to stop it. And it was all his fault. He couldn’t save Billy Franks in North Korea, he couldn’t save Melissa, and now he was trapped here while his family was out there, with nothing to do but wait, like he had so many times as a child, for the Water Cannibals to

come snatch him and his sister.

Only this time it wasn’t just the irrational fears of a child. There were real demons out there. He pulled the cryptic drawing from his pocket and studied the stick figures. There was no way he was going to share this detail with Colton. The officer wouldn’t understand the story. White people never did. If anything, Colton might somehow try and pin this on Raven or say he was making shit up.

This time Raven had a feeling he was going to have to face the demons on his own.

He turned back to the window and patted his leg to signal Creek they were leaving. He grabbed a tarp and prepared for the trek. Radiation or no radiation, he had to get out of here and protect his family before it was too late.

— 17 —

“There’s someone outside again, Major,” Detective Lindsey Plymouth said quietly.

Nathan put the shortwave radio receiver down on the desk. The signal was way too weak down here to reach anyone. He followed the detective through the shelter under town hall, past sleeping civilians. There were a lot of people down here and the room was hot as hell. They couldn’t stay locked up forever or they were all going to suffocate.

Colton was already at the bottom of the stairs, listening as someone pounded on the door outside. Neither of them had slept much through the night, and he guessed that he looked about as ragged as the police chief did. After nine hours, the rain had finally stopped coming down, but that didn’t mean it was safe to go outside unprotected.

“Second one in the past three hours,” Colton said, keeping his voice low as Nathan approached. “We better check it out.”

They both walked up the narrow staircase toward the blast door. Nathan squeezed next to Colton and pressed his ear against the reinforced steel. It was the main entrance to the shelter, but there was another hallway beyond and a second door to the outside of town hall. They couldn’t hear much of anything, and shouting was only going to scare everyone inside the room.

What Nathan did know was that high-level radiation could kill within hours. It was going on nine hours since the storm rolled over the town, so if someone was outside, then it stood to reason that the radiation wasn’t that bad.

“Reckon we should get out the Geiger counter,” Colton said as if reading Nathan’s thoughts.

“I’ll put on one of those space suits and go out there to take a reading,”

Lindsey offered.

Nathan glanced down at the detective. She was young and reckless, just like he'd been once upon a time. When the hell had he gotten so old?

"No," Colton said. "We need to wait longer."

"I can't wait much longer," Nathan said. "Remember your promise at the Safeway?"

Colton leaned closer. "We can't compromise this shelter, Major. My family and a hundred other people are down here. We have enough air to last for another twenty-four hours or so, even without the HVAC systems. I understand you want to get to Empire, but—"

A howl from outside cut Colton off.

"Was that a wolf?" Lindsey asked.

"I think that's a dog," Nathan said.

"Creek," Colton whispered, reaching for the door handle. "Holy shit."

Feagen approached them, shaking his head. His hair was sticking up on one side from where he'd slept on it, but he still managed to look disapproving. "Do not open that door," he said.

"I can't leave them out there. It's my fault Raven was on the mountain in the first place," Colton said.

"Do not open that door," Feagen repeated. "Whoever's out there is contaminated!"

Colton pointed a finger at the town administrator. "Keep your voice down. You're going to scare people."

"I'll wake the mayor!"

The police chief wanted to tell Lindsey to lock Feagen in a closet, but decided to give her other orders. "Lindsey, get the CBRN suits and the Geiger counter."

Nathan nodded and put his hand on Colton's shoulder in a silent show of support. They went back to listening with their ears against the door.

"Raven couldn't have survived out there for nine hours without shelter, right?" Colton asked.

Nathan shrugged. "I get the sense there's no telling what that guy can or cannot do."

A shrieking sound came from below as Lindsey dragged a crate with a biohazard sign to the staircase. The mayor followed on her heels, looking annoyed at being woken up.

"You're not seriously thinking about going out there," Gail said. She

pushed her green glasses up her nose and frowned. “Chief, with all due respect…”

“I have to,” Colton said. “Someone’s got to go out there and take a reading, anyway.”

Nathan grabbed a suit and started putting it on. All he needed was gear and a vehicle to get him to Empire. Would the chief try to stop him? Colton seemed like a man of his word, but if he tried to back out of their deal, Nathan would just have to steal the keys to the Jeep.

“All right, let’s move,” Colton said. He accepted an AR-15 from Lindsey and slammed a magazine into the gun.

Nathan picked up his M9. They walked up the stairs single file, their bulky suits crunching. Nathan hated these things. They made everything more difficult, muffling his senses and hampering his movements.

“I’ll go first,” Colton said. “You open the second door and then cover me just in case there’s someone else out there besides Raven and Creek.”

Nathan nodded.

Colton eyed Feagen. “Don’t give Detective Plymouth any problems.”

Lindsey, standing guard at the bottom of the stairs, raised her shotgun with a smile.

Nathan took in a breath that smelled like plastic and grabbed the door handle.

“Okay,” Colton said.

Nathan unlocked the door and pushed it open. Colton strode into the hallway toward the second steel door with his rifle shouldered.

“Who’s out there?” Colton said, his voice muffled by his suit.

They listened for a response but Nathan couldn’t hear much of anything.

“Get ready,” Colton said.

Nathan grabbed the door handle and waited for the order. At Colton’s nod, he unlocked the bolt and pushed the door open.

A thick mist was rolling over the parking lot. Overhead, the sky was the dull grey of newsprint.

“About time someone opened the door!”

Nathan moved toward the voice to see Raven leaning against the building with his arms crossed in a relaxed pose. Creek was at his feet, sheltering under the narrow overhang of the roof.

As soon as Raven saw they were armed, he held up his hands. “Hold your fire!”

Creek wagged his tail at Colton.

“That you inside the moon suit, Chief?” Raven asked, squinting in the dull light.

“You’re okay?” Colton asked, stepping forward to get a better look at Raven. The rain had finally tapered off, and a mattress of thick gray clouds rolled overhead.

“Yeah, I’m good, Chief,” Raven replied. He pulled off his hat. “My hair hasn’t fallen out yet, and my insides aren’t melting as far as I can tell.”

Nathan grabbed the Geiger counter from the top step and then closed the door behind them.

“You sure?” Colton asked. “Any nausea or diarrhea?”

Nathan turned the device on and stepped up to Raven, the probe held high. Static hissed from the machine.

“Careful where you put that thing, Major,” Raven protested.

“Just hold still and shut up,” Nathan said. He held the device against Raven’s arm and watched the needle move. It stopped at the border of the danger zone.

“Well, I’ll be damned,” Nathan said, exhaling a hot breath against his visor. “The rads are higher than before, but not too bad.”

Raven’s smile widened. “See, I told you. It’s a miracle. The storm dumped whatever radiation was up there before it hit us.”

Nathan lowered the Geiger counter and scrutinized Raven. “How do you know that?”

Raven reached into his pocket and pulled out a walkie-talkie that he handed to Nathan. Then he pulled another walkie-talkie and tossed it to Colton.

“Found a radio at Bill’s place. I was listening to a broadcast about the storm. I also found those walkie-talkies in a Faraday cage under the bed.”

“They work?” Colton asked.

Raven smirked like a kid that had just finished his chores. He pulled off his baseball cap and wiped his wet forehead clean with a sleeve. “I got to be honest, Chief. Your officers did a really shitty job searching that place. I also found a clue that you guys missed.”

“That’s because we haven’t had time to search his place or follow proper protocol. Hell, we just barely had time to recover Bill’s body and—”

“Did that broadcast say anything else about the southern part of the state?” Nathan interjected.

Raven avoided Nathan's gaze, then looked up and said, "The radiation was mostly dumped on the Southern part of the state. Sounds like it was hit hard, too. I'm sorry, Major. I know your nephew is down there."

"I have to go. Colton, are you still going to loan me a vehicle?" Nathan said.

Colton turned toward him. "You'll die. You know that. Just stay here a few more days until the radiation lessens to the South."

"Chief, you made me a promise."

"It's suicide, and all due respect, but we both know your nephew is probably…"

Raven held up a hand. "Guys, sorry to interrupt, but there's something else you should know."

"What?" Nathan and Colton said at the same time, pivoting toward Raven.

Raven smiled again and pulled out a cigarette from his vest. He jammed it between his lips, lit it, and took a long drag. Nathan was really starting to dislike the guy. He seemed to be enjoying the attention as they waited for him to deliver the rest of his briefing.

"I've been waiting for a smoke all morning."

"That's your news?" Colton asked.

"Oh right, sorry," Raven said. "After you guys left me on that mountain to fend for myself in the storm—thanks for that, by the way—I found that blue F-150 we've been looking for."

"That's the clue?" Colton asked.

Raven took another drag and nodded. He exhaled several puffs of smoke and watched them climb into the sky, avoiding Colton's gaze. The small mannerism told Nathan that Raven wasn't being completely honest, but Raven was Colton's problem now. Nathan was heading out to find Ty as soon as he could get a ride.

***

First the planes fell out of the sky. Then all the lights went out.

Brown Feather didn't mind; Water Cannibals hunted better in the dark.

People lost their minds, abandoning their cars in the middle of the road and walking into town, as if someone there would save them. These people were no better than sheep, and their shepherd was a fool who couldn't control his

own flock. There would be riots soon. Chaos in the streets, neighbors fighting each other to the death over a loaf of bread.

“Your time will come soon,” said his demon brother.

Brown Feather replied with a smile. “I know, Turtle. Our hunt will come to an end soon with our prize.”

He loved watching these people fight amongst themselves. It was as though the world had given him a gift. He didn’t give a shit about cell phones and supermarkets. He knew how to live off the land. All he needed was his knife, his woman, and the other demons to keep him company.

The rest of the world could go to hell for all he cared.

But tonight the world had given Brown Feather another gift. She was tall and slim, with hair the color of a crow’s wing that fell to her shoulders in a black wave. He’d spotted her earlier that evening, outside the town hall. At first, he had mistaken her for his woman. The bronzed skin and dark hair were the same as hers, but this girl was younger and more supple.

He was on foot tonight, moving like a shark through a shoal of fish as the crowd dispersed. His truck was safely hidden where the looters wouldn’t find it.

She wasn’t alone. That was more challenging, but he liked it when his prey played hard to get. Walking slowly with the herd, she made her way across the park, her sneakers leaving distinctive diamond-patterned prints in the soft, wet earth. He could have tracked her by those prints alone, or the scent of her sugary perfume.

She didn’t know it yet, but she was already his.

The girl stopped to tie her shoe, waving the others on, insisting that she’d catch up. She wouldn’t. He watched her prop a foot up on the park bench, her lean muscles tensing as she bent over to knot the laces.

It was time. He moved swiftly, silently. Approaching from the side rather than behind so he didn’t startle his prey, he held his hands spread wide and said, “Can you help me?”

She looked up, her eyes curious but not yet frightened. They were the eyes of a doe, soft brown and sensitive. “Uh, sure. What’s wrong?”

He let out a good-humored chuckle. “Seems like everything’s wrong. But right now, I can’t find my dog. My little girl loves that mutt.”

“I love dogs, what’s yours look like?” she asked as she finished tying her shoe. Her hair had fallen over her eyes, and she swept it back with a copper-brown hand.

He thought fast, the lie running smoothly from his mouth. “Chocolate lab. Her name is Candy. I’m Brown Feather, by the way.”

“I’m Mollie,” she said, smiling and eager to help. “Let’s find your dog.”

It took only a moment to draw her away from the crowd, into the soft darkness of the wooded park. She didn’t realize what was happening until it was too late. One step from light to dark, one step from life to death. He clamped a massive hand over her mouth, his palm easily covering the lower half of her face. She struggled like a fish on a hook.

“Hold still,” Brown Feather said, pressing the tip of a small knife into her side. “I won’t hurt you if you hold still.”

She went limp, and he almost laughed. What a stupid girl. It almost wasn’t worth killing her.

Once they were far enough from the crowds to risk moving his hand, he gagged the girl and bound her hands with zip ties. She must have realized then what her fate would be. Tears streamed down her face as she dug her heels into the turf, but in the end, he brought her to the river’s edge. In the old stories, the demons lived beneath the surface of lakes and rivers, coming out only at night to stalk and burn their prey. If he followed in their footsteps tonight and proved that he was one of them, he would finally be ready to unleash the horror of the Water Cannibals on these pathetic sheep.

“You can’t do this here,” said his demon brother. “We can’t risk being seen yet. It’s too early for the world to know what we’re doing.”

Turtle was right. The other demon was always right.

The girl’s eyes widened, and Brown Feather smirked with excitement. He knocked her unconscious with a butt of his large head. For the next hour he carried her over his shoulder through the woods until they reached his lair where he set her on the ground. Next he looped a length of thick nylon rope over a tree branch and then tied one end into a simple but effective noose that slipped easily over the girl’s head. A small fire was soon burning merrily below her feet. She writhed and kicked as she regained consciousness, but all her efforts did nothing more than tighten the noose.

Soon—too soon—she died. He watched the fire for a while longer, staring deep into the heart of the flames as if it might reveal secrets to him.

Once the flesh had been charred, he would cut her down and feast. That was the Water Cannibals’ way, so that’s what he had to do too. Squaring his broad shoulders, he strode forward and examined the body. Where should he start? The air was rich with the scent of barbecue as he contemplated his

options.

He had tracked, killed, and eaten just about everything, from squirrel to elk, but this was new to him. The legends weren't clear on which parts were the best to eat. The flash of a diamond on the ring finger of her left hand caught his eye.

Okay, Brown Feather thought. *I'll start there*.

***

Sandra peeled off her gloves and tossed them in a trashcan overflowing with medical supplies. It was morning of the third day after the attack, and only one of the cleaning staff had showed up earlier that morning. He was doing his best to keep up, but it wasn't enough.

She grabbed another pair of gloves and strode to the ER. Inside, Doctor Newton was hovering over Rick Nelson. Rosy spots of blood had formed on the bandages covering the four burr holes Newton had drilled in Nelson's skull. Sandra could still hear the crunching sound as the hand drill broke through the bone.

"Check his vitals," Newton said without looking up at her. "Then check the drainage."

Sandra stepped up to the bed and gently took Rick's wrist. She took his heart rate by placing her index and middle finger over the radial artery. Then she counted for fifteen seconds and multiplied by four.

"Heart rate is ninety-two," she announced. That wasn't good. Next, she took his blood pressure with a manual cuff and a stethoscope. It had dropped since she had taken it last.

"Blood pressure is now ninety-six over fifty."

"Shit," Newton replied. "His breathing is getting worse, too. We might have to get out the BVM."

Sandra opened Rick's eyelids and shone a flashlight at his pupils. She raked the light back and forth, but there was little movement.

"He still isn't responding," Sandra said. "His pupils are equal in size, but not reactive to light."

"We need to do everything possible to keep him calm and pain-free or we're going to be looking at a higher probability of brain herniation," Newton said. He doused his hands in rubbing alcohol, which was the best

they could do for sterilization without hot water. “How are those burr holes?”

Sandra examined the four small holes in Rick’s skull. Three of them were left open for pressure relief, but the fourth had a tube draining a mixture of blood and clear fluid into a sterile bag.

“Looks good,” Sandra said. “Relatively speaking.”

She checked them a second time just to make sure. The drip was slow, which was hopefully a good sign. Drilling was an archaic method that Newton had never performed before. Sandra wasn’t sure what was normal.

“The drain doesn’t look like it’s putting out much cerebral spinal fluid,” she said.

“Let me take a look,” Newton said, bending down next to her. She moved out of the way, giving her a full view of Rick’s buzzed skull. A bloody dent marked the top of his head where he’d been struck with a brick. Judging from the placement wound, he never saw the attack coming.

Standing, Newton shook his head and put his hands on his hips. “I’m not sure what else we can do for him. Check on Teddy, please.”

Sandra sucked in a long, deep breath. She needed an entire day of sleep, maybe two, to catch up. But there was no time for that. She tried to put the officer’s fate out of her mind for now, but Sandra couldn’t help thinking of Nelson’s wife, Maggie, and their infant daughter. She’d been Maggie’s nurse, and she remembered how delighted the young officer had been to be a father for the first time.

She approached Teddy’s bed, where a nurse named Jen was pumping the bag that allowed him to breathe.

“I thought he was trying to open his eyes, but it might have just been involuntary movement,” she said when Sandra asked for an update.

Sandra threw her gloves in a trashcan and put on another pair. “Thanks, Jen. I’ll take over now.”

“Take an extra ten minutes,” Jen said. “You look exhausted. When was the last time you ate something? Go get a drink of water at least.”

Sandra hesitated until she heard Allie’s voice from the lobby.

“I’ll be back in a bit,” Sandra said.

Jen continued pumping precious air into the little boy’s lungs. Teddy’s parents were sitting in the lobby, as they had been ever since their son was admitted. They had been watching after Allie, who sat on the floor in front of them playing with a puzzle.

Outside the window, a police officer was pacing with his shotgun. Creek

lay on the pavement, protecting the hospital while his handler got better inside. He wagged his tail when he saw Sandra, and she waved at the dog before turning back to Teddy's parents.

"Mr. and Mrs. Brown, thank you so much for watching my daughter," she said.

"Momma!" Allie cried, delighted. She came running over.

"How is Teddy?" Marie Brown asked.

"He's doing okay," Sandra said. "Your son is a very strong boy."

"When will they have the power back on?" Michael Brown asked.

"I…I'm not sure," Sandra lied. She avoided their gazes by kneeling in front of Allie. "How are you, sweetie?"

"I want to go home. When is Uncle Raven coming back?"

"Soon, baby." Sandra hugged Allie and then stood. She drew in a breath before turning to face the Browns.

"What have the doctors told you?" she asked.

Michael rubbed the back of his neck. "They said that there's no further sign of the bacterial infection, but that's it."

Sandra picked her next words carefully. "There is no sign of the Necrotizing Fasciitis infection, but Teddy needs a constant regimen of intravenously fed antibiotics."

Allie looked up at Sandra, tilting her head slightly as if she was trying to understand. She put a hand on Allie's shoulder and pulled her close.

Michael did the same to Marie.

"My baby," Marie whimpered. "My poor baby."

Sandra gave Allie a final squeeze and said, "You'll have to excuse me, but I need to go see my brother."

Marie nodded and returned to her seat with Michael.

"You stay with these nice people, sweetie," Sandra said.

"But I want to see Uncle Raven."

"He's resting, baby, but you can see him soon."

Sandra left the lobby and cut through the ER to get to Raven's room. He was sharing it with an older man who had been caught outside during the storm for much longer than Raven. The man seemed to be doing okay, but only time would tell.

She pulled her mask over her face and knocked on the door. Once inside, she nodded to the first patient and then slipped between the curtains to her brother's bed.

He was sitting up, a mischievous grin on his face. Seeing him smiling made her heart nearly burst with joy—until she saw him quickly pull his sheet up to his chest to hide something.

“Sam Spears! What are you up to?”

“Nothing,” he said. “I’m a model patient, Sis. Ask that good-looking nurse with the tattoos on her—”

She held out a hand palm-up. “Hand it over, Raven.”

“I don’t have anything to hand over!”

She pulled the sheet back and grabbed the can of beer that he was attempting to hide.

“Where the hell did you get this?” she asked.

“Cut me some slack! I nearly died.”

“Yes, you could have died, and you have been exposed to radiation, which means you need to rest and take in fluids.”

“Beer is a fluid. Can’t I drink just a little?”

She poured the remainder of the can down the drain and then perched in the chair beside his bed. “I still can’t believe you walked all the way into town in the middle of the storm. What were you thinking?”

At her words, his face turned grave. All trace of humor had vanished.

“Raven, what is it?”

“Remember the Water Cannibal story?”

Sandra smiled behind her mask. “I remember you used to crap your pants over it.”

“I think someone’s trying to bring it to life,” Raven said coldly.

“What? What do you mean?”

“The man who killed Melissa and Bill Catcher seems to know the story, like they’re trying to act it out. I found a picture near the tree they found Bill Catcher hanging from. And both victims were burned.”

“Picture?” Sandra asked. “Like a photograph?”

“No. Someone drew the scene on a piece of paper. They were just stick figures, but it was definitely a scene from the Water Cannibal story.”

“Have you told Chief Colton?”

Raven shook his head. “He won’t understand.”

“You can’t keep this from him. It makes you look guilty,” Sandra said. “You don’t need him to be any more suspicious of you. Besides, whoever is doing this is a sick person, but they aren’t carrying out some story our parents told us when we were kids. That’s just crazy.”

A knock on the door echoed through the room, startling Sandra. She pulled her mask up and stood as Colton and Jake stepped into the room. Nathan waited in the hallway behind them. She smiled at the pilot, and he returned it with interest.

“Ma’am,” Colton said, taking off his hat. “We need to speak to your brother.”

“This can’t be good,” Raven said.

“Can you give us a few minutes?” Colton asked Sandra.

“No,” she said, surprising them both.

Colton and Raven both stared at her.

“Whatever you have to say to him, you can say in front of me, Chief. I’ll just make him tell me later.”

Nathan chuckled from the hallway.

“Raven, we need your help,” Colton said.

“Of course you do,” he said.

“There’s been another murder.”

Raven stopped grinning, and Sandra held her hand to her mouth.

“A college student named Mollie Harms was found in Fall River this morning, right in the middle of town. She was hacked up pretty good—missing a hand, and her legs were burned down to the bone.”

Raven let out a sigh and threw off his bed sheets. “Then I guess you really do need my help. It’s a shame; I was starting to like these digs.”

“No, this is not happening,” Sandra said. “Raven, you need to stay put and rest.”

“And take in fluids. Yeah, I know,” Raven said. He grabbed his Seattle Mariners hat from the table and put it on. “Don’t worry, Sis. I’m good.”

“I’ll keep an eye out on your brother, ma’am,” Colton said.

Raven joined Colton and Nathan at the door.

“Tell them,” Sandra said.

All three men stopped and turned.

“The drawing, Raven,” Sandra said. “Tell them about it.”

Colton pivoted slightly to stare at Raven, but Raven kept his gaze on Sandra.

“Either of you ever heard the Cherokee legend of the Water Cannibals?” Raven said. “’Cause I got reason to believe our chase is trying to bring the story to life.”

— 18 —

A brilliant sunrise stretched across the horizon over the Atlantic Ocean. Charlize sat in a wheelchair outside the command center of the USS *John C. Stennis*. Albert stood by her side. She shielded her eyes with a hand to look at the other vessels of the strike group cutting through the sea behind the flagship.

The salty breeze rustled her newly trimmed hair. That slight friction was enough to make the back of her neck flare with pain. She had suffered one of the worst burns among the survivors from the PEOC, and a healthy dose of radiation poisoning on top of that.

Senator Sarcone had also made it out, but countless others weren't so lucky. Secretary of Defense Smith, Secretary of State Loyola, and Clint were among the ranks of those that had perished.

"Beautiful," Albert said as they stared out over the water. Rays of light sparkled on its surface in a mesmerizing dance.

"It is," Charlize said.

Charlize looked up at her bodyguard and longtime friend. He offered a reassuring smile. A gentleman, no matter what they faced. They both knew that his family was almost certainly dead. His wife and kids had been on their way out of D.C., but it wasn't likely that they had made it out of the blast zone in time. She considered saying something reassuring, but the words wouldn't come. What could she possibly say right now to make him feel better?

Instead, she reached up and touched his arm with her left hand. The other lay curled in her lap, still swaddled in bandages. She hadn't been brave enough to look at it yet.

Nearby, a Black Hawk was preparing to take off. Six Marines ran toward

the chopper, keeping low as a crew chief waved them into the troop hold. As soon as they were aboard, the bird rose into the air and curved away from the ship. The Navy had been running missions all morning and returning with troop holds full of civilians. Many of those shell-shocked survivors were in bad shape. It was amazing how quickly civilization collapsed without the infrastructure to support it.

The hatch to the command center opened and Captain Victor Dietz stepped onto the platform.

“Senator,” he said with a nod. “How are you feeling?”

“The radiation treatment seems to be working, but I still feel like a hotdog that spent too much time on the grill.”

The hint of a grin formed on his lips. He strolled up to the railing to watch the Black Hawk.

“Where are they headed?” Charlize asked.

“Evac op,” Dietz said. “We’re still tracking down several members of the cabinet. Plus about a thousand other high-ranking individuals. President Diego has provided us with a list.”

The captain’s words reminded her of Senator Ellen, chasing desperately after the convoy of black SUVs. Ellen hadn’t been important enough to make the list, and Charlize wondered if the woman had survived despite being left behind. Maybe she’d been taken to someplace safer than the PEOC—but Charlize doubted it.

Her mind seized on something else Dietz had said. “*President* Diego? When did he get promoted? Last I checked, he was Acting President of the United States.”

Dietz shook his head sadly. “We’ve confirmed that President Drake, Vice President Pederson, and Speaker Hamilton are all deceased. You missed out on the formalities, but it’s official. Diego is the forty-fifth President of the United States. The injuries he sustained in the PEOC were relatively minor. He’s one hell of a lucky man.”

Charlize looked up into his eyes. The captain’s sunburned forehead was a map of creases. They had only met once before, years ago when she was still a pilot. He hadn’t aged well, and recent events seemed to weigh heavily on him.

You’re not looking so hot these days, either, she reminded herself. After seeing her reflection in the mirror for the first time after the bomb, she’d thrown up. She was still struggling to accept the massive damage that had

been done to her body.

“We need you healthy, Senator,” Dietz said. “You’re one of the highest-ranking government officials left.”

Charlize looked back to the deck as a second Black Hawk took to the sky. An Osprey was preparing to take off farther down, and a flight crew was preparing several F-18 Super Hornets. The deck of the super carrier was alive with activity, and all Charlize could do was sit in her chair to watch.

Just give me a fighter jet, she thought, the fingers of her good hand twitching as if they were anxious to wrap around the flight controls.

The hatch opened again, and Janet Marco, the ship’s XO, slipped outside. She was a stiff, alert woman with the physique of a long-distance runner and sharp, never-resting eyes.

“Senator,” Marco said, inclining her head. “Glad to see you out and around.”

“Thank you,” Charlize said without taking her eyes off the fighter jets.

“Captain, we still haven’t been able to reach the Seventh Fleet, but I do have an update for you on the Second Fleet. They’re two hundred and fifty miles north of us. Admiral Doyle has requested we send F-18s for CAPs while civilians are evacuated from the East Coast.”

“They’re worried about more attacks?” Charlize asked.

“Yes, ma’am. Apparently, the North Koreans also hacked some of our satellites. We’re mostly blind north of the Mason-Dixon line.”

Dietz nodded. “Get it done.”

Marco saluted and returned to the bridge. A few minutes later, a dozen pilots were running across the flight deck toward their birds. Charlize gripped the armrest of her wheelchair and leaned forward to watch them.

“Goddammit,” Dietz muttered. “We’re already low on aircraft, but the Second Fleet are sitting ducks out there.”

“Is there any indication the North Koreans are capable of hitting us again?” Charlize asked.

“After seeing some of the drone footage of the northern part of the peninsula, I don’t see how they could mount another attack. North Korea is so pockmarked with radioactive craters that it looks like the surface of the moon.”

“I’m not convinced they didn’t have help,” Albert put in. It was unusual to hear her bodyguard speak up, but he was a smart man and she valued his opinion when he chose to give it.

Charlize nodded. “I’ve considered the same thing, Albert, but who would have helped the North Koreans start World War Three? Iran? Russia? China? No one is that crazy.”

“So far there is no evidence of collaboration,” Dietz said.

The last pilot closed the canopy over his cockpit and gave a thumbs up sign. She pushed at the grips on her chair, trying to rise to her feet.

“Senator, you should really stay in the chair,” Dietz said.

Albert put a hand on her shoulder, but instead of insisting she sit down, he helped her to her feet.

Dietz gave them both an exasperated look. “I won’t snitch to your doctors, Senator, but you should really take it easy. As I said, you’re one of the highest-ranking officials left, and I’m sure President Diego will be looking to you for a position in his cabinet.”

One by one the F-18s were moved into position. She shuffled over to the railing and grabbed the cold metal in her burned hands. “Captain, how far inland are those rescue missions?”

Dietz scratched his chin. “I’m not sure. Why do you ask?”

“My son is in Colorado. If President Diego won’t authorize a rescue op, I’m going to steal a Black Hawk and fly out there myself.”

“If I didn’t know you, I would think you were kidding,” Dietz said. “But your reputation precedes you. I’ll put in a good word…however, if you try to steal one of my birds, I’ll have you thrown in the brig.” The ghost of a smile returned, and then Dietz left them to return to the command center.

Charlize tilted her face to the sky, watching the jets streak toward the mainland. Three days earlier, she had thought she would never see the sky again, but now she had a feeling she would be flying across it soon enough.

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“I don’t like this, Raven,” Sandra said. “Colton is using you.”

Raven took a drag of a cigarette as he approached town hall with Sandra and Allie in tow. Creek trotted alongside them.

His sister rubbed at her eyes. Raven had never seen her this exhausted. She’d been working herself to the bone at the hospital. How could she expect to help her patients if she wouldn’t take care of herself?

“You’re the one that said I need to make better choices, Sis. I’m trying to

be one of the good guys here.”

It was almost three in the afternoon, and for the first time in days the sky was clear. The sun beat down on them as they walked to town hall.

Raven’s Jeep was parked next to Jake’s Chevy pickup and an old VW van with tie-dyed curtains in the rear windows. A technician was working on the engine of a VW Beetle at the front of the new Estes Park police fleet.

“Uncle Raven, why do you have to go?” Allie said.

“I promise I’ll be back soon.”

Allie stroked Creek’s coat and frowned. “Can Creek stay with me? He’s my friend.”

“Sorry, but I need his nose. We won’t be long, kiddo,” Raven said.

Colton, Nathan, Jake, and a half dozen police officers stood in front of the vehicles, looking at a map spread over the hood of Raven’s Jeep. The men were armed to the teeth with semi-automatic rifles and pistols.

“They’re not playing around,” Raven muttered.

“What did Colton say about the drawing?” Sandra asked.

“Not much.”

Sandra halted and grabbed his arm. “You did tell him everything, right?”

“Yeah,” Raven said quietly.

“You’re somethin’ else,” Sandra said, sensing his lie.

Colton called out before Raven could reply. “Sandra, I’m glad you’re here. How’s Officer Nelson?”

“He’s hanging in there,” she said.

“Good, I’ll come see him when we get back.”

“In the meantime, you better keep your promise about watching after Raven, or you’re going to have to deal with me when you do.”

“And me,” Allie said with her hands on her hips.

Nathan limped over and smiled at them. “I promise to personally watch out for Raven,” he said.

Sandra thanked him, but Allie hid behind her back, peering out at the pilot.

“How’s your ankle?” Sandra asked.

“It hasn’t snapped yet.” He stopped a few feet away and bent down to Allie’s height. “I’m Nathan. What’s your name?”

Allie didn’t answer. She pushed her face against Sandra’s back.

“I’m sorry, she’s really tired,” Sandra said. “And a little shy, too.”

“It’s okay. I don’t blame her.”

Raven left his sister to talk, or flirt, or whatever it was she was doing with

the major. Creek followed him and Colton to the Jeep.

The chief had a serious, hard look on his battle-scarred face. “Get ready to move out. We have another lead. Detective Plymouth found the signs of a camp at the top of Prospect Mountain, not far from the aerial tramway and that truck.”

“What the hell was she doing up there?” Raven asked. Privately, he was also wondering how the big city cop had managed to find something he had missed.

“She was checking on the folks with homes up on the mountain,” he said. “And she found this.”

Colton handed him a pink mitten.

Raven didn’t need to ask whose it had been. He recognized it immediately; in fact, he still had Melissa’s other mitten in his Jeep somewhere.

Colton gave an ear-splitting whistle, and the officers, along with Raven and Nathan, gathered around the Jeep.

“We got lucky with the storm, but we still have major problems. One major problem in particular.” Colton paused and scanned his officers before continuing. “Our suspect has killed three times so far. I’ve been able to keep the third homicide quiet for now, but if our citizens catch wind of it, we’re going to have more than riots at Safeway to worry about. Nothing is more important right now than stopping this man.”

“Is it true the killer is acting out some Cherokee folk story?” Lindsey asked. “Water Snakes or…”

“Water Cannibals,” Sandra corrected.

“Anything else we should know, Raven?” Colton asked. “You and Sandra are both half Cherokee. If anyone can tell us more, it’s you two.”

Every officer glared at Raven and his sister. This was exactly why he didn’t want to say anything. All of a sudden he felt like a suspect. He resisted the urge to scratch his neck and stiffened instead.

“Our chase is a hunter,” Raven said. “A damn fine hunter. You may think you’re out there tracking him, but make no mistake, whoever this guy is, he’s good. The best I’ve ever tracked. He got the drop on me and Chief Colton back at Ypsilon where we found Melissa. I could feel him out there. Watching.”

“This dude is crazy,” Lindsey said.

Raven nodded. “Psychotic, actually.”

“He’s just one man,” Colton said. “Together we will find him and we will

kill him.”

“We’re with you, sir,” Lindsey said.

“To the end,” Jake added.

Colton raised his hat to rub his forehead. “All right, let’s gear up and prepare to move out. You all have your assignments.”

Jake slammed a magazine into his AR-15 with a click. After chambering a round, he pushed the scope to his eye and scanned the tree line on Prospect Mountain. Nathan loaded the M14 that Colton had given him and then reached down to retie his boot, wincing as he struggled with his injured ankle.

Colton turned on one of the walkie-talkies Raven had brought him and said, “Margaret, you copy?”

“I’m here, Chief,” she replied.

“We’re heading out soon. Keep in touch.”

Colton clipped the radio on his belt and checked the ammunition in his various guns. The man looked more like an Old West outlaw than a modern-day lawman, but Raven had to admit it was a good look on the chief. Raven was packing light today, with only a crossbow and his hatchets strapped across his back.

Nathan limped past Raven and started loading bags into the VW van. Sandra drifted over a moment later and leaned against the vehicle.

“You going somewhere after this?” she asked.

“Yup, as soon as this is over, Colton is giving me this beauty and a CBRN suit to go track down my nephew in Empire.” He paused and then added, “You take care of yourself, Ms. Spears.”

“I told you not to call me that.” She smiled and took the hand he offered, holding it for just long enough to make Raven’s older brother protective instincts go into overdrive.

“I hope I get to see you again,” she said.

“I’d like that,” Nathan said.

Raven thought his sister might be more worried about Nathan than she was about him, but as soon as she threw her arms around Raven, he knew the truth. Her eyes were filled with unconditional love.

“You be careful, too, Raven,” she ordered.

“I will, Sis.” Raven hugged her back, harder this time, as if she was the only real thing in this increasingly crazy world.

— 19 —

Teddy slowly opened his eyes.

Sandra almost forgot to pump the next breath, but she quickly regained her composure. She had seen patients do this before, especially those in a chemically-induced coma. He'd already closed his eyes again.

"Teddy, can you hear me?" she asked.

His eyelids fluttered, but this time they didn't open.

Doctor Newton had pulled Sandra back into the emergency room as soon as she had returned to the hospital. Jen had reported a possible infection in Teddy's wound. They had upped his dose of antibiotics and were continuing to monitor him closely.

Still exhausted and worried about her brother, Sandra decided to talk to Teddy, even if he couldn't hear her, just to stay sane.

"You're going to be out of here in no time, buddy. Your parents are right outside, and I promised them I'd help smuggle in your dog the day you wake up. What's his name again? Baylor?"

Teddy's eyelids fluttered once more. His forehead was sweating, and Sandra wiped it clean with a cold rag in between pumps.

She looked at his dressings. The stump just below his elbow was clean, but his temperature bothered her. It was 102.5 and rising. If the antibiotics didn't start working soon, they might lose him after all.

"I know you're in there, Teddy. I know you can hear me," Sandra said. "I need you to keep fighting, honey."

A jolt shook his right arm. That was normal, too, but each of these involuntary movements gave Sandra hope.

Sandra continued pumping air into the little boy's lungs and watched his chest rise up and down.

“Your mom and dad said you’re already reading and that you like the Harry Potter books. I’ve been trying to get my Allie to read, but she would rather play on her tablet.” Sandra laughed ruefully. “I guess I don’t have to worry about that anymore, huh? I bet books will be making a big comeback. When you wake up, maybe you can talk to her…”

Teddy let out a low groan, and his chest convulsed.

“It’s okay, sweetie,” Sandra said. She tried to think of something else to say, eager to keep up the steady, soothing flow of words in case it helped Teddy. “My brother has an Akita named Creek. Maybe Baylor and Creek will become friends.”

Sandra pumped another breath into Teddy’s lungs as Doctor Duffy and Jen pushed a gurney out of the room, a white blanket draped over the form of another patient lost. This time it was Jack Parker, a WWII veteran. He had been as tough as nails, but in the end, pneumonia had killed him. He had turned down the medicine that would have saved his life so patients like Teddy could live.

Sighing, Sandra turned back to the boy.

“I think you would really like Creek. He’s a good dog. Very smart, too. What kind of dog is Baylor?”

Teddy began to cough, struggling to breathe around the tube, and his eyes were now wide-open and filled with panic.

“Doctor Newton!” she shouted. “Doctor Duffy! Somebody come over here!”

Newton rushed over and assessed the situation. He checked Teddy’s breathing, listened to his lungs with a stethoscope, and then removed the endotracheal tube.

Teddy coughed and sputtered. His dry lips pursed as he took his first voluntary breath of air in over two weeks.

He whispered something, and Sandra had to lean down to hear him. “What was that, sweetheart?”

Teddy tried again. “Momma.”

“Your mom is just outside,” Sandra said.

Teddy tried to use his right hand to reach out for her. The realization set in on the boy’s face. His eyes widened with shock.

“You were sick, Teddy. Very sick,” Newton explained. “Jen, please go notify his parents that Teddy is awake.”

The nurse scurried away, and a moment later the doors to the ER swung

open and ecstatic voices filled the room. Marie and Michael ran across the space to their son's bedside.

Sandra left to give the family some space. She realized that if the Browns were in here, then Allie was alone in the lobby.

She pulled off her gloves, tossed them in the trash, and looked at Jen.

"Where's Allie?"

She shrugged. "I didn't see her."

Sandra's heart froze into an icy lump.

"Your brother came to pick her up," Marie said without taking her eyes off Teddy. "He said they were going for a walk."

"My brother?"

Michael chimed in. "Yeah, a Native American guy, right?"

Sandra turned and ran toward the lobby, her frozen heart shattering.

"Where are you going?" Newton shouted after her.

She burst through the ER doors into the lobby. "Allie! Allie, where are you?" she shouted. "Has anyone seen my daughter?"

The duty officer was Tom Matthew today, and she grabbed the front of his uniform, holding on as if she might start shaking him. "Where's my daughter?"

Tom pulled himself free. "Calm down," he said, straightening his shirt. "She went for a walk with her uncle."

"Her uncle is on Prospect Mountain, you idiot! You let her wander off with a stranger."

Sandra ran into the street, yelling her daughter's name over and over again. Kayla jogged out to meet her a few minutes later, something brown and fuzzy in her hands. It was Allie's stuffed pony, the toy she had refused to go anywhere without ever since Raven had given it to her.

"This was in the lobby," Kayla said, handing it over. "Sandra, there's a note attached to it."

A piece of paper was pinned to the plush fur. Sandra's hands were shaking so badly that she nearly crumpled it into a ball before she could read it. In blocky, horribly familiar handwriting, were words that chilled her to the marrow.

THERE IS A MOUNTAIN ABOVE THE ENTRANCE TO THE UNDERWORLD. FOLLOW THE WINGS TO THE NEST AT THE TOP. COME ALONE, OR YOUR DAUGHTER BURNS.

***

Colton dipped down to look out the windshield at the bulging clouds creeping across the sky.

“Looks like another storm,” he said.

“Then I guess we’re going to get wet,” Jake replied.

With a jerk of his chin toward the rearview mirror, Colton said, “Not as wet as those poor bastards.”

Nathan, Raven, and Creek were in the bed of the pickup, heads bobbing up and down as the truck jolted over the highway.

Colton unclipped his walkie-talkie. “Margaret, this is Colton. Do you copy?”

“Loud and clear,” the administrative assistant replied.

“We’re headed to the first road block on Highway 7 by the Scott Avenue turnoff. Then we’re checking out Prospect Mountain.”

“Roger that, sir,” Margaret said. “I’ll keep you updated if anything happens in town.”

“There it is,” Jake said. He pointed to a fort of cars positioned strategically on the highway. To the left was a red minivan, the windows smashed out on all sides. A volunteer marksman sat in the back seat, face pressed to the scope of a rifle aimed up the road. To the right was a panel truck from an appliance store. Two wood barriers blocked off the small passage between the vehicles. Officer Sam Hines waved when he saw Jake’s truck. Three other men carrying high-powered rifles and shotguns fell in to watch.

John Palmer had followed through on his promise to help keep order in Estes Park; he was standing in the bed of a pickup with a shotgun trained on the road. It felt good to have men like John watching over the town. Colton was going to need a lot more like him in the days to come.

The men stationed here were under orders to stop and search any vehicle attempting to enter Estes Park, as well as people on foot, and turn away anyone who didn’t have a legitimate reason to be there. Although he didn’t feel good about the decision, Colton had also ordered his men to turn away refugees unless they possessed a skill that would benefit the town in the coming months. Those people would be welcomed, but he had to be realistic about how far the town’s limited resources would stretch.

Sam Hines strolled up to the pickup and ducked down to look in the driver’s window. “Morning.”

“How are things?” Colton asked. “Any problems?”

“Pretty quiet night. We had a few refugees this morning. We turned a family away, but let a man through who said he was a mechanic.”

“Good, we need more of them,” Colton said.

“Heard about Mollie Harms,” Sam said. “You really think it’s the same person that killed Melissa Stone and Bill Catcher?”

“We know it is,” Jake said.

“Focus on holding this road, Sam. I’ll focus on finding the person responsible for these murders.”

“You got it, sir,” Sam said. He signaled to his men, and two of them jogged over to the barriers and moved them out of the way.

Colton watched the roadblock recede in the passenger side mirror. In some ways it wasn’t much different than those he had guarded in Afghanistan, but he’d never expected to see something like that in America.

They drove in silence for several minutes until they reached their turn off. Colton rolled the window down manually to let in the cool breeze. Brown grass and ponderosas framed the road on both sides. Jake put the truck into third gear and climbed toward Prospect Mountain Drive. Detective Lindsey Plymouth had found the camp up there, about a half mile to the west of Bill Catcher’s place.

The walkie-talkie on his hip crackled. “Chief, do you copy?”

Colton pulled the radio and brought it to his lips. “Roger that, Margaret, go ahead.”

The white noise from the radio made it hard to hear what came next. They were already too far out of range for a clear transmission.

“Chief, Sandra Spears is here.” Static. “She says someone—”

Colton tapped the side of the radio.

“Come again,” he said. “I didn’t catch your last.”

Another squawk of static and then the signal cleared. “Chief, Sandra Spears claims someone kidnapped her daughter.”

Colton swallowed, his gaze instantly flitting to the rearview mirror. Raven was smiling and bantering with Nathan in the back.

“Pull off,” Colton ordered.

“Where?” Jake asked. “Not really a great place—”

“Pull off now!”

Jake slammed the brakes and twisted the wheel. Colton opened the door and jumped onto the dirt before the truck had come to a complete stop.

Raven was standing in the bed of the truck, looking down at Colton.

“What’s wrong? Why did we stop here?” Raven’s smile slowly faded away as he took in the expression on Colton’s face. “Chief, what’s wrong?”

“Allie has been kidnapped,” he said, keeping his voice low.

“What?” Raven said quietly, like he couldn’t believe it.

“Your niece has been taken,” Colton said. He pulled his radio off his belt and held it up. “Margaret called it in. Apparently, your sister showed up at the station and said someone took Allie from the hospital.”

Raven gritted his teeth and kicked a rock over the side of the ledge. It tumbled down the bluff, dust swirling into the air. “I was supposed to protect them. I was supposed to keep them safe.”

The crackle from Colton’s radio cut him off.

“Go ahead,” Colton said, grateful for the interruption.

“Sir, Ms. Spears said she found a note with Allie’s stuffed animal. She’s hysterical.”

“Tell Sandra to hold on. We’re headed back to the station.”

Raven reached for the radio, but stopped at the crackle of another transmission.

“Sir, she ran out of here right after I called you,” Margaret said. “Sandra Spears is already gone.”

Raven’s hand wobbled as he reached out for the radio. Colton handed it to him.

“Margaret, this is Raven,” he said, his voice shaky. “What does the note say?”

There was a hard pause of static followed by Margaret’s reply. “There’s a mountain above the entrance to the underworld. Follow the wings to the nest at the top. Come alone or your daughter burns.”

Raven’s eyes widened and he lowered the radio as if he had just realized something awful.

“You know what that means?” Colton asked.

Raven didn’t reply, but he didn’t really need to. The truth of it was written all over his ashen face.

— 20 —

The flag bridge on the USS *John C. Stennis* felt like a freezer. Charlize fidgeted in her chair, goose flesh prickling across her burned skin. She and Captain Dietz, along with several other officers, had already been waiting nearly forty-five minutes by the time President Diego limped into the room. Rear Admiral Robert Luke followed him, holding a briefcase in one hand and a stack of folders under his other. Luke was the commanding officer of the strike group, and it appeared he was already trying to curry favor with the new president.

"Sorry to keep you all waiting," Diego said, not sounding sorry at all. "I was on the horn with the British Prime Minster and the Secretary-General of the United Nations about aid shipments."

"No problem, sir," Dietz said. "Thank you for meeting with us."

Luke handed the folders to Dietz, who in turn passed them out to everyone in the room. Diego didn't waste any time. He cracked the seal on his folder. Charlize followed suit, opening hers to find a dozen sheets of satellite imagery and several pages of documents inside. She rifled through them, wondering why she hadn't already seen these reports.

Luke said, "You will find the current international locations of all branches of the military, including troop counts, equipment, armaments, and so on, in your packets. There are also reports detailing the recovery efforts in the United States."

The admiral licked his index finger and thumbed through the documents until he found the one he was looking for. "Page twenty, everyone," Luke said.

Charlize flipped to the page to find a map of the United States and several diagrams.

“We estimate over a quarter of the population will die in the next two weeks as a result of the radioactive fission products from the air detonations and the fallout from the ground blast in Washington D.C. From our models, the safe areas appear to be shown on this diagram,” Luke said. “It’s hard to know how accurate these models are, though. The radioactive fission products and the fallout can be difficult to measure.”

Charlize could hardly bring herself to look at the predictions for Colorado. Empire was right in the middle of a red zone. She felt like crying and screaming and running for the hatch, but instead she swallowed her despair and listened to the briefing.

Luke walked them through the report on the following page, which showed how much of the country had gone dark following the EMP. Almost the entire map was shaded gray, and parts even extended into Mexico and Canada.

“Ladies and gentleman,” Diego said, taking over the briefing. “Moving forward, there’s good news and bad news. I’ll start with the good.”

He clasped his fingers and rested his elbows on the table. “As you can see from these documents, recovery efforts have begun. Working closely with the military and FEMA, we’re setting up SCs in all major cities.”

“SCs?” Charlize asked.

“Survivor Centers outside the radiation zones,” Diego said. “Water, food, and medicine is being heavily guarded and distributed appropriately at these locations. The Army has also established FOBs to help combat the rioting and destruction in major population centers.”

Diego paused to take a sip of water before continuing.

“Now comes the hard part. Two of the most important assets we have are the FEMA generators located in Southern Florida and the fleet of semi-trailers that were not damaged by the EMP. Using military escorts, we will be shipping these generators to priority SCs in the coming days and weeks.”

Charlize understood now. The good news was they had resources in Florida that had survived the attack, but the bad news was they would have to prioritize which SCs received those resources—in other words, who lived and who died.

Diego continued the briefing. “We have recalled over one hundred thousand active duty troops serving overseas. They will be returning to the states in the next few weeks to help with the recovery efforts.”

“How about our allies, sir? You mentioned you spoke to the UK and the

UN?” Charlize said.

“Mexico and Canada are dealing with their own problems as a result from the attack, but England, France, Germany, and a dozen other allies have committed and or already deployed hundreds of aid ships to help,” Diego replied. “Many of these shipments will include high protein food, medicine, fuel, and generators. However, I’m afraid they won’t arrive in time for many of our citizens.”

Diego looked down at his folder and turned the page. “Anyone living west of the Mississippi River who survives the radiation is going to suffer for several months before we can get these supplies to them. Highways are already impassible due to abandoned vehicles, and we simply don’t have the capability to ship supplies.”

He looked up from his folder, eyes as cold as ice. After a short pause, he added, “We expect fifty million Americans will starve to death by winter. Another twenty-five million who are dependent on medicines will die, and an additional twenty-five million will be killed in the violence and disease that follows.”

There was an uneasy silence as everyone in the room did the math. A hundred million dead in addition to those who had already perished or would perish from the radiation made Charlize sick to her stomach.

“There’s more bad news,” Luke said. “Take a look at page thirty-three.”

Charlize had to hold her folder to the light to see the image. Where there should have been the nuclear-powered super carrier, the *USS Ronald Reagan*, and the rest of Carrier Strike Group Five, she only saw blackened sheets of metal floating in the teal water of Yokosuka Harbor.

“The North Koreans hit Yokosuka Naval Base with intercontinental ballistic missiles shortly after the initial attack with their commercial airliners. We didn’t see it coming because they took out several of our satellites, leaving us in the dark across key areas. This is more evidence that the Supreme Leader believed he could destroy us before we could hit back. They actually thought they could win this war.”

“All due respect, Admiral, they *have* won this war,” Charlize interjected. “The war is over. They won it the moment they violated our airspace.”

The hatch to the room opened before anyone could reply.

Lieutenant Marco stepped inside. “I’m sorry to interrupt, but we have a problem, sir.” Her gaze was directed at Rear Admiral Luke.

“Speak freely,” he said after Marco paused.

“Our anti-submarine warfare officers have caught some passive sonar hits that could be enemy subs.”

Dietz stood. “Have we been able to track them?”

“Negative, sir, the hits fade in and out too often to accurately track.”

“Put the fleet on high alert, Lieutenant,” Luke said.

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Sandra wasn’t sure where she was going, but she was running there as fast as she could. Her mind was a complete mess. The note said to come alone, but she had hoped the police could help her. When had she started trusting them? Kids from the Rez knew better than to trust the cops. They wouldn’t save her daughter and Raven was too far away to help right now. She would have to do it herself.

Looking up, she realized that she’d run all the way through the station and into the parking lot. Raven’s Jeep was still parked there. Detective Lindsey Plymouth was leaning against the passenger door, chewing bubble gum as if she didn’t have anything better to do.

I have to find Allie. I have to find my baby. I should never have come here!

Her vision clouded and her stomach rolled. She bolted for the green trashcan outside the building, doubled over, and puked in the grass.

Lindsey rushed over. “Ma’am, are you okay?”

“No, I’m not fine,” Sandra said. “I need the keys to my brother’s Jeep.”

Lindsey shook her head. “I’m waiting for Detective Ryburn to go check out an incident at the YMCA camp.”

Sandra brushed the curtain of hair from her face and wiped her mouth off with a sleeve. “My daughter was taken.” She was gasping for air now—hyperventilating, she realized.

“Just calm down,” Lindsey said. She put a hand on Sandra’s shoulder, but Sandra backed away.

“No, I *won’t* calm down, Officer. I need my brother’s Jeep.”

“I’m sorry, but…”

“Chief Colton said it’s fine, and if you don’t believe me, you can go ask that girl at the front desk.”

Lindsey glanced toward the door and then back at Sandra with a skeptical look.

“Stay here, then. I’m going to check with Margaret.”

Sandra waited for Lindsey to enter the building. Then she rushed to Raven’s Jeep. She opened the door, reached under the front seat, and searched for the extra key he kept taped to the floorboard.

“Come on, come on,” she muttered. Her fingers scraped against the metal key, and she plucked it off the floor, jumped into the car, and slammed the door.

“Stop!” shouted Lindsey. The door to town hall swung open and footsteps pounded the ground. By the time the detective reached the parking lot, Sandra was already gunning the engine through Bond Park. The oversized off-road tires ripped through the green sod, leaving wide tracks. She squealed onto Riverside East and pushed down harder on the gas pedal.

She recited the note from memory. “There’s a mountain above the entrance to the underworld. Follow the wings to the nest at the top. Come alone or your daughter burns.”

There were so many mountains in this place. Tears fell from her eyes as she scanned the sky, searching the peaks for anything that might give her a clue.

Birds had wings. Maybe there was an actual bird’s nest she was meant to find?

Think, Sandra, think!

She sped up the road, raising a hand to shield her eyes from the brilliant sun. The glow reflected off the glass of one of the tramway gondolas strung across Prospect Mountain. Sandra was staring at them so hard that she almost ran into a sign that read *Tunnel Access CLOSED*.

It was then she finally understood. On the tramway tour she’d taken with Raven and Allie, their guide had mentioned an old tunnel under Prospect Mountain that ferried water from Mary’s Lake to Lake Estes, where it then fed into Big Thompson River.

The underworld was that tunnel, the gondolas were the wings, and the nest was the top of the tramway. Now she just had to figure out how to get up there. The road forked ahead to the right and left. She jerked to the left at the last moment.

A dusty cloud of exhaust trailed the Jeep as she sped up the winding mountain roads. For several minutes she swerved up the west side of the mountain. Ahead, Turquoise Trail ended at a cul-de-sac. She slammed on the brakes and killed the engine.

Wiping the tears from her face, she stared at the top of the mountain. It wasn't far to the tramway, but the woods were dense and steep. She would have to hike the rest of the way up.

Without another thought, Sandra sprinted into the forest.

It took everything in her not to scream Allie's name, but she resisted the urge.

Be strong, Sandra. You can do this. You have to do this.

Gasping for air, she pushed on, sweat dripping down her face, calves burning. She could still taste the bile from throwing up earlier, but nothing was going to stop her now. She would find her baby and then tear the kidnapping bastard apart with her bare hands.

That was when she realized that, in her panic, she hadn't brought a weapon. She really would have to use her bare hands.

She ran harder through the minefield of mossy rocks and fallen logs. Somewhere in the distance, there was the caw of a crow. Another bird answered it, and then another.

Ravens were good omens in some Native American legends. They could be tricksters, too, which was how her mischievous brother had earned his nickname. But it was strange to find so many in one place. When a turkey vulture swooped high overhead, she realized that there was only one reason so many carrion birds would have gathered.

Something was dead at the top of Prospect Mountain.

The pain was deep and raw, but there was something else inside her now, something that would fuel her even when hope and adrenaline failed.

Anger.

A deeper rage than she had ever felt in her life.

Pawing at the branches that scraped her skin, she burst through the final stand of ponderosas at the edge of the woods and stumbled onto a dirt road. The concrete lookout of the aerial tramway towered above her like a castle. Sandra eyed the stairs leading to the tramway platform overhead.

She took a deep breath and prepared to climb.

"Mommy!"

The single word seized all the air from Sandra's lungs. She looked up to see two figures behind the metal safety fence surrounding the raised platform.

Sandra raised her hand and squinted into the sunlight.

"Hello, Sandra," came a voice. "It's been a long time."

She would never forget the cold, calculating, monotone voice. She didn't

need a cloud to pass over the sun to know the man that had taken Allie wasn't Mark or some love-struck patient.

It was someone much, much worse.

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Light as a feather, Raven told himself. He couldn't believe Sandra had run off to find Allie without him. *And* she'd stolen his Jeep.

No, on second thought he could definitely believe it. He just wished that Sandra had waited for him. Now they were searching the mountain for Sandra and Allie, and he could only hope they'd find his family before they became the next victims of the madman acting out the Water Cannibals story.

He ducked under a tree branch and then stopped, waiting impatiently for the rest of the search party. Colton held up a hand to the right. He raised two fingers to Raven, then to Jake and Nathan, then pointed to his eyes, and finally to a clearing ahead.

The scent of smoke caught Raven's nose and he signaled for Creek to hide with a quick hand motion. The dog scurried into the underbrush and vanished under a moss-covered log.

An eerie silence passed through the forest. A bird took off from the canopy, but Raven kept his eyes on the clearing. He caught the strong scent of beans. Someone had definitely been cooking. There must be people ahead, camouflaged by the foliage, and hidden by a fortress of trees. Surely their chase wouldn't be foolish enough to camp out in the open like this, though.

Colton lowered his AR-15 and flashed an advance signal to Nathan and Jake. He gave Raven the same signal and, forming a perimeter, the four closed in on the camp.

After scanning the woods with the scope on his bow, Raven followed the order. He kept low, almost in a hunch, his finger on the outside of the trigger guard.

Colton vanished behind a tree in Raven's peripheral. He lost sight of Jake and Nathan a moment later. Keeping to the left, Raven caught his first glimpse of the camp. There were several t-shirts and pairs of pants drying on a clothesline strung between two pine trees. A fire pit with a grate and a pot on top was smoking in the center of the camp.

He worked his way closer, step by step, and hugged the trunk of a tree.

Pushing his scope to his eye, he followed a man with shoulder-length blond hair, his back turned to the trees. As soon as he grabbed the lid of the pot, Colton shouted and burst into the camp with his rifle pointed at the man's face.

"Freeze!" Jake shouted.

Nathan limped out of the foliage, the men closing in from opposite directions to trap their quarry. Raven followed with his bow raised.

The man at the pot held up his hands, one of them still holding the lid. He backed away from the fire, eyes roving from side to side. "What the hell?" he shouted. "I wasn't trying to steal it, I swear. We're just so hungry!"

"Shut up!" Colton yelled back.

Raven caught a glimpse of a second person emerging from the woods to his left. He aimed his crossbow at a woman that dropped the bundle of sticks she was carrying.

"Don't shoot!" she yelled.

Raven lowered his bow and pivoted back to the man at the fire pit. The officers and Nathan were closing in, weapons held steady.

"On your knees," Colton ordered.

The blond man slowly got down as instructed. "Take it easy. If this is your camp, then I'm sorry. Like I said, we were just looking for—"

Nathan plucked a pistol from the back of the man's jeans. He tossed it to Colton, who snatched it expertly from the air and looked it over.

"Nice piece," he said. "You planning on shooting someone today?"

Jake motioned with two fingers to the woman. "Ma'am, please come over here and get down on the ground with your hands over your head."

"What the hell is this about?" she asked. "We didn't do anything wrong."

"This guy isn't our chase," Raven said.

The man looked up from his knees. "Chase? What the hell are you talking about? We weren't chasing anyone."

"Shut up," Colton said.

It was obvious these people weren't killers, but clearly Colton wasn't taking any chances. He handcuffed the man, despite the guy's continued stream of protests, while Jake did the same to the woman.

"What are your names?" Colton asked.

"Kirk. This is my wife, Sally." He glanced up, blue eyes pleading. "Please don't arrest us. We were just looking for something to eat."

They were both filthy, faces and hands covered in dirt. They looked like

they'd been through a tough ordeal.

"We're wasting time," Raven said, agitated.

"Hold on a second," Colton snapped.

Raven whistled for Creek and circled the camp as Colton interrogated the couple. Two sets of clothes, both men's, and a couple of old towels and a single sleeping bag. Nothing much to tell him who had been living up here. Idly, he peered into the pot.

"C-colton." Raven choked out.

"What?" The chief looked over at him, and something about Raven's expression must have shaken him. "Christ, Raven, you look like you've seen a ghost."

Not a ghost, he thought. *A spirit. I was right all along. The Water Cannibals are here.*

Inside the pot, floating above some mushy, overcooked vegetables, was a livid human hand that ended in a ragged, blackened stump.

Colton looked in the pot and then grimaced in horror and disgust. "Jake, I think we just found Mollie Harm's missing hand."

— 21 —

“What do you mean you found a hand?” Kirk asked for the fourth time.

Colton spat on the ground as he unlocked the cuffs on Kirk’s hands. “Get out of here and don’t come back. It’s not safe up here.”

“Where are we supposed to go?” Kirk asked. “We were robbed at gunpoint yesterday. Bastards took our bicycles. We walked here, but your people turned us away this morning. We hiked through the woods and found this campsite.”

Kirk massaged his wrists and walked over to his wife. She was sitting on a log, whimpering and rocking back and forth.

Colton placed the cuffs back on his duty belt and took a moment to think. According to Raven, their killer had to be a Native American. Probably Cherokee, given the origin of the legend, but he was less certain on that point. This couple had just been in the wrong place at the wrong time.

“Go to the Stanley Inn,” Colton said. “Tell Jim that Chief Colton sent you. Know how to get there from here?”

“Thank you,” Kirk said, nodding enthusiastically. “Oh God, thank you!”

Sally stopped rocking. “You can’t just send us out there alone!” Kirk tried to soothe her, but she shouted, “We almost ate someone’s hand, you asshole! Do NOT tell me to calm down.”

Kirk looked hopefully at Colton. “Can I have my gun back?”

With a grunt, Colton tossed it to him, and the terrified couple sprinted into the trees without a backward glance.

Raven was prowling the camp, sometimes crouching down to examine the dirt, sometimes studying a snapped tree branch or other, less obvious signs. He knew the man must be desperate to find his sister, but Colton didn’t want to run off into the woods half-cocked. Things weren’t adding up. If this was

their killer's lair, why had he let these people live?

"We need to keep moving, Chief," Raven said. He jogged over, Creek at his heels.

Colton gestured for the other men to join them. Raven pulled off his baseball cap and folded the brim before putting it back on his head.

"I found three sets of tracks leading into the mountains," he said. "Two belong to that couple, and one is a large man's boot print. But it doesn't look very fresh, and Creek hasn't found any trace of Allie or Sandra."

"Do you think this is our killer's camp?" Jake asked.

"I do, but he's not here." Raven said. He shot a glance at Colton and then continued. "We might need to split up. The note said something about the underworld. I think that means the tunnels beneath the mountain, but I could be wrong."

"Those have been closed off for years," Colton said.

"The other possibility is the tramway. That could be the nest. I think we should cover both places, just in case," Raven said. Beside him, Creek whined and pawed the ground.

"No," Colton said, holding up a hand to cut off Raven's protests. "We stick together. The tramway sounds more likely than the tunnels. We'll head there."

"Fine, but let's move now," Raven said. He motioned for Creek and led the way out of the camp. The team worked their way through the forest for fifteen minutes. Colton's boots sank into the damp pine needles with every step, leaving behind clear tracks. If someone had been here before them, surely they would have left a trail.

He looked up to see Raven crest a hill and freeze like a statue. Colton carefully walked up the ridge until he was standing a few feet behind the tracker. He slowly took a knee, his joints creaking. They were almost to the tramway. From here, the pine trees thinned out, allowing Colton to see farther. Fallen trees and boulders covered in moss dotted the terrain. He scanned the area systematically, just like he'd been trained. Glancing over at Raven, he realized the man was doing the exact same thing.

The storm had rolled to the east and the cloudless sky was ocean blue over the mountain that was a collage of changing colors. His gaze moved from left to right, but there was no sign of anything out of the ordinary. No glint of metal or smoke, and no people other than themselves.

Raven stopped at a tree and motioned for Colton. Creek was sitting on his

haunches, looking up at his handler.

“Creek’s picked up a scent,” Raven said quietly. “It could be them. I think we’re getting close.”

Colton flashed an advance signal to Nathan and Jake. Both men were one hundred feet to the east, using the cover of trees on the ridgeline.

Raven moved north, raising his crossbow as he scanned the tramway. Colton would always prefer a gun to a bow, but he had to admit that Raven was pretty good with the thing.

Creek prowled through the foliage, muzzle sniffing the dirt. He weaved back and forth, picking up the invisible skin rafts blowing on the wind. Maybe, when this was all over, Colton would see about enlisting Raven and Creek as Estes Park’s K-9 unit.

Colton stepped over a fallen tree and jogged through a patch of yellow wildflowers. Raven stopped again, squatting to check a pair of tracks. Colton did the same.

“Looks like they separate here,” Raven said. “See that?”

Colton checked the footprints. Both appeared to be male, judging by the size. The two sets curved off in different directions.

“Either of these could be our chase,” Raven said. “But I don’t see any smaller prints. Nothing to indicate Sandra and Allie came this way.”

Colton stood and waved at Nathan and Jake. They met under the cover of a grove of pine trees. A cool breeze shifted the branches around them, the canopy whispering to itself. Normally, the sound was reassuring, but Colton was too on edge to appreciate it.

“Nathan, Jake,” Colton whispered. “We’re going to have to split up after all. The tracks split off in two different directions.”

Nathan looked up at the tramway. “Whatever we do, let’s hurry.”

“You and Jake continue west,” Colton said. “Raven and I will head east.”

Nathan and Jake nodded and had turned to go when the sharp pop of gunshots rang out. Colton spun in that direction with his AR-15. He put the scope to his eye and roved the crosshairs across the southern stretch of forest. Unless he was mistaken, the shots sounded like they’d come from the campsite.

“Head west with Nathan,” Colton told Jake. “Raven and I will check this out.”

Colton took off into the trees, hoping that Kirk and Sally hadn’t returned to the camp instead of heading to the Stanley. Raven whistled at Creek and fell

into a run. It only took a few seconds for the Akita to overtake them both. He moved with graceful ease over the steep terrain, dodging rocks and springing like a rabbit on his powerful back legs. Colton, on the other hand, could hardly breathe. He wasn't used to running like this. Kelly was always trying to get him to exercise more, but he had gotten out of the habit after coming home from his last tour of duty.

Loose rocks tumbled down the hill as Colton ran down the slope. He threw the strap of his rifle over his back and pulled his Colt .45.

Raven leapt nimbly over a rock. He ran with the grace of a trail runner. Vultures continued to circle overhead. Their calls were growing louder as the raptors swooped lower. The pop of gunfire hadn't sounded for several minutes. Whatever had happened, Colton feared he was too late to help.

I shouldn't have sent Kirk and Sally away on their own.

If something had happened to the couple, it was on him.

Colton ran faster, ducking under branches and scraping against tree trunks. Lungs straining for air, muscles burning, and sweat pouring down his face, he felt like he was back in Afghanistan. A branch caught him in the face. He swatted it away with his hand and bolted toward the clearing of the campsite. When he was clear of the trees, he realized Raven and Creek were nowhere in sight.

Colton tried to steady his breathing. He slowed to a walk, his pistol angled slightly downward. He scanned the path in front of him, looking for hazards and planning each footstep before he made it. He halted and raked the barrel over the camp. A figure was moving in the tall weeds, crawling on its belly.

It was Sally.

"Oh god," Colton whispered. He ran full-speed toward her. As he moved, he caught a drift of smoke, familiar and rank, like charred beef left too long on the grill.

He knew then, but he still forced himself to look at the fire pit.

Kirk lay face first beside the flames, his legs still burning. There was no question that he was dead. A living man, even one with a mortal wound, would have crawled away from such torture.

As Colton ran across the camp, he swept his revolver back and forth. Where the hell were Raven and Creek?

Sally continued dragging her body using only her elbows, dazed and moving like a maimed animal. A choking sound came from her mouth, but Colton couldn't see her face.

An overwhelming wave of anxiety hit Colton. He felt like he was being watched. He spun, raking his pistol across the trees surrounding the camp. The branches swayed in the wind, movement coming from every direction. Seeing nothing, he bent down and put a hand on Sally's back.

"It's okay," he whispered. "I'll get you out of here."

She dug her elbows into the dirt again and pulled herself forward another foot like she hadn't even heard him. She left a swath of blood behind her in the grass, like some kind of nightmarish snail trail.

Colton kept his gun on the trees and touched Sally's shoulder with his other hand. Using the utmost care, he rolled her onto her back.

Wide brown eyes locked onto Colton as if he was the devil in the flesh.

Blood was pouring out of her mouth, and as she opened it to scream or beg for help, he realized that the sick bastard had cut out her tongue.

There was so much blood that at first he didn't notice the second wound, lower down on her neck. Her throat had been slit, just shy of severing her arteries and granting her a mercifully quick death.

"It's okay," he repeated, but he knew it was a lie. "I won't let anyone else hurt you. I'm going to find the man who did this to you."

Sally croaked again, trying to speak, and began to choke on her own blood.

"Don't try and talk," Colton whispered.

Her eyes widened again, but this time they weren't looking at him.

A copper-skinned man with a dark, scraggly beard ambled into the clearing, a gun in one hand and a blood-stained knife in the other. His yellow grin stretched from ear to ear.

Everything that happened next seemed to occur in slow motion. Colton raised his gun just as the man pulled the trigger of his own weapon. A bullet hit the dirt by Colton's right boot, and a second punched into his upper chest, knocking the gun from his hand and sending him backward. A third whizzed by his forehead as he fell. He raised a hand to protect his face, knowing that he had failed, and worst of all knowing that he wouldn't see Kelly or Risa ever again.

Colton collapsed to his back next to Sally. He opened his eyes again, expecting to be looking down the barrel of a gun, but instead he saw Raven and Creek behind the man who'd shot him.

The killer was on his knees, an arrow sticking out of his left temple. He was still staring at Colton, his smirk just as wide as before, as if he didn't notice or didn't care that he'd just been shot in the head.

Raven fired a second arrow not long after, and the killer crashed to the dirt with a thud.

Gasping for air, Colton pawed at his chest where the bullet had hit him. He felt for blood, but he had been lucky. The vest had stopped the bullet. It still hurt like a son of a bitch, but hurt was better than dead. Wheezing, he rolled over to look at Sally.

“We got him,” he said, trying to smile at the dying woman. Blood bubbled in her throat as she tried again to speak. Her eyes rolled up into her head, and then she was gone.

Colton let out a sigh and reached over to close her eyelids. The hunt for the serial killer had ended, but it had cost two more innocent lives. Pushing himself to his feet, Colton looked at the man responsible for this evil. He lay face first in the dirt across the camp, his reign of terror finally over.

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Raven felt like his world was falling apart. And deep down, he believed it was his fault. He eyed Kirk and Sally’s bodies. He was sorry for their deaths, but he was more worried about his sister and his niece.

He’d sworn to protect Allie and Sandra, and instead he’d let them get taken by a demon from his childhood nightmares. That demon was dead, but his family was still missing.

He’d promised Billy Franks that he’d watch his back, but the Marine had saved Raven’s life instead and caught a bullet in the face for his trouble.

Raven couldn’t shake the feeling that the North Korean nukes were his fault, too. Everything he touched seemed to turn to shit.

No more, he thought. *You can’t mess up again. You have to find Sandra and Allie.*

Creek let out a whine that pulled Raven from his thoughts. The dog sat guarding the killer. Raven walked over to check the corpse for any clues that might tell him where his sister and niece were.

He thought he would feel something at the sight of the dead man, but he was numb. It had been like that during the war, sometimes. He knew from experience that the pain and fear and grief would come later. He still hadn’t gotten a good look at the killer’s face. Bending down, Raven grabbed his shoulder and rolled him onto his back.

“Holy shit,” Raven said. He stood quickly and took a step back, his heart lodged in his throat.

Colton walked over, a hand on his vest. “What? Do you recognize him?”

Raven could almost feel the blood quickening in his veins. He wasn’t sure if it was from adrenaline or anger, but whatever it was, he had to control it before it overwhelmed him.

“Raven, what’s the matter?” Colton asked. There was genuine concern in the chief’s voice. It was almost like he cared. When had that happened?

“That’s Turtle,” he said, still trying to process what he was seeing. “His real name is Billy Tankala. He and his brother, Mike, used to live on the Rez with me and Sandra.”

“Are you sure?” Colton demanded.

Raven leaned down just to make sure, pulling back the man’s collar to reveal a tattoo of a turtle.

“Yeah,” he said.

“Please tell me you didn’t owe him money too,” Colton said.

“What? No, I didn’t owe him money, Marcus. Mike Tankala—we called him Brown Feather, back on the Rez—used to go out with my sister, but I haven’t seen him for years.”

“You tellin’ me this is just a coincidence? That some asshole from Rosebud came all the way to Estes Park to kill Melissa, Bill, Mollie, these people, and kidnap…”

Colton’s words trailed off, realization apparently sinking in. “That’s why he’s here, isn’t it?”

“He came for my sister,” Raven said, feeling sick to his stomach. He placed his crossbow on the foot stirrup and used the crank system to load another bolt in the groove.

“Nathan and Jake had to have heard those shots. They’re probably on their way. We should stay put until they return,” Colton said. He looked around the campsite, his face a grim mask.

No wonder there had been two sets of prints. They were tracking not one but two murderers. That explained the other night at Mount Ypsilon, too. One of the killers had been watching Raven and Colton with Melissa while the other had been busy with Bill Catcher at Prospect Mountain.

“If he was here for Sandra, then why kill Melissa and Mollie?” Colton asked.

“I don’t know,” Raven said. “Sandra had a thing with Brown Feather a

long time ago, when they were practically just kids. Brown and Turtle went to prison after they robbed a liquor store on the Rez and assaulted an officer, along with a shit-ton of other things. He used to write her letters, but after a while they stopped coming. I figured he finally got over her.”

What he didn’t say was that although he’d hated both the Tankala brothers, Brown Feather was the one he had truly feared. He wasn’t just a criminal; he was a madman—and he had Raven’s family. They couldn’t wait here and hope that Jake and Nathan would return. They had to move out now before Brown Feather could finish his reenactment of the Water Cannibal story with Sandra and Allie.

— 22 —

Nathan limped through a fort of trees. He hadn’t been able to reach Cheyenne Mountain since that first transmission from the top of Trail Ridge Road. Every time Nathan had tried the shortwave frequency since then, it was silent. But that wasn’t the only thing that was quiet. The lack of noise on Prospect Mountain gave him pause. He hadn’t heard anything from Colton, Raven and Creek, or Jake for over ten minutes.

Raising his M14, Nathan moved the crosshairs across the trees. The radio tower and aerial tramway were just ahead, but there were no voices, just the whistle of the wind and creak of branches swaying in it.

Where the hell was everyone?

He continued west up a steep slope lined with a fence of aspen trees, their white trunks like bones jutting out of the rocky earth. Nothing moved inside the forest, but Nathan felt like he was being watched.

A quick scan revealed nothing. He shouldered his rifle and moved quickly toward the concrete base of the aerial tramway. The thick trunk of a ponderosa provided cover, and he ducked down next to its base to survey the lay of the land.

There was still no sign of Sandra or Allie, and he didn’t see Colton or anyone else trekking up the slope, but the view was magnificent. The entire valley was visible from his vantage.

Nathan carefully edged around the safety of the tree and checked the tramway platforms again, moving the crosshairs across the safety fences for contacts. Seeing none, he ran for the base of the first observation deck. When he reached the bottom of the wall he put his back against the concrete and stopped to listen. There was still only the rustle of falling leaves and the sigh of the wind carrying them to the ground.

Then he heard something else. It was a girl, and she was crying.

Nathan looked up at the higher platforms. The noise was coming from somewhere up there, but it was hard to pinpoint a location. Hugging the base of the lookout, he slowly made his way around the corner toward a cluster of trees growing along the side of the compound. At the top, an empty red gondola hung from the cables.

“Don’t do this. I’m begging you, please just let Allie go.”

Nathan recognized Sandra’s voice, but there was a panicked edge to it that made him want to charge up the slope. He gripped his rifle tighter and forced himself to proceed with caution until he saw the second cart. Sandra was standing inside, hands bound, next to Allie.

Pushing the scope to his eye, Nathan finally saw the bastard that had kidnapped them. The man was tall and powerfully built. He ran a hand over his shaved skull and moved out of sight before Nathan could get a clear shot.

He moved the crosshairs back to Sandra and Allie to see them more clearly. They were tied up inside the bright red tramway gondola closest to the platform. The terrified little girl was sobbing, but her mother’s expression was as defiant as a cornered wolf.

Nathan roved his rifle back to the kidnapper, but there was no way he was going to get the drop on the guy from here. Shooting from this angle put Sandra and Allie at risk, so he was going to have to find another path around the tramway and work out a plan from there. Gritting his teeth against the pain in his ankle, he began to search for a way to rescue them.

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Sandra struggled against her restraints and looked for some way out of their situation. She was tied to the metal handlebar inside the gondola docked at the top of the tramway. Red paint flaked off the bar as she worked the rope back and forth. Allie was lying on the seat, wrists and ankles bound by rope.

A concrete walkway curved away from the platform where tourists boarded. To the left, a staircase led to a coffeehouse, gift shop, and second lookout with a terminal that looked like a cross between a greenhouse and a bunker. Straight ahead, another walkway led to an observation area that looked out over the Rocky Mountains to the west. The familiar shops, houses, and even the red roof of the Stanley Hotel appeared as a miniature skirt of toy

buildings at the bottom of the mountain. Although she couldn't see them, she could imagine the town's residents walking the streets aimlessly, no job to go to, no purpose but to survive.

And not one of them was going to help her.

Even if she screamed, no one would make it up the mountain in time. Her only hope was Raven. If anyone could find them, it was her brother and his loyal dog.

She pulled on her restraints again, making the gondola sway. Allie's eyes widened in fear. She had always hated heights, and the one time Raven had taken them here for a family day, Allie had been too scared to enjoy the scenery.

Brown Feather stepped away from the railing. He had been staring at the sea of trees below since the gunshots had rung out.

"Turtle," he hissed. "Where the *fuck* are you?"

"Please, please let us go," Sandra begged.

He slowly turned in her direction, his brown eyes focused hungrily on her face. He was tall for a Sioux, over six feet, with wide shoulders and ropy muscle that had always reminded her a bit of a praying mantis. Feather tattoos ran up his neck on both sides, the tips nearly touching his earlobes, which were pierced with black studs.

"I told you to shut up. You could never keep your mouth shut." He put a hand on his shaved head and muttered something under his breath. Sweat poured down his leathery skin. How had she ever, in a million years, found this man attractive?

Because he's just like your father, only worse, she thought.

"You remember that night when we talked about the future? When I told you about my dream for us?"

Sandra swallowed and nodded, trying to smile. She had blocked out most of their relationship, and she had no idea what he was talking about.

"We're supposed to be together, Sandra. We were going to start a family. You promised me we would. When I got out of jail, I thought you'd keep your promise and we'd be happy. I tracked you all the way here, but when I saw that half-breed brat, I witnessed your betrayal in the flesh."

"You have it all wrong, I still want those things we talked about," Sandra lied. She'd had a lot of practice lying to men to avoid a beating.

"You want me," she continued. "And you can still have me."

Brown Feather blinked, seemed to consider it for a moment and then shook

his head slightly. His eyes turned flat and predatory.

Sandra remembered that look, too. It always happened right before he hurt her.

“After I saw you with your daughter, I thought I should have my own daughter, too, but the girl I chose was weak,” Brown Feather said.

“So that’s why you killed her?” Sandra blurted out without thinking.

“No,” Brown Feather snapped.

“Why then?” Sandra whispered.

“Practice,” Brown Feather said with a wide smile. The teeth he still possessed were black with rot.

“Please, I’ll do anything, just don’t hurt my baby,” Sandra said. She pulled on the ropes binding her wrists, the coarse material cutting her skin.

“Shut up!” Brown Feather pulled a buck knife from a sheath on his belt and put his other hand on his head, rubbing it back and forth. “I told you to shut your mouth!”

He stopped at the open door to the tramway cart, grabbed the frame and leaned in, examining Sandra and then Allie. His stench washed over them in a fetid wave.

“We could have been a family. But instead you chose to betray me. This is your own fault,” he said.

Motion behind Brown Feather drew her gaze. A dark-haired man was scaling the side of the observation deck. He rolled onto the platform, raised his rifle, and took aim.

“Please,” Sandra said, trying to keep Brown’s attention on her. “Don’t hurt my daughter.”

“You had your chance.” Brown Feather leaned down toward Allie with the knife, the smile on his face expanding into an alligator’s hungry grin.

Crack!

A bullet shattered the window of the gondola to the right of Brown Feather. He fell backward onto the platform.

“Nathan!” she yelled.

The pilot fired again, this time clipping Brown’s ear and blowing it clean off, onyx stud and all. Screaming, Brown Feather pushed himself up and ran at Nathan. He aimed, but then pushed the muzzle up when Brown Feather moved in front of Allie and Sandra. Nathan raised the butt of his rifle just as Brown Feather barreled into him. The force of the blow slammed Nathan into the guardrail. He let out a grunt of pain as his rifle cartwheeled away. It

landed a few feet from the gondola where Sandra and Allie were trapped.

“This another one of your lovers?” Brown Feather said. He turned and snarled at her. “I’m going to gut him while you watch, whore.”

He pulled his hand away from his missing ear, his fingers gloved in blood. Both men eyed the gun, which lay roughly halfway between them.

They bolted for the rifle at the same time, but Nathan was faster. He bent to scoop it up as Brown Feather slammed into his side. Nathan stumbled toward the end the platform. He lost his balance at the edge, scrabbling for a handhold on the metal side of their gondola. Allie screamed as the cabin rocked violently.

Brown Feather grabbed Nathan’s belt, and for a moment Sandra had the crazy hope that he was going to haul the pilot back onto the platform. Instead, Brown Feather grabbed a pistol from his holster and then shoved Nathan over the side.

“NO!” Sandra shouted.

He didn’t scream or even cry out as he tumbled out of view. Brown Feather smiled again, blood running freely down his face as he looked over the side and spat.

“Piece of shit,” he said.

Sandra felt her insides sink. Brown Feather had just killed one of the only good men she had ever met in her life. She closed her eyes, but this time there were no tears. She didn’t have any left. Footsteps advanced down the platform and into the metal cabin. When she opened her eyes, Brown Feather was standing in front of her.

He tucked the pistol into his belt, licked his lips, narrowed his eyes, and focused once more on Allie and Sandra.

“I told you nothing would keep us apart.” He picked up Nathan’s rifle and then stepped into the cart. She gagged at his rancid breath and fought to get away as he leaned in to kiss her. That’s when she saw motion on the platform behind Brown Feather. A large police officer wearing a cowboy hat approached slowly with a rifle shouldered.

It was Jake and he winked at Sandra.

“Don’t fucking move,” he said in a deep bass voice.

Jake pressed his gun into Brown Feather’s back.

“Get out of the cart, you piece of shit.”

Brown Feather grinned at Sandra and then turned around. Jake tore the rifle from his hands.

“On your knees,” Jake said.

As soon as Brown Feather obeyed, Jake kicked him in the solar plexus so he would stay down. He let out a deep gasp and collapsed to the platform.

“Are you okay, Sandra?” Jake asked.

“Yes, but he pushed Nathan over the side!”

Jake eyed Brown Feather to make sure he was down and then walked over to the rail. While the big lawman’s back was turned, Brown Feather jolted up with the pistol Jake had overlooked. Sandra screamed, and Jake turned just in time to return fire.

She blinked reflexively with each deafening pop. A round buried itself in Jake’s vest, and a second hit him in the unprotected gut. Despite the wounds, he kept firing. His next shot grazed Brown Feather’s shoulder with such force he jerked to the side and fell against a wall.

Brown Feather dove for cover, rolled, and took off running up the staircase that led to the main lookout. Jake kept firing wildly with one hand, his aim off from his injuries. The bullets punched into the stairs as Brown Feather escaped.

Jake staggered and then dropped to his knees. He pulled a bloody hand away from his stomach.

Sandra sucked in a breath, trying to find her strength. Allie had started crying again, but at least she couldn’t see Jake bleeding out on the platform.

“Allie, are you okay?” She scanned her daughter when Allie didn’t reply. “Are you hurt, baby?”

Allie managed to shake her head, but her sobs never let up.

“Ma’am, are you and your daughter hurt?” Jake said. He tried to stand up, but he coughed and fell again, landing hard on one meaty palm. He smiled at her, his teeth bloody. “Don’t worry, I’ll be fine. Just a little unsteady.”

The sound of a gunshot rang out, and his smile twisted into a grimace as a bullet knocked off his cowboy hat. As it flew into the air Sandra saw the top of Jake’s skull was missing.

She heard a scream, but didn’t realize it was her own until she started gasping for air. Jake crumpled to the ground. Through the blur of tears, she watched Brown Feather on the platform above theirs, still holding the pistol he’d used to kill Jake. He gave Sandra a jaunty wave before vanishing down the terminal.

— 23 —

The big cop got what he deserved for interfering with Brown Feather's hunt. Same with the black-haired son of a bitch who'd shot his ear off.

Sandra was close to being his again. This time, they would be together forever. But first Brown Feather had to find his brother and figure out who else was tracking him before he could claim his prize. He gripped the pistol and scanned the woods below the platform.

"Turtle, where are you?" Brown Feather said quietly. He should have never told his brother to return to their camp to kill the dumb hippy couple.

Sandra's screams forced Brown Feather back into action. There wasn't time to go back and silence her. He was done hiding. It was time that the Water Cannibals came out into the light.

Turtle was one of them now, having feasted on the stew containing human flesh. They'd laid a trap to separate the police officers, planning to hunt them like game through the woods, but the hippy couple had ruined their plans. Now he feared his brother was either dead or injured so badly he couldn't help Brown Feather finish the most important hunt of all.

It was the bitch's fault. Sandra had ruined everything, distracting him when he should have been focused on bringing the legend of the Water Cannibals to life. Her lies and betrayals were going to cost her. As soon as he'd finished his hunt, he would sacrifice her half-breed daughter and eat the girl's heart right in front of her mother.

He spotted one of the police officers as he moved around the base of a tree. The man was walking slowly, sweeping an assault rifle over the terrain. Brown Feather was probably too far away to shoot the cop with his pistol. He would have to get closer. That was fine; he preferred to kill up close.

Brown Feather ducked under a branch and silently made his way to the

next tree for cover.

Motion farther to the east commanded his attention. Not far from the officer was a man carrying a crossbow. A dog trotted alongside, sniffing the ground.

Brown Feather smiled. Now *that* was prey worth hunting. Raven Spears was coming to rescue his sister, just like he had all those years ago. But this time, he wouldn't succeed. This time, Brown Feather would gut the bastard and spread his entrails through the trees like Christmas lights.

He was going to enjoy this.

***

Raven's heart kicked when he saw Jake's broken body, and it nearly stopped when he saw Sandra and Allie in the swaying gondola.

They were alive!

Colton burst from the trees a moment later. Raven watched his features transform as Colton realized Jake was beyond helping. The raw expression of grief and fury lasted for only a second before Colton schooled his emotions.

"I think the son of a bitch ran up there," Colton said, pointing to the upper observation platforms. "You find this Brown Feather, and I'll get Sandra and Allie."

Colton jogged toward the gondola without waiting for a response, and to his surprise, Raven found that he trusted the chief to take care of his niece and sister while he tracked down Brown Feather.

Drenched in sweat and driven by rage, Raven followed the blood trail up the stairs. Somebody had hit Brown Feather, but he couldn't tell how badly the bastard was hurt yet.

It wouldn't matter in a few more minutes, because the man who'd hurt his family and killed innocent people would be dead.

Raven thought about discarding his crossbow and using his bare hands to kill Brown Feather, but he'd rather win the fight first and then smack around the corpse. He halted and motioned for Creek to get behind him. There was no sign of Nathan anywhere, and with Jake dead, Raven had to assume he was on his own.

He signaled to Creek, and the dog took the path to the right, which curved around the other side of the tramway. The area was massive, but the idea was

to flank Brown Feather and box him in. That way, if he did have a gun, Brown Feather wouldn't be able to shoot both of them.

But if the sick fuck shot his dog, Raven really would tear him to pieces.

The blood trail continued around the corner of the observation deck. Raising his bow, he followed the trail. He listened for Brown's breathing or anything else to determine his location, but all Raven heard were the distant voices of Colton and his family.

Bursting around the corner, he aimed his bow toward a stand of trees that shaded the concrete walls of the tramway like soldiers guarding a castle.

There was no sign of Brown Feather.

Raven checked the trail of blood, but it ended in the dirt by his boots. Bending down, he examined the last drop of red. Dirt, pine needles, and pebbles had been kicked over the path.

Son of a bitch.

Raven's guts dropped like he was standing on the edge of a thirty-story building. He rose to his feet and spun around, but it was already too late. Brown Feather had been hiding behind him among the tall trees. It was an ambush, and Raven had walked right into it.

Brown Feather knocked the bow away, grabbed Raven by the face, and pushed him into the concrete wall. The back of Raven's skull hit it with a crack. There wasn't much pain, mostly just pressure, followed by a warm feeling and a flurry of stars that broke before his vision.

"Hey, Sam," Brown Feather said. "Been a while. I've been waiting a very long time for this."

Dazed but determined, Raven threw a clumsy punch that went wide and hit Brown Feather's bloody shoulder instead of his face. Brown screamed in agony and grabbed Raven by the shirt as he lost his balance. They crashed to the ground in a heap.

Raven launched another blow as Brown Feather climbed on top. This time, Raven was aiming for his wounded shoulder, seeing as how bad it hurt Brown Feather the first time. His fist connected with a meaty thump.

Brown Feather shrieked like he'd been stabbed with red-hot iron. Raven flipped to his stomach and crawled away, elbows digging into the bed of pine needles beneath a towering ponderosa. Pushing himself to his feet, he reached back and pulled his twin hatchets.

When he turned, Brown Feather was standing, too. He pulled the buck knife from his belt and sank into a fighting stance with the blade held high in

one hand. He balled his other hand into a fist. Blood flowed from his missing ear, and a rosy patch blossomed from the bullet wound on his shoulder. His jaw snapped and then opened into a wide grin.

"You ready to die, half-blood?" Brown Feather snarled.

Raven remembered the taunts in school. Coming from a mixed family on a Sioux Reservation, he was always teased about his Cherokee background.

"For a Sioux, you sure liked the Cherokee stories," Raven said.

The statement seemed to light up Brown Feather's dark eyes. Saliva webbed across his lips like a wild animal frothing at the mouth. "Then you understand," he said huskily. "The Water Cannibals *are* real, Sam. I've released them into the world."

Raven spat on the ground. "You always were a crazy bastard. I should have killed you the first time you hurt my sister."

"I'm going to enjoy sticking you like a pig." His jagged black teeth clanked together at Raven. "And after I'm done hacking and burning you, I'm going to roast that mutt dog of yours alive and then go to work on your sweet little niece. I bet she's tender."

Raven howled in a voice he didn't recognize as his own. He darted forward, swinging his hatchets in long arcs. The blades whooshed through the air in front of Brown Feather. He was fast and easily dodged the blows. Then he swiped at Raven with his blade. The edge slid along Raven's ribs, drawing blood. That just made him more furious.

He moved his left arm as if he were about to strike, then swung the axe in his right hand. Brown Feather parried the attack with a slap of his palm. He nicked Raven again with his knife, flicking the blade against his cheek.

Raven backed away and touched the cut. Warm blood trickled down his fingers as he pulled them away. He used the stolen moment to get his bearings. The mountain was huge and easy for a man to get lost on, but where the hell was Creek? Surely the dog hadn't deserted him.

He looked back at Brown Feather, and decided he was glad they were alone. His gut had been right before. Brown Feather was Raven's demon to face alone.

"Come on, you ugly bastard," Raven muttered. He strode forward and swung both hatchets at Brown Feather in wide arcs. The right blade found the soft flesh deep in the back of Brown Feather's right leg as he turned away. The wannabe Water Cannibal dropped to his left knee.

"Raven, get out of the way!" a woman's voice shouted.

He glanced up to see Colton and Sandra, both aiming guns at Brown Feather from the observation deck above.

“Don’t shoot, he’s mine!” Raven shouted.

Brown Feather seized the opening to strike. He charged and speared Raven in the gut with his bald head. The blow knocked Raven on his back again. More stars danced before his eyes. He blinked, trying to clear his vision. He couldn’t see his sister or Colton from this angle, which meant they didn’t have a clear fire zone to hit Brown Feather as he loomed over Raven.

Good. I’ll kill him myself!

Raven raised his right axe, but the bigger man knocked it from his hand and bent down with his blade. Before he could stab Raven, a blur of fur slammed into Brown Feather.

“Creek!” Raven shouted.

He watched helplessly as Brown Feather picked the Akita up and threw him into a tree. The dog slumped to the ground, letting out a low whine.

Brown Feather staggered over with a smile on his face and kicked Raven in the leg. As he moved in with his knife, Raven brought his knee up into Brown Feather’s belly. The bigger man fell on top of Raven.

“I’m going to kill you!” Raven yelled. “I’m going to *fucking* kill you!”

Brown Feather thrust his knife at Raven’s throat as he gasped for air. Raven caught his wrist and pushed, but Brown Feather was stronger and had gravity on his side. He slowly inched the knife down. Raven watched the tip of the blade descend, arm shaking as he tried to push it away.

A massive vein like a fat leech protruded out from Brown Feather’s forehead. His eyes were wide, crazed, and full of bloodlust. Maybe if Raven held out long enough, the bastard would have a stroke. He pushed back harder. Sweat and blood dripped off Brown Feather’s head onto Raven’s face.

“Give up, Sam,” Brown Feather muttered between breaths.

The blade was just centimeters from Raven’s throat now.

He tried to squirm, but that just made things worse. His breath was driven out as Brown Feather dug his knees into Raven’s gut. He gasped, but he couldn’t get enough air. His vision began to fade in and out, in sync with the thunderous beating of his heart.

“Die, you fucking half-blood,” Brown Feather hissed. He glared at Raven with eyes as dark as black holes.

Raven pushed back with all his strength. He couldn’t fail. He couldn’t let

his family down. He had to fight, he had to kill this demon on his own…

No matter how hard he pushed, it wasn't enough. Pain flared as the blade punctured the muscle above his rib cage. He closed his eyes and offered up a silent apology to his sister for failing her when it mattered most.

And then, suddenly, he could breathe again. Brown Feather had been hauled backwards like a fish caught on a hook. There were muffled shouts and the crack of a fist on bone.

Gripping his chest and gasping for air, Raven sat up. He blinked and tried to make sense of the scene. Brown Feather appeared to be fighting a man-sized pine tree near the edge of the bluff that overlooked Estes Park.

Then he recognized the sweatshirt Nathan had borrowed from the police department. The pilot looked worse for wear. His tattered clothes were plastered with mud and blood and other things Raven couldn't identify, and he was covered in so many evergreen needles that it looked like he'd covered himself in sap and then tried to climb every ponderosa in the forest. His left arm had a nasty gash, but that didn't stop him from throwing a punch at Brown Feather.

Sidestepping the blow, Brown Feather grabbed Nathan by his injured arm and twisted it. The scream that followed made Raven's eardrums ache.

A second figure bolted toward the fight. Colton paused for two seconds to check on Raven, who nodded feebly that he was okay.

At least, he hoped he was okay. Raven pulled his sticky fingers away from his chest. There was a lot of blood, but he was more concerned about Creek. He crawled over to his dog, allowing the other men to deal with Brown Feather now.

"It's okay, boy," Raven whimpered, reaching out.

Creek licked his hand and tried to stand.

"Don't move," Raven said. He checked the dog for injuries. Hopefully he was just rattled and nothing was broken.

Raven glanced back at the fight. Brown Feather and Nathan were grappling in the dirt near the edge of the drop-off. Colton reached them before they could topple over the edge. He pushed the barrel of his Colt .45 against Brown Feather's head.

"Get off him, you piece of shit."

"I'll kill him," Brown Feather said, brandishing his knife. "Don't think I won't."

"Shoot him," Nathan choked.

Colton pulled the hammer back with a click. “I said get off him.”

The tense silence seemed to stretch on forever. The quiet was at last shattered by Brown Feather’s raspy voice. “Fine, officer.” He slowly pulled the knife away from Nathan’s throat, but instead of tossing it aside, he lunged for Colton in a last, desperate move.

He never made it. Raven had crept up from the side and brought his axe down in the center of Brown Feather’s skull, ending things his way. The blade lodged in bone with a crack that echoed through the mountains.

A gurgling sound came from Brown Feather’s mouth. It sounded like he might have been trying to laugh.

Colton lowered his pistol, and then raised it again. He fired at Brown Feather’s chest until the revolver clicked empty. The impact of the rounds sent Brown Feather staggering backward. His body slumped over the side of the bluff with Raven’s hatchet still wedged in his skull.

Raven and Colton leaned out to watch him splatter on the rocks below.

“That’s the end of the Water Cannibals,” Raven said.

Colton reached down with a hand and helped Nathan to his feet.

“You okay, Major?” Colton asked.

“Not really,” Nathan grunted, massaging his ribs. “How’s Sandra and her daughter?”

“They’re fine,” Colton said, and Raven felt the tension in his body recede.

“Estes Park is a quaint tourist town, they said,” Nathan said wryly, shaking his battered head. “Stay longer, they said…”

Colton snorted, but he didn’t laugh. Raven wondered how long it would be before the chief even smiled again. He reached down to check Creek. The dog sat on his haunches, tail wagging at the touch of his handler.

“I’m sorry about Captain Englewood,” Nathan said, turning serious. “I didn’t know him well, but I liked him.”

Colton swallowed and directed his gaze to his boots. “Everybody liked Jake,” he said. He swiped at his eyes and then looked up at Raven.

Raven half expected to hear Colton read him his rights for killing Brown Feather, but instead he put a hand on Raven’s shoulder.

“C’mon,” he said. “Let’s go see Sandra and Allie.”

— 24 —

By afternoon on the third day after the attack, Charlize Montgomery was walking again. She had ditched the wheelchair for a cane as soon as she could. It was painful, but she was sick of sitting down all the time.

Ahead, Albert stopped at the bottom of a ladder and put his arm out like a wing. “Lean on me,” he said. When she hesitated, he added, “It’s okay, no one is watching.”

Charlize grabbed on with one hand. Each step was agonizing, her skin pulling and tightening. Albert helped her up the ladder and down the next narrow corridor. Sailors working below decks moved out of the way as she passed.

“Is that Senator Montgomery?” one of them asked.

Not for long, she thought.

Her next meeting was possibly the most important of her life. It would determine the fate of her son and her future with the new government. Albert helped her up a second ladder leading to the top deck. From there, they walked past the mess and the galleys. When they finally reached the Combat Direction Center, Charlize was out of breath and nearly doubled over with pain.

“You okay, ma’am?” Albert asked.

She stopped to catch her breath, palming a bulkhead with her bandaged hands.

“Yes. I’m fine,” she said. “Why don’t you go get something to eat?”

Albert hesitated, glancing over at the two lance corporals standing sentry outside the CDC.

“It’s okay, we’re safe here,” Charlize said. “No one’s going to try to assassinate me on this ship.”

Albert stepped forward, his massive frame making her feel very small. She looked down and chuckled. He followed her gaze to his shoes. The sneakers were filthy, smeared with ash and something that looked like blood, and the shoelaces on the right one were nearly burned off.

“I loved these shoes. Don’t suppose I’ll be able to ever find a new pair of Jordans again,” he said in a soft voice.

“You never know, Big Al.”

She walked into the CDC, where Captain Dietz was waiting with his executive officer. Janet Marco’s light blue eyes seemed to take everything in at once as Dietz gestured for Charlize to come inside. Behind them, the room was swarming with activity. Sailors worked at stations throughout the space, their faces basked in blue and red light.

“Follow me, Senator,” Dietz said.

He led her into a small room where Diego was already seated. He looked up from a laptop and raised a hand in greeting. His left arm was covered in a bandage.

“Ah, Charlize, welcome,” Diego said.

Captain Dietz closed the hatch behind her, sealing her inside with the new President of the United States.

“How are you feeling?” he asked.

Somehow, Diego’s pleasant small talk was more unsettling than if he’d yelled at her. Charlize shrugged in answer to his question and then regretted it. That *hurt*.

Diego smiled. “Probably about the same as I am, then.” He scooted closer to the table and folded his hands on the table. The smiled vanished as he furrowed his eyebrows.

“Look, I’m going to be frank. I know you don’t like me. I’m not the easiest man to like. We’ve had our differences in Congress. But those times are behind us. We have to work together now.”

Charlize nodded cautiously. They were at war, and sometimes war required enemies to work together for the greater good.

“I appreciate what you did for me in that bunker. I won’t forget that. You’re a warrior, Charlize, and I need someone like you on my side—and in my cabinet.”

“Sir,” she began.

He held up a hand. “Please, let me finish.”

She nodded and relaxed in her chair.

“I can’t think of a better person to take on the role of Secretary of Defense. You understand the world. The war we’re fighting now requires a person with your experience.”

“The war—”

“Is not over, as you know,” Diego said, interrupting her again. “Our anti-submarine warfare officers have caught more of the passive sonar hits that could be enemy subs.”

“Yes,” Charlize said. “And I’m sure there is someone very capable to serve as your Secretary of Defense to combat this threat. I’m honored, sir. Really. But I have to be honest. I’ve put my country first for my entire career. As you know, I have a son. He’s stranded in Colorado, at a camp for kids with special needs.”

Diego grabbed a glass of water from the table and took a sip, nodding while she spoke.

“I know we’re short on resources, but I have to go get him. I need my boy here with me.”

“Okay, done,” Diego said. He put the glass down and offered his hand across the table.

Charlize didn’t trust anyone that made deals so quickly, but this was especially suspicious. Diego rarely made deals at all.

“I don’t think you understand,” Charlize said.

Diego withdrew his hand and frowned.

“I want to find my son myself. All I need is a Black Hawk, extra fuel, and a few good Marines.”

Diego rubbed his nose. “See, that’s where you’re wrong, Senator. I do understand. I knew you would ask that after I spoke with Captain Dietz. Thing is, I can’t risk losing you out there. That’s why I’ve already deployed a fire team of Marines to find your son. They left an hour ago.”

Charlize slowly uncrossed her arms, unable to hide her shock. Her burned cheeks warmed, but she wasn’t sure if she felt angry at Diego for routing her plan or embarrassed that she’d been so easy to outmaneuver.

“Don’t worry,” Diego said. “I sent one of our best teams.”

She shook his hand with her good hand. What else could she do?

“Thank you, sir. I’m more than grateful for what you have done and I would be honored to serve as Secretary of Defense.”

A knock on the hatch sounded, and Lieutenant Marco stepped inside.

“You really like to interrupt meetings, don’t you?” Diego asked.

“I’m sorry, sir, but I have an urgent message for Senator Montgomery.”

Charlize felt her heart stutter. Did she have news about Ty?

“Go ahead,” Charlize said, bracing herself for the worst.

“Senator, we just received a transmission over the shortwave from Cheyenne Mountain. A senior airman named Jeff Main has been trying to reach you. It’s about your brother.”

Charlize was shaking now, but she didn’t care anymore if President Diego thought she was weak. “For the love of God, just tell me,” she said.

“Major Sardetti is alive, ma’am,” Marco said with a smile. “He’s on the comms right now, asking to speak to you.”

***

“I can’t believe it!” cracked a voice from the speakers of the shortwave radio. Colton turned away from Jake’s body to listen.

Nathan smiled and pushed the receiver to his lips. “It’s so good to hear your voice, Charlize! I feared the worst when I heard about D.C.”

A cross between a whimper and a laugh flowed from the speakers. “Me too. I’m glad we were both wrong.”

“Sardettis are hard to kill,” Nathan said.

Colton left Nathan to his joyful reunion and tucked his jacket over Jake’s body. He couldn’t bear the thought of telling Jake’s wife and daughters about this. They would be devastated.

“I’m sorry, brother. I’ll look after your family.”

Colton pushed himself up and joined Sandra, Allie, and Raven against the fence on the lookout. They were huddled together, wrapped in Raven’s coat and listening to Nathan’s conversation with amused looks on their faces. Creek was sitting beside them, tail wagging like nothing had happened.

Colton patted the dog on the head. “Everybody okay?”

Raven nodded. “Thank you for helping me find them.”

Colton felt like he should say something in return, but he couldn’t find the right words. His heart was all torn up. Estes Park had lost a legend and one of the kindest souls Colton had ever known. He turned back to Nathan. He and his sister had turned serious over the radio.

“Empire is right in the radiation zone,” Charlize was saying. “President Diego has deployed a team of Marines to find Ty.”

Nathan held the receiver for a moment before responding. “I was going to head out there in a few hours. I’ve got a CBRN suit and a VW van.”

“No,” Charlize said firmly. “Stay put for now. I’ll send someone to get you. Things are bad out there. The radiation isn’t the only threat. There are reports of gangs forming on the highways all over the country.”

“When should I expect evac?” Nathan asked.

“I’ll have the Marines pick you up after they find Ty. Check this frequency again this time tomorrow.”

Nathan lowered the receiver and looked at Colton before bringing it back to his lips.

“Can you tell me where you are right now?”

“I can’t say, but it’s a safe place. The entire grid wasn’t knocked out by the EMP attack after all. The military is going to start setting up survival centers across the country for refugees.”

The news was reassuring. Maybe Estes Park would get help eventually, but Colton knew it was a long way off. Florida might as well have been the moon without a way to get there safely.

“Okay, I’ll check back with you this time tomorrow, Nathan.”

“Roger that, Senator.”

“Madam Secretary, actually.”

Nathan spluttered in shock. “Come again? I didn’t catch your last.”

“I’ve been promoted to Secretary of Defense.”

Nathan smiled. “I’m proud of you. Our country has never needed you more.”

“The country needs you, too, Major.”

“I’ll talk to you tomorrow. I love you, Charlize.”

“I love you, too, Nathan.”

He turned off the shortwave and walked over to Colton and Raven’s family.

“Well there’s some good news, but sounds like things are bad out there,” Nathan said.

Colton nodded grimly. “Don’t know what I’m going to do without Jake.”

“He was a good man,” Raven said. “A better man than me.”

“Better than me, too,” Colton said. He jerked his chin at Raven and Nathan, signaling them to meet him at the guardrail away from Sandra and Allie. All three men walked over and stood at the barrier. Creek limped over and sat next to Raven’s feet, looking out over the valley.

It was the first time Colton really had a chance to see the beauty of Rocky Mountain National Park that day. An armada of clouds drifted across the horizon, coasting just above a fortress of rocks and an ocean of pine trees. Fall River snaked through the lush landscape.

He gazed out at the vista, wishing for a moment that he could just stay here and never move again. It seemed so peaceful, but below, in his town, he knew things were going to get much worse. The acts of violence they had witnessed over the past several days were just the beginning.

“I wish you were staying, Nathan,” Colton said. “Your sister was right; the country needs good men like you, but so do we. I just lost one of the best.”

“I’m sorry, Chief, but I have to go.”

“I know,” Colton said. “I don’t blame you for wanting to be with your family. That’s the most important thing at the end of the day.”

Raven nodded. “I don’t know how to thank you for saving mine,” he said.

“Just stay out of trouble for a while,” Colton said. “I’m going to have my hands full just keeping this town from boiling over.”

“Hey, Chief,” Raven said, his voice uncharacteristically hesitant. “I could maybe lend a hand. I owe you one.”

Colton studied his face for any sign of a joke, but Raven looked more serious than he had ever seen him. “Why would you want to work with me again? I arrested you.”

“Twice,” Sandra said.

Colton almost smiled. He looked back at Sandra and Allie. They were watching the three men, looking to them for reassurance and guidance. Just like Kelly and Risa and everyone else would be when Colton returned to town.

Raven squared his shoulders. “There’s something I want to tell you all. Then maybe you can decide if you want my help or if you’d rather put a bullet in my skull.”

Sandra gave him a sharp look. “That’s not funny, Raven.”

“I’m not joking. I never told anyone this because technically it’s treason to talk about the mission, but I guess that all doesn’t matter much anymore,” he said, looking out over the valley.

For a moment he seemed lost in the view, then he turned and said, “Eighteen months ago I was sent on a mission with my recon team into North Korean territory to rescue two American girls. One of them was the granddaughter of Senator Mack Sarcone. We got them out, but at a cost. I lost

my best friend in the Corps, and the Gunny shot the defector who'd been our guide—executed him right in front of me. What I saw happen there had me questioning a lot of things."

Raven took a deep breath, his eyes glistening, "I think maybe this—all of this—is because of me. If we hadn't gone on that raid, maybe the North Koreans wouldn't have bombed us to hell. I'm so, so sorry."

Sandra wrapped her arms around his shoulders. "It wasn't your fault," she said.

"Your sister is right," Nathan added. "What happened has nothing to do with what you did over there, Raven."

Colton had never asked Raven about his service abroad, but now his actions back at home made more sense. The man wasn't a troublemaker; he was just very troubled from things he had seen and done. War could break men, even the best.

Everyone had their own demons, even Colton.

"I've always made my own path," Raven continued, finding Colton's gaze again. His eyes were bright but steady. "But that hasn't really worked out so well for me. It made me a damn fine hunter and tracker—hell, it made me a good Marine in some ways—but I screwed everything else up along the way. I think that I might have a chance to do some good now."

Colton had spent eighteen months learning to distrust Raven, but maybe he should have spent that time getting to know him instead. Maybe he should have simply asked him why he did the things he did. It was time to work together and bury the past.

"Brown Feather and his brother may be dead, but we've got a lot to do to protect our town from other threats in the coming months and years, Raven."

"I know," Raven replied, shaking Colton's hand. "Something tells me the battle to save Estes Park has just begun."

—End of Book 1—

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Trackers 2: The Hunted

TRACKERS 2

~

THE HUNTED

TRACKERS 2

THE HUNTED

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

NICHOLAS SANSBURY SMITH

For my Dad, relentless in his pursuit and fight for a better world.

“Humankind has not woven the web of life. We are but one thread within it. Whatever we do to the web, we do to ourselves. All things are bound together. All things connect.”

—Chief Seattle, 1854

— Prologue —

Dr. Martha Kohler staggered down Highway 7, somewhere south of Rocky Mountain National Park, in a radiation suit she had constructed out of garbage bags. A pair of ski goggles and a scarf shielded her face, but she was all too aware that they wouldn't be enough to block the radiation drizzling from the skies.

A nuclear blast had almost blinded her three nights ago, and the fireball had set fire to the surrounding forests. All around her were views of the apocalypse. Blackened evergreen trees swayed in the wind to the northeast, carrying the scent of burning pine needles. Flames engulfed an entire forest to the southwest, filling the sky with a wall of black smoke that choked out the sun.

When her car stalled out on the road, she'd been stranded. The National Guard soldiers had told her to stay put and wait for help. After two days, she decided to take action. Waiting meant dying. Running at least gave her a chance to reach help before it was too late.

Martha's heart had been firing out of control since she had left her car. As a doctor, she knew what irradiation did to a human body. She had done everything she could to keep the radioactive material off her skin, but there was little she could do to stop breathing it into her lungs. A flimsy cotton scarf was no replacement for a CBRN suit.

The deep rattle of a cough rose in her throat. The sound seemed to echo in the quiet afternoon. She licked her cracked lips, desperate for a drink of water. A stream snaked along the left side of the road, but drinking the water would be a death sentence.

She slogged along, searching for supplies or someone to help her. She hadn't seen another living person for three hours. Before that, a man had run from her, screaming nonsense about an alien invasion. Delirium was another

sign of radiation sickness. For now, Martha's mind seemed whole—but if it wasn't, would she even know?

She'd seen plenty of bodies on the road over the past few days. Another victim lay ahead. The elderly man was on his back, hands twisted like a praying mantis. A second corpse, rigid from rigor mortis, lay a few feet from the man. The gray-haired woman was facing him, curled up in a fetal position. They had died within reach of one another.

At least they were together, Martha thought. She'd lost her husband to a heart attack ten years ago. Regrets surfaced in her mind. They always found a way of coming to a head when disaster struck, things she would have said or done differently during their marriage.

She sighed and pressed onward, even though stars were bursting before her vision. The journey was taking its toll, and she was only halfway to Denver. The soldiers had said to head that way to avoid radiation, but the bodies here told her she was still in the middle of the dead zone.

Reaching out, she steadied herself on the side of a mini-van. Over the howl of the wind came a faint, scratchy sound like someone was trying to clear their throat. Something moved inside the van. Martha peered inside the back window. Two small figures were huddled together in the back seat. A body was slumped against the steering wheel, and judging by the pale, blistered skin on its exposed arm, the kids were probably orphans.

She had been careful to avoid other people on the road. If anyone found out she possessed potassium iodide pills, which she carried in her medical bag, they would surely take them from her, maybe even hurt her to get them. But these kids weren't going to hurt anyone, and she couldn't just leave them here to die.

She scanned the road again. There was motion down the highway to the east, directly under a bridge. Several clusters of bodies rested beneath the overpass. Loose clothing rippled in the wind, but there was no sign of anything or anyone alive that way.

Satisfied, she opened the van door. The two kids reared back from her, their curly brown hair a disheveled mess.

"Don't hurt us," the boy sniffled.

Martha pulled down her scarf and pushed up her goggles so they could see her eyes. She could only imagine how terrifying she probably looked with the garbage bags covering most of her body. From a child's eyes, she probably looked like an alien.

She summoned the same calm voice she used with kids at the beginning of a pediatric visit. “I’m not going to hurt you. I’m here to help.”

“Can you help our papa?” the girl asked.

“Your father is sleeping,” Martha lied. She pulled a piece of duct tape away from her waist and reached to retrieve the bottle of pills from her pocket.

“I’m Doctor Martha Kohler, and I’m going to help you both feel better, okay?”

They just stared back.

“What are your names?” Martha asked.

The girl started sobbing, tears streaking down her red skin. The boy scratched at a sore on his cheek.

Martha unscrewed the lid and placed two pills in the palm of her glove. She managed a smile with her cracked, dry lips. “I want you two to take these. Okay? It will make you feel better.”

“Papa said to never take candy from a stranger,” the boy said. He rubbed at his bloodshot eyes and then squinted at her like he was looking into the sun.

“I’m a doctor, and this isn’t candy,” Martha said. “Didn’t your parents teach you to listen to doctors?”

The girl sniffled and dragged her sleeve across her nose while the boy slowly nodded.

“It’s okay, I promise,” Martha said, holding out the pills. “These will make you feel better.”

“Do you have any water?” asked the girl. “I’m really thirsty.”

Martha shook her head and held out her palm. She could see these kids had already been exposed to the radiation for a period of time. The pills helped block radioactive iodine from being absorbed by the thyroid gland, but they wouldn’t reverse what had already been absorbed. They needed water, and they needed protection from the radiation. She might be able to cut the tarp down and tape it around them, but it wasn’t an ideal solution.

First, though, she needed to get the children to trust her. She leaned in and mustered up a warm smile.

“How about we play a game?” she suggested. “Do you want to play a game?”

The boy tilted his head, his blue eyes brightening slightly.

“I do,” the girl said.

“No, Emma. Papa said we have to stay here until help comes.”

“I’m the help your father was talking about. Now, I know your name is Emma. What’s your name?” Martha said, looking at the boy.

“Micah,” he said shyly. His eyes flitted to the front seat. “Papa isn’t sleeping, is he?”

“I need you to take these pills,” she said, “and then we can play a game.”

The boy and girl both reached out and plucked them from her glove. Doubtfully, they examined the pills and then swallowed them with difficulty.

“Can I see that tarp?” Martha asked. “I need it to make you suits like mine to protect your skin.”

Micah hesitated but then pulled the plastic away. A fetid stench rolled out, confirming her fears. The kids were already sick. The initial symptoms of radiation poisoning were vomiting and diarrhea. Dehydration wouldn’t help matters. She needed to get these children clean water and medical care immediately.

“Come here,” she said, holding out her hand.

Emma and Micah scooted across the back seat, and Martha helped them both onto the road. It took her several minutes to carve up the tarp with her multi-tool, but when she was done she had enough pieces to wrap the children in makeshift suits.

“Hold up your arms,” Martha said.

The kids did as ordered, and she taped the plastic around them. Emma shivered in the wind, gooseflesh prickling over her arms.

“You ready?” Martha asked the kids.

They both nodded. She grabbed them each by the hand and guided them toward the stalled vehicles.

“Bye, Papa,” Emma said.

Micah was silent, but he looked over his shoulder several times as they walked away. Martha had to gently tug his hand to keep him moving.

“I’m sorry about your father, but he would want you to be safe,” she said.

A sniffle sounded behind her. She wasn’t sure if it was Micah or Emma.

If they started crying, they’d become even more dehydrated. Water wasn’t the only thing on her mind. She still needed to find a way to cover the children’s faces. She turned her attention to a Toyota Prius ahead, hurrying over with the kids in tow. A few of her friends drove Priuses, and all of them were the prepared type.

“Stay right here,” she said.

Micah and Emma remained at the bumper while Martha checked the front

of the car. She opened the door and did a quick sweep of the dash and glove compartment. An empty bottle of raspberry tea was stuffed in the cup holder on the door. She climbed into the backseat and moved a blanket aside to reveal a pair of tennis shoes and a sweatshirt. There was a gym bag on the floor. She rifled through the contents and pulled out a nearly full water bottle.

For a moment, she just stared at the bottle. Then a natural smile formed on her face for the first time in days. She opened the back door, anxious to show the children. Smoke drifted across the road to the west. She clutched the bottle against her chest. The forest fire was shifting, but it wasn't the flames she was worried about—it was the smoke. She couldn't see through the black cloud creeping up on them.

Emma and Micah reached up for the bottle.

"Don't drink it all at once," Martha said.

Emma greedily gulped down the water anyway, a trail bleeding down her chin.

"Not all at once," Martha repeated.

"Sorry," Emma said. She handed it to her brother. He took several gulps and then handed it to Martha. She took a slow slug, licked her lips, and sealed the container. Then she placed it inside her suit, tucking it into her waistband.

Martha guided them onward, clutching Emma and Micah's hands in the shifting winds. There were more bodies crumpled on the other side of the bridge ahead. There was no way to shield the children from the corpses, but nothing could be worse than watching their father die of radiation poisoning.

A faint whistling sounded over the gusting wind. It seemed to come and go as they walked. She listened for the sound again, catching it a moment later. Martha craned her neck to search for the source, but everything was shrouded in smoke. She turned back to the vehicles ahead. There were only two more before the bridge—a black sports car and a passenger van.

Halfway to the car, the rusty rattle of a motor vehicle rang out, stopping her mid-stride. The noise grew louder, clinking and clanking, and the cough of an engine joined the din. She pivoted back to the cloud of smoke. To the northeast, an army of skeletal trees jutted out of the hills like candles on a chocolate birthday cake. The frontage road twisting through the area was clear, with no sign of movement down the dirt path.

Was she hearing things? Was this the beginning of delirium?

She glanced down at the children and asked, "Do you hear that sound?"

They both nodded. "Sounds like a car," Micah said.

Martha turned around just as a pickup truck broke through the wall of smoke. Several men wearing green CBRN suits stood in the bed of the vehicle. They were the same type of suits the National Guard men had been wearing.

Her instincts told her something was off. These men weren't in a Humvee like those other soldiers.

Martha pulled the kids toward the black sports car and ducked behind the bumper. The pickup truck weaved around stalled cars, the tires screeching. Whoever these guys were, they were in a hurry.

"Are they going to help us?" Micah asked. He stood and looked around the car.

Martha pulled gently on his arm. "Be quiet," she whispered.

The truck slowed, and Martha strained to hear their conversation over the clatter of the engine.

"Where'd you see those people?" one of the men asked, his voice distorted by his mask.

"Over there."

Martha peeked around the bumper. The truck had slowed to a crawl. She glanced back over at the kids and said, "Get under the car and don't come out until I tell you. Okay?"

The children stared back at her.

"Come on," Martha said. "Doctor's orders."

She helped them crawl under the vehicle, and when they were safely hidden, she darted toward the van.

"There!" shouted a voice.

Martha halted and turned toward the pickup, praying her gut was wrong about these men. She held up her hands as the truck came to a stop. The passenger door opened and a soldier hopped out. The men in the bed angled assault rifles at Martha, forcing her throbbing heart into her throat. She squinted to see their features, but their faces were mostly obscured by their helmets.

"Stay where you are," one of the riflemen said.

The passenger checked the surrounding area as he strode toward her with a hand on the grip of a holstered pistol. She could see his eyes behind his visor. They were crystal blue and focused on her.

"You're the first person we've seen on the roads for a while," he said calmly. "That means you're either really stupid, or really smart for staying

alive out here.”

Martha kept her hands in the air and didn’t reply.

“Not saying much, are you?” He took a few steps closer—so close she could see a snake-like scar on his forehead. It looked like someone had carved the squiggly design on purpose.

He glanced back at his men, motioning for them to lower their rifles. Coughing sounded from the back of the truck, and several small faces covered with gas masks peered around the side. The children were all wearing protective suits covered in ash.

Martha relaxed slightly, but she kept her hands up. The old pickup wasn’t a military vehicle, but maybe these men weren’t bad after all if they were trying to help those kids.

“Looks like you got a pretty fancy suit on,” the man said with a chuckle. He gave her the elevator eyes treatment, up and down, to look at the garbage bags covering her body. “I’m willing to guess that you know a thing or two about fallout. Am I right?”

Martha decided to risk answering him. “I’m a doctor, and this isn’t fallout per se. That only really happens when a nuclear warhead detonates on the ground. The radiation from an air detonation is actually more dangerous in the short term than fallout.”

The man turned to look at the other soldiers. “Well damn, she does speak—and she’s smart, too!”

“What unit are you with?” she asked.

The man cocked a bushy gray brow. “Unit?”

“I assumed you’re a soldier. That CBRN suit is military issue, isn’t it?”

“You are a *very* smart lady.” He turned back to the truck and shouted, “Boys, what unit are we with?”

The men in the back of the truck all yelled, “Sons of Liberty!”

Martha had never heard of that one, but she didn’t know much about the military. Maybe that was some sort of team call sign or something.

“You out here by yourself?” the man asked.

“Yes,” she replied a bit too quickly.

“Carson, didn’t you say you saw three people near the bridge?”

One of the men in the back of the truck nodded. “Her and what looked like a couple of kids.”

The man in front of Martha stepped closer. That’s when she noticed the holes patched with duct tape on the breast of his suit. The area was stained

with something dark—something that looked a lot like blood. A chill spiked through her sweaty body.

“Now why would you want to lie to me? Do I strike you as someone that would hurt a kid?” he asked her.

Martha remained silent and took a step back. Were those bullet holes in the front of his suit?

His demeanor suddenly changed. “Now you’re just making me mad,” he growled. He closed the distance between them and stopped directly in front of her, hot breath hitting the inside of his visor.

“I was thinking about giving you a lift out of here, but you’re testing my patience, and we already have a doctor back at our base.”

“I’m sorry,” Martha said, her mind racing. “I’ve seen some bad people on the road. Never know who you can trust, right?”

The man grinned again. “Damn right.”

“So you’ll give us a ride somewhere safe?” she asked.

“Sure, you and those kids. Just tell me where they are.”

Martha moved to get a better look at the children in the back of the truck and the riflemen standing in the bed. She couldn’t see their faces clearly because of their masks and visors, but she did notice other details on the truck from this angle; the number 88 stenciled on the passenger door, the double lightning bolt of the SS symbol made from strips of duct tape, an armband with a crudely painted eagle clutching a Swastika. These men weren’t soldiers—they were some sort of white supremacist gang.

“Well? You going to get them kids or what?” the man in front of her asked.

“Okay,” she said. “I’ll go get them and come right back.”

“Not a chance, lady. I’ll send one of my men with you.” He turned to wave at the truck. “Carson, get your ass down here.”

As soon as the man turned, Martha took off running. If they had killed soldiers for those suits, then there was no telling what they would do to the kids. Martha couldn’t help the children already in the truck, but maybe she could lead the men away from Micah and Emma.

“Stop!” shouted the leader, anger rising in his voice.

She jumped into the ditch and made a run for the fort of blackened trees at the bottom of a nearby hill. A gunshot rang out, the crack shattering the quiet of the afternoon. Adolescent screams followed. Martha looked over her shoulder to see a boy in a wheelchair in the back of the pickup truck. He was

shouting at the so-called Sons of Liberty to stop, but they were ignoring him.

Muzzles flashed, and rounds lanced into the ground next to her. The trees were still a hundred feet away. She wasn't going to make it.

Martha began to raise her hands in surrender when a bullet slammed into her shoulder, forcing her to the ground so violently that it knocked the air from her lungs. She hit the dirt hard, red flashing across her vision.

The injury was bad; she knew it right away by the lack of pain. The helpless feeling of being hurt without knowing how badly filled her with dread. She gasped for air and slowly rolled to her left side. The air hissing out of her chest meant she might have a punctured lung.

She knew then the wound wasn't survivable.

If the bullet had hit an artery, she'd be dead in minutes. Even if it hadn't, she'd be dead long before any help arrived.

"Why'd you have to go and do that, lady?"

Martha blinked away the tears welling in her eyes and glared at the leader, who was towering over her.

"I told them not to shoot you, but I guess one of them missed. Confidentially, I'm starting to think my men are enjoying this whole end of the world thing."

Micah and Emma started yelling, their thin, high voices carrying on the chill wind.

"What…" Martha wheezed. "What are you going to do with them?"

"Don't worry, I'm not going to hurt them. They're *far* too valuable. The government will pay a pretty penny to get those kids back. Some of 'em are cripples, but even the defective ones are probably worth something."

He stood and clucked his tongue like he was lecturing a child. "We got to get out of here before those fires catch up. You want a bullet in the head? It's all I can do for you now."

"No," she moaned, shaking her head from side to side. "Please, no."

He shrugged. "Your choice."

She watched the man slowly walk back down the slope to the road, leaving her there to die alone as the flames to the west slowly crept toward her.

— 1 —

Two Days Later

Estes Park Police Chief Marcus Colton stood in the chilly morning wind at the barricade blocking Highway 7. Several volunteers flanked him, all of them looking out over the highway in silence. They now knew why there weren't any refugees and stranded tourists staggering up the road.

They were all dead.

The radiation zone started about thirty miles to the south, and things were worse out there than anyone had predicted. Five days had passed since the North Korean attack. In that short time, several residents of Estes Park had lost their lives to the Tankala brothers. The police department, with the help of Major Nathan Sardetti and Sam 'Raven' Spears, had dealt with the serial killers, but justice had come at a high cost for the town of Estes Park, Colorado.

Colton had lost his best friend, Captain Jake Englewood, and Officer Rick Nelson was in the intensive care unit at the Estes Park Medical Center. He'd been trying to stop three junkies from robbing a grocery store pharmacy and gotten a brick to his skull for it. Detective Lindsey Plymouth and Raven Spears were tracking the assailants down while Colton waited at the roadblock for an update from Patrol Sergeant Don Aragon.

An hour earlier, Colton had sent Don south along Highway 7 in Raven's Jeep wearing a CBRN suit to scope out the area. He hadn't checked in, and Colton was growing impatient.

He pushed the radio to his lips and said, "Don, do you copy? Over."

There was a long pause, followed by static, and finally Don's Western drawl. "Lots of interference, but I can read you, Chief."

"You got a SITREP?" Colton asked. "Any survivors?"

“Negative, Chief. Everyone out here is dead.”

Colton sucked on his cigarette, careful not to waste any of the precious tobacco. His hand was shaking when he pulled it away—a combination of PTSD, nerves, and early-onset arthritis. Colton cursed under his breath. He’d been looking forward to retiring in a few years, spending more time with his family. Instead, he was trying to hold the town together while the rest of the country fell apart.

“All right, head out just a bit farther and then report back,” Colton said. He clipped the walkie-talkie back on his duty belt and gave a nod to Rex Stone. Colton had found the Stones’ missing daughter, Melissa, murdered just before the EMP attack. Rex stood now in the bed of a pickup truck with a Springfield bolt-action rifle trained on the road.

“Didn’t find anyone?” Rex asked in a gruff voice, his eyes fixed straight ahead. Five days ago, he’d been an easy-going, soft-spoken man. The initial shock of losing his daughter seemed to be turning to anger—an anger without a target. It was a dangerous combination. Colton wasn’t so sure putting Rex to work was a good idea, but his old friend had insisted.

Colton shook his head and walked to the shoulder of the road to wait for Don. The lack of refugees at least solved the growing dispute between Colton and his new second-in-command about whether to let more people into town.

Twenty-four hours earlier, not long after Colton had returned from Prospect Mountain with Jake’s body, he had instructed his officers and armed volunteers to continue turning away refugees unless they possessed a specific skill that could benefit the town. People like doctors, engineers, mechanics, and police officers were highly needed. But since the storms had dumped radiation over southern and central Colorado, there hadn’t been anyone to turn away, and Colton was beginning to wonder if there was anyone still out there.

He studied the snow-brushed mountains as they waited. Winter was near, and he wasn’t sure he could get Estes Park through the cold without Jake. Even with the unexpected help of Raven, Colton didn’t have enough manpower to get through the challenges Estes Park would face in the next few months.

First on Colton’s list was to find the bastards that had put one of his officers in a coma. Raven and Lindsey were already working on that, but even if they did catch those responsible, there wasn’t room in the small Estes Park jail to hold them. Theo, the thug that had started a shootout at Raven’s

house, was already locked up, along with several citizens who'd been caught looting.

"Got a vehicle inbound!" Rex shouted.

Colton looked up from his cigarette to scan the highway for Raven's Jeep. Instead, the growl of a diesel engine echoed off the bluffs. He reached for the grip of his Single Action Army Revolver, but he kept it holstered when he saw it was Lindsey driving Jake's red 1952 Chevy pickup. Raven sat in the passenger seat, and Nathan was in the bed with a rucksack over his shoulders.

Colton took one last drag and stomped the butt out before walking down the road to meet the truck. Lindsey pulled onto the shoulder and waved.

"Mornin', Chief," she said.

Raven hopped out and went to the lift gate to let his dog out and help Nathan down. The new K9 unit and the battered pilot walked over, Creek's tail wagging as he trotted next to the men. Nathan's broken arm was in a cast, and his skin was covered in lacerations and bruises. He and Raven had both taken a hell of a beating on Prospect Mountain in the battle that had left Brown Feather and Turtle Tankala, as well as Jake, dead.

"Major, you look like you got run over by a car, then a bus, then a train," Colton said. "When are those Marines coming to get you? I thought Secretary Montgomery was sending them out to pick you up."

Nathan shrugged. Even that seemed to hurt. He winced and looked out over the road. "I haven't heard anything, but they must still be looking for my nephew. I thought I might get a better signal out of the valley, just in case my sister tries to reach me."

Colton still couldn't believe the pilot was the brother of the Secretary of Defense. He also had a bad feeling that the Marines searching for Nathan's nephew weren't going to find anyone alive at the Easterseals camp in Empire, Colorado.

Lindsey pulled off a pair of aviator sunglasses and met Colton's gaze. The past five days had etched new lines around her eyes.

"Any luck?" he asked.

"We canvassed several folks on Black Canyon Drive, including the Arnettes," she said. "They think they saw the suspects running across Devils Gulch Road yesterday."

"You think they could be hiding out in a house there?" Colton asked.

"That's my guess," Lindsey said.

Raven ambled over to them. A bandage masked the gash on his cheek and

bags hung below his dark eyes, but despite his injuries he seemed in high spirits. Colton snorted. Give Raven something to chase and he'd be happy in hell itself.

"Lots of people live up that way, Chief," Raven said. "They could be anywhere. My suggestion would be to send a message to folks up there to keep an eye out and send word if they see anything."

"Can't risk it," Colton replied. "Remember, our suspects are addicts, and when their pills run out, they will be looking for a new source. No telling what they'll do to get more."

"The Chief is right," Nathan added. "You need to find them before they hurt someone else."

"What do you want us to do, Chief?" Lindsey asked. Her shoulder-length red hair fluttered in the wind. She was in her early twenties—too young, it seemed to Colton, to experience the horror of the past several days. He'd fought alongside men and women her age or even younger in Afghanistan. It changed them. Hell, it had changed him, too.

"Take Creek and see if he can pick up a scent. Maybe we can narrow down their location. If you locate our suspects, I want to know before you move in," Colton said.

Lindsey nodded, and Raven touched the bill of his baseball cap.

"Good luck," Colton said. He went to pat Creek, but the dog was already darting after Raven. The Akita might be designated as a K9 unit, but he was loyal to one man and one man only.

Colton was reaching for another cigarette when his radio crackled.

"Chief, you copy?"

Colton plucked the radio off his duty belt and brought it to his lips. "Go ahead."

"I found a survivor," Don heaved. "A woman. She's in bad shape, sir. Looks like—" Static crackled over his voice.

"Come again," Colton said. "You're breaking up."

"She's—" Static. "Shot."

The word sent a chill through Colton. He lowered the radio and pivoted back to the Chevy.

"Hold up, Lindsey!" he said. "Move the barrier. I'm heading out, too."

Rex and the other men holding the road stared at him without moving.

"Do it," Colton said.

Several of the men began shifting the concrete blocks.

“You sure that’s a good idea?” Raven asked.

“Don found a survivor on the road. Sounds like she’s been shot,” Colton said. “We’re going to pick her up.”

“Without suits?” Lindsey asked, leaning out of the truck’s window.

Colton cursed. He had forgotten about the radiation. He raised the radio back to his lips.

“Don, can you get that woman back to town on your own?”

White noise crackled from the speakers, a long delay before the reply. Don spoke in a low voice as if he didn’t want to be overheard.

“Sir, I don’t think she’s going to make it. Even if I get her back to the hospital, we’re already low on medical supplies. We have to look after our own.”

Colton almost cursed a second time. He had set a dangerous precedent by ordering his officers to turn people away. But never once had he told any of them to abandon someone who needed medical attention.

What would Jake have done?

That answer was an easy one. Colton knew his best friend would have carried the wounded stranger on his back, if need be.

Colton clicked the radio. “We’re not in the business of leaving people out there to die. Bring that woman back to town.”

“But sir, I thought we agreed—”

“That’s an order.”

“All due respect, but this is a waste of time and resources,” Don said.

Everyone on the road was staring at Colton now, the tension palpable around him. Some of the volunteers probably agreed with Don, but this wasn’t a democracy. Colton called the shots, and he had to show everyone that he was still in charge of Estes Park.

He pressed the radio button again and said, “Do your job, Sergeant!”

There was no response, just the buzz of static.

“Good call, Chief,” Nathan said. “That guy is a piece of work. You better watch your back around him.”

“Get going,” Colton said. “I’ll handle this. You find those junkies. I want them locked up by nightfall.”

“Okay, Chief,” Lindsey said.

Colton folded his arms across his chest and looked back out over the mountains, recalling the night of the attack when he and Raven had found Melissa Stone’s body. He’d known when the jets crashed and the lights went

out that it was the start of something larger, but he'd had no idea that in five short days he would be the one deciding who lived and who died. With a heavy sigh, he jammed another cigarette in his mouth and went back to work.

***

Ty Montgomery coughed into the gas mask strapped to his face. The world smelled like burning cedar and plastic. His hands were zip-tied to the armrests of his wheelchair. There was no use in fighting the restraints. Even if he could slip out of them, there was nowhere to go. He was trapped with the other kids in the back of a pickup truck. There were four of them from the camp, all around his age, plus the new kids, Micah and Emma.

This was the second time they had been moved in the past two days. They had spent last night in a warehouse. A couple of the campers were autistic, and the constant chaos was hard on them, but the men didn't care. They just shouted and pushed the kids around.

Ty's best friend at camp, Alex, was right to have hidden when the soldiers came. If Ty had been able to, he would have done the same thing, but he had been captured along with these other kids, and the men were treating them like animals.

Sometimes, it seemed like this was all a bad dream. Except that it smelled too nasty and hurt too much to be a dream. He tried again to process the events of the past five days. First the massive explosion that had sounded like a volcano erupting. Then the fires. His friends had all been taken to different locations at the camp where they had taken shelter from something called radiation. After the rain had stopped, the Sons of Liberty soldiers had shown up with guns. Then they shot Mr. Barton and Mr. Gonzalez. That's when Alex had limped away and hid.

Ty shivered at the memory. Mr. Barton and Mr. Gonzalez had been his friends. He just hoped that Alex was okay, but deep down, Ty had a bad feeling that he wasn't. Alex had a minor form of cerebral palsy, and Ty was worried he wouldn't be able to take care of himself. He wished he'd gotten to say goodbye.

"Up there!" shouted a muffled voice.

The truck slowed and the soldiers all stood in the bed of the truck. Most of them didn't talk much around him and the other kids. The only nice one was

a young man with a pimply face named Tommy. His arms and neck were covered in tattoos like the others, but he never shouted.

Ty listened whenever the men did talk where he could hear them. They called themselves the Sons of Liberty, and their leader was the General. He had a smooth voice and squiggly scar on his head, like Harry Potter. The General kept saying the time had come to take back the country from the corrupt government and restore it to what it was meant to be back when the nation was founded. The other men always cheered.

Ty didn't understand. His mom was in the government, and she was brave and kind. Why did they want to take it back from people like her?

These men weren't like any soldiers Ty had ever met. They certainly weren't like his Uncle Nathan or his mom. These men all wore funny looking space suits, and instead of helping people, they kidnapped children and shot that old lady in the back.

She wasn't the first person they had killed along the road.

A jolt rocked the truck, and Ty grabbed the armrests of his wheelchair. His blindfold slipped down enough that he could see Tommy and another man named Carson standing to his left.

"Pull off," Carson ordered. He patted the roof of the cab.

The pickup crawled to a stop, and Carson jumped out onto the road. Tommy remained behind.

"It's okay," he said to the kids. "We're just stopping for a few minutes."

The muffled voices of the other soldiers sounded from all directions. They piled out of the vehicles in front of the convoy. Ty bowed his head to see better over his blindfold.

On the shoulder of the road, under a canopy of evergreens, stood a man and woman. They were both wearing backpacks stuffed with camping gear. The man waved to the Sons of Liberty, and a beaming smile spread across his face.

"You guys sure are a sight for sore eyes. My girlfriend and I were starting to think we were the last people on Earth!"

"We haven't seen anyone for over a day," the woman said. She wrapped her arms around her chest, shivering.

Ty wanted to tell them to run, but it wouldn't do any good. They wouldn't make it far.

Two of the other soldiers, Joshua and Bernie, strode toward the couple. They were both thickly built with bushy beards, shaved heads, and tattoos.

They approached with their guns lowered toward the ground. The General joined them a moment later.

“Where are you two headed?” the General asked. Despite the breathing apparatus he wore, Ty could still clearly hear his smooth voice, like the narrator of a show on the Discovery Channel.

The young man looked to the west. “We’re trying to get away from those fires.”

“You sick?” Joshua asked.

The woman nodded.

“Can’t use ‘em,” the General said casually. He walked back to the truck, leaving Joshua and Bernie in the street.

“What? What do you mean?” the young man said.

“He means you’re fucked,” Joshua said with a laugh. He turned with Bernie and followed the General.

“You can’t just leave us here!” the man said, reaching out. “Please—”

His girlfriend ran past them, grabbing the General by the sleeve before they could stop her. Bernie and Joshua both raised their rifles.

“Get the hell back!” Bernie shouted.

The woman held up her hands. Her boyfriend did the same thing and slowly got in front of her to shield her body with his own.

“Whoa, whoa, we don’t want any trouble,” he said.

The General stood his ground and calmly said, “Give me your backpacks.”

The woman looked at her boyfriend, who nodded back at her. She unslung her pack and handed it to the General, who then tossed it over to Bernie.

“Yours, too,” the General said.

“But this is all we have. How are we supposed—” the young man began to say when the General threw a right hook. A flash of metal glimmered in the sunlight as his fist connected with the man’s jaw. A crack rang out, metal on bone.

The woman let out a scream and dropped next to her injured boyfriend.

The men laughed as the General held up the brass knuckles he liked to wear on his right fist over his glove.

The General crouched in front of the couple and tilted his head.

“People just don’t listen,” he said. “Now, I’m going to ask you one more time to give me your packs.”

The woman helped her injured boyfriend pull off his pack. He let out a moan as she pulled it from his shoulder. The General grabbed the bag and

glanced back at the truck, meeting Ty's gaze for a moment.

"Take note, kids. *This* is how we survive in the new world."

He stood and walked back to the truck, but Joshua remained by the couple. "Hey General, I got an idea. How about we take this lady with us?"

"She's sick," the General replied. "But hey, if you want her, be my guest."

The injured man pushed himself to his feet and stood in front of his girlfriend, one hand clutching his jaw.

"Run, Sarah," he said.

"Stay where you are," Joshua ordered.

The injured man pulled a small knife from a sheath on his belt and held up the blade in a shaky hand. "You'll have to go through me."

"Don't do it," Tommy whispered from behind Ty. "C'mon, man. Just let 'em go."

Joshua let out a bellowing laugh. Instead of shooting the man, Joshua lowered his rifle. Ty let out a sigh of relief.

Tommy looked down at Ty and then tugged the blindfold back over his eyes. The last thing Ty saw was Joshua pulling his own knife.

The woman screamed. Cheering and laughter from the soldiers followed. Then came the grunts and cries of pain from the young man, topped off by his girlfriend screeching in agony. It was over in less than a minute, but it felt more like an eternity to Ty. Tears welled in his eyes. One of them streaked down his filthy cheeks, and he couldn't even lift his hands to wipe it away.

No. Don't you cry. You're stronger than that, he thought.

If his mom were here, she would probably have told him it was okay to cry, but she was in Washington, D.C., working like always. He loved his mom more than anyone in the world, but he was mad at her, too. Why hadn't she come to rescue him?

The sobs from the other kids rose into a wailing cacophony. One of the soldiers told them to shut the hell up. Tommy tried to calm them down in his quiet, nasally voice.

"It's okay," he kept repeating.

A gunshot sounded, followed by two more. The woman stopped screaming.

"I told you not to waste bullets, Bernie. Those two were already as good as dead," the General said. "Were you this stupid in Iraq? If so, I'm surprised you made it back in one piece."

Several of the men chuckled. Ty tried to move his hands, but even if he

could loosen the restraints, he couldn't exactly run away. Frustrated, he tugged harder on the zip-ties.

"Kid, don't do that," Tommy said. "It'll go better for you if you just hold still."

Ty froze. Tommy was right; he needed to be good until his mom came to get him.

"Let's move out!" the General shouted. "We're almost back to the Castle."

The doors to the other vehicles opened, then slammed, and then the convoy rolled forward. His wheelchair jolted, and although he couldn't feel anything below his waist, pain lanced up his spine from the impact. He let out a muffled cry and held onto the armrests.

Tommy tried to keep the wheelchair in place with his firm grip. A few minutes into the drive, his voice spoke softly next to Ty's ear.

"It's okay, kid. Just hang in there," Tommy said.

"Shut up, Tommy. I told you not to talk to those kids," Carson said. "Half of 'em probably can't understand you anyway."

Ty stayed silent and thought about his mom. She would come find him soon. And when she did, the Sons of Liberty were going to pay.

***

Lieutenant Jeff Dupree sat in the belly of a Sikorsky UH-60 Black Hawk helicopter, trying to get his thoughts in order. It was the third chopper he'd been on that day, having been transferred from a Sikorsky SH-60 Seahawk to a Sikorsky HH-60 Pave Hawk, and finally to the Black Hawk that his team was hitching a ride on now. Logistics since the North Korean attack had been a nightmare, and finding working aircraft and equipment had been a huge hassle.

He had a dozen things on his mind, but today he needed to focus on saving the son of the new Secretary of Defense. Knowing his own kids were safe in Key West with his ex-wife helped alleviate some of the stress of the mission, but it hurt to know they were better off with her than him. He wasn't the best dad—he knew that, he accepted it, and he kept saying he would make up for it.

He'd already missed too many birthdays. Once this mission was over, and Ty Montgomery was back in his mother's arms, Dupree was going home. It

might be too late to patch things up with his ex, but maybe there was still time to be a father to his boys.

During his last tour in Iraq, he'd saved the lives of a dozen men. He had expected the airstrike he'd called in to kill him, and it nearly had. His left side, left arm, and part of his chin had scars from the blast. But while his men called him a hero, his wife just called him a lousy deadbeat dad.

The earpiece inside his helmet transmitted a message.

"LT, we're coming up on Cedar Rapids. It's pretty bad down there. That high-rise to the east looks like it swallowed a passenger plane."

Dupree joined the other men as they maneuvered in their tight-fitting CBRN suits for a better look at the city. Tendrils of smoke rose from the skyline. He quickly saw what the pilot was talking about. The wing of a plane stuck out the charred side of the building like a fin on a shark.

"That city is cookin' like bacon in a skillet," said Staff Sergeant Erik Emerson. "Good Lord, this shit is crazy."

"Keep us clear," Dupree ordered. "I don't want any survivors taking potshots at us. Not everyone is going to be happy to see a military helicopter."

"If there *are* any survivors," said Sergeant Dusty McCabe.

Dupree hadn't said it out loud, but he had wondered the same thing during their flyover. The view below was a constant reminder that life in the United States wasn't going to return to normal anytime soon. It was only five days after the North Korean attack, but civilization was falling apart. Riots, looting, violence, and radiation were killing hundreds of Americans by the hour. There was no telling when this place would be habitable again. Dupree scanned the highway snaking through the city. Cars and bodies littered the asphalt.

Corporal Nick Sharps let out a low whistle as the bird turned to the west. "Man, I would not want to be caught outside without one of these." He brushed off the shoulder of his CBRN suit.

"These suits will protect us, right, LT?" asked Emerson.

"Long as you got that shit on tight," replied Sharps before Dupree could answer. "You don't want to end up glowing in the dark. We'd hafta put you in the latrine as a nightlight, brother."

"Cut the crap," Dupree said. "Do you even know what radiation does? Do you shitheads have any idea what those people are going through?"

"Sorry, sir," Emerson said.

Dupree directed his gaze at Sharps. The man had given up a basketball scholarship at Duke to join the Marines after his brother was killed in Iraq. Dupree liked him, but Sharps was a jokester.

"No, sir," Sharps said a beat later.

"That's what I thought. Ever had a bad case of diarrhea?" Dupree said. "Add internal bleeding to that and gangrenous ulcers. You start puking up your guts, literally. Then it's going to be a race to see what kills you first: blood loss or a terminal coma, assuming you don't go crazy from delirium and blow your head off first."

Sharps looked at the floor, and everyone else in the troop hold fell into silence. The mind-rattling thump, thump of the rotors was the only sound as they pulled away from the city, but the quiet didn't last long.

"So those people are screwed?" Sharps asked. He pointed to the interstate cutting through cornfields. It took Dupree a moment to find the ancient boat of a Cadillac weaving through the minefield of abandoned vehicles scattered across the road.

"Wonder where they got a working ride?" McCabe said.

"How about some peace and quiet?" Dupree said. "We got a mission to focus on. Chances are we're going to find a bunch of…" He stopped himself short of saying exactly what he expected to find.

"Bunch of what?" Sharps pressed.

"This is a camp for disabled children, and Command said we need to prepare for the worst," Dupree replied.

Each helmet dipped in acknowledgement. They were all business now, prepared to do what Marines did best—save lives.

If there are any left to save, Dupree thought.

"How are we doing on fuel?" he asked over the comms.

"Good, sir. We'll stop for a drink after we secure our targets," the primary pilot replied.

Dupree grabbed a handhold and stood in front of his men. It never hurt to go over the mission one more time. "Remember, our orders are to locate Ty Montgomery. If the boy is still alive, we will bring him back to the USS *John C. Stennis*. If he's not, we'll at least be able to give his mother some closure."

"Sir, yes, sir," all but one of the men said in unison.

Sharps gave Dupree a cockeyed look.

"You got a problem, Sharps?"

"No, sir."

“Spill it, Sharps,” Dupree ordered.

“Sir, it’s just…” Sharps hesitated for a moment. “What’s so special about this one kid? I mean, we all got families out there. I’m worried about my little bro and sis, you know?”

Dupree had prepared to give Sharps a dressing down, but the kid had a point. If he could, Dupree would have turned the bird around and flown straight to Florida to check on his boys.

“Life’s not fair, Sharps,” Dupree said, his voice raised so that everyone would hear him over the rotors. “This mission comes directly from President Diego. Our job as Marines is not to question orders. It’s to follow them. Got it?”

This time every helmet dipped in acknowledgement.

Dupree turned his attention to the checkered fields below. It was easy to get bored with the view, but it was a welcome and peaceful distraction. Iowa looked like flat, empty land, but it was important to the country’s economy. He came from a long line of farmers, and he knew that land was ideal for growing staple crops. Iowa was number one in corn, soybeans, hogs, eggs, and ethanol. The radiation would kill most everything down there.

Another hour or so passed before they saw the snowy tips of the Rocky Mountains. McCabe gave the order, and in seconds the other men were doing their final gear and weapons checks.

“Remember, your CBRN suit is your lifeline,” Dupree said. “One tear could kill you, so be careful once we hit the ground.”

Dupree did a quick once-over of his own suit and then pulled a magazine from the vest he wore over it. He palmed the mag into the rifle, but didn’t chamber a round. The only time he’d used his weapon stateside was during training, and this sure as hell wasn’t a training mission. Killing enemies in Afghanistan and Iraq was one thing, but he couldn’t imagine firing on an American citizen.

“All right, listen up, everyone,” he said after the men had finished their prep. “We’re splitting up into three teams. Sharps and Emerson, you’re on me. We’ll take the dormitories. McCabe and Rodriguez, head east. Snider and Runge will go west.”

“Target in fifteen minutes,” said one of the pilots.

“Remember, Ty Montgomery can’t walk, so be prepared to carry him out of there. If he’s alive, he’s going to be scared. Try not to give the poor kid a heart attack,” Dupree said. “His mom gave me a password to use: *Falcon*.

You got that? The first word out of your mouth should be ‘Falcon’.”

“What about other survivors?” asked McCabe.

“We will take as many children as we can,” Dupree said.

“Ooh rah,” Sharps said.

A light rain pattered against the aircraft as the pilots flew toward the mountains. Dupree nodded at Crew Chief Joshua Locust. The man hadn’t said a word the entire flight, and he silently opened the troop hold door now, revealing a sea of green trees shifting in the wind. The cornfields were long gone, replaced by a forest of ponderosas blanketing the mountains.

They passed over another road blocked by several abandoned vehicles. Nothing looked out of the ordinary—if you could call the apocalypse ordinary—until he spotted several crumpled bodies in the center of the lane a few hundred feet from an overpass. Something about the way they were sprawled pinged his curiosity. Dupree brought his scope up to his visor just as the voice of the main pilot came over the open channel.

“You seeing this, Lieutenant?”

“Get us closer,” Dupree said.

“Radiation must be really bad here,” Sharps said. “Poor bastards.”

Dupree scanned the road as the pilots hovered. A pool of blood surrounded one of the bodies.

“Damn, you weren’t kidding, LT,” Emerson said. “Those people really bled out!”

He centered his red dot sight on a man lying on his back. As he zoomed in, Dupree saw the bloody hole in the middle of the dead man’s forehead.

Radiation hadn’t killed him after all.

“Get us the hell out of here!” Dupree yelled over the thumping rotors. He lowered his gun to scan the road with his own eyes. There weren’t any hostiles visible, but he couldn’t see into the shadows beneath the bridge.

The pilots craned their helmets from the cockpit. “Come again?” one of them said.

“NOW!” Dupree screamed.

The bird pulled up and away from the road, jarring the Marines in the back. Dupree grabbed a handhold, but remained at the open door. It was possible that the man had shot himself rather than face a slow death from the radiation, but Dupree hadn’t seen a gun anywhere at the scene. And those other bodies, all haloed with blood…no, something bad had happened down there. Something worse than radiation poisoning. He’d seen too many

ambushes in Iraq and Afghanistan to miss the signs. Those people had been executed—and whoever had done it might still be around.

The Black Hawk leveled out, and Dupree found himself reaching for the charging handle of his M4. He chambered a round and put his weapon on safe as he watched the road below. He'd hoped to make it through this mission without having to etch more crossbones on the barrel of his rifle, but it looked like war had followed him home to the United States of America.

— 2 —

“Thanks for the ride, Detective,” Nathan said as he climbed out of the back end of the pickup. Raven had offered him a hand, but the Major was too proud for help.

And a major pain in the ass, Raven thought.

“See ya around,” Lindsey said with a wink and a toss of her red hair.

Raven rolled his eyes. First his sister, now Lindsey? What did all these women see in Nathan Sardetti?

“Good luck out there,” he said to Raven.

Raven reached through the window and shook Nathan’s hand. “Just in case your flight comes before we get back.”

Nathan smiled. At least Raven thought he did; it was hard to tell with how bruised his face was.

Lindsey pulled away from town hall. By early afternoon the sun had poked through the dome of gray clouds, covering the terrain with a golden glow. Raven watched the mountains in silence on the ride out of town. It wasn’t that he didn’t want to talk to Lindsey. Normally, he would have jumped at the chance, even though she was a cop. Red hair, feisty, funny: she was practically his dream woman. They were only about nine years apart, which wasn’t terrible. Or so he kept telling himself. He hadn’t been sure which way she swung, but she had definitely been flirting with Nathan.

Cut it out, Raven. You got assholes to track down.

He snuck another look at her cute profile. How was a man supposed to concentrate with a woman like her around?

“No, I don’t have a boyfriend,” she said suddenly. “And I’m not interested in one, either.”

Raven felt his cheeks warm. “What?”

“For a former Force Recon Marine, I’d have thought you would be a little bit more subtle when checking me out.”

“Lady, I ain’t—”

“Detective. And save it, Sam. You’re not fooling anyone.”

Raven smiled and turned back to look out of the passenger window. At any other time, he would have enjoyed the banter, but today he didn’t feel much like his charming self. It wasn’t because he was exhausted and covered in bruises and cuts from the showdown against Brown Feather. The events of the past five days had changed Raven. The injuries to his body were going to leave scars, and the horror inflicted by the wannabe Water Cannibals would stay with him forever. The stories from his childhood had given him nightmares for years. Seeing them come to life was enough to make him crave a stiff drink.

Too bad he’d quit drinking.

The old Raven would have tried to drown the memories in a bottle, but he didn’t do that anymore. He had a family to protect—hell, thanks to Colton, he now had a whole town to protect. Sandra and Allie, along with the rest of Estes Park, needed him sober. And at the moment, they needed him to track down the junkies who had put Officer Nelson in the hospital.

“You okay over there?” Lindsey asked. “I didn’t hurt your feelings, did I?”

Raven straightened his Seattle Mariners baseball cap and tried to sound convincing. “Lady…” He corrected himself when she glanced in his direction. “I mean, Detective. It takes a whole hell of a lot more than that to hurt my feelings.”

“I’m just giving you shit.” She met his gaze for a moment before looking back to the road. “I heard what you did up on Prospect Mountain, and I’m glad to have you with me. With us, I mean. The Estes Park police force.”

Raven felt his smile return. He wasn’t used to being flattered. Especially by a cop. And never by a pretty cop.

“Creek and I are happy to help.”

“I just wish I’d been up there with y’all. Maybe I could have saved Captain Englewood.”

Raven’s smile folded to a frown. He was sorry for Jake and his family, but the man’s sacrifice had helped save Sandra and Allie. There was no telling what Brown Feather would have done to them if Jake and Nathan hadn’t shown up.

“The Stanley sure is a blessing,” Lindsey said after a long pause.

“Huh?” Raven eyed the red roof of the iconic hotel in the distance. “Oh. Right. How many people are staying there?”

“Hundreds, I think. I’ve lost track. There are over one hundred and fifty rooms, plus there are other buildings on the property, but we still don’t have enough space for everyone. We’ve moved some of the stranded tourists to other hotels and resorts. I can’t imagine how they’re feeling, stuck here and away from their homes and family.”

Raven wanted to ask her about her own family, but this wasn’t the time or the place. He continued to look out the window at the Stanley. It was amazing how things had changed nearly overnight.

“I always thought it would take longer for society to collapse,” he said.

“Without power? Without smartphones?” Lindsey lifted a brow. “I’m surprised we’re not hearing about more shootings.”

“Like the one that Don found? I bet there are more cases like that. We just aren’t hearing about them.”

“Yeah,” Lindsey said. “You’re probably right. And you know what else? I really don’t like the way Don talked to Colton. It’s been a long time coming though, to be honest.”

“How do you mean?”

“Colton and Don have always butted heads, ever since I got hired. Jake was the buffer between the two. Now that he’s gone…” She shrugged, never taking her eyes from the road. “I don’t think Mayor Andrews likes Colton much, either. I wouldn’t be surprised if the administration tries to push Don into the Chief of Police position.”

“I never liked that little prick,” Raven replied. “He wanted to toss me in jail and throw away the key when I got arrested for poaching.”

“Yeah, I know.”

Raven rubbed his forehead and smirked. “Then again, I didn’t really like Colton at first, either. He’s kind of a prick, too.”

Lindsey chuckled and shifted the aviators higher on her freckled nose. “He means well. The man has a big heart, but he’s one of those old-school, hard-ass cops. I hope I never get like that.”

“Really?” Raven said. “Because I already think you’re kind of a hard-ass. You’re definitely a firecracker. Pretty terrible combination, if you ask me.”

“Very charming, Sam.” She laughed and turned onto Devils Gulch Road. The engine rattled as the truck shot down the open road. Fences separated the shoulder from grassy fields, and the houses were fewer and farther between

out here on the edge of town.

To the west, bluffs dotted with Douglas firs, aspens, and ponderosa pines separated civilization from the wilderness. There were a few stalled cars ahead, but the only person Raven saw was a guy walking his dog along the shoulder. They were lucky the radiation had mostly passed them by up here, and people could go outside without fear of being poisoned.

“Any idea where we should start?” Lindsey asked.

“I say we canvass some more folks,” Raven said. He pointed to the man walking his dog. “Starting with the guy in the Estes Park hoodie.”

“That’s Allen Dixon. He’s a retired school teacher and a pretty nice guy,” she said, bringing the vehicle to a stop.

Creek jumped up in the bed of the pickup and barked at Allen’s Golden Retriever. Raven rolled down his window and told Creek to be quiet.

“Afternoon, Mr. Dixon,” Lindsey called out.

Allen strode over to the vehicle and pulled down the hood of his sweatshirt, revealing a weathered, bearded face.

“Afternoon, Officer Plymouth and… I’m afraid I don’t know your name, son.”

“Raven Spears, sir.” He stuck his hand out the window to shake.

“Nice to meet you,” Allen said. “What brings you this way?”

“We’re looking for three people who assaulted an officer,” Raven said.

“Two men and a woman,” Lindsey said. “Guys were both around forty years old and between five-ten and six feet tall. The larger man was wearing an Old Navy sweatshirt, and the thinner man had on a red poncho. The woman is probably five-five or shorter and about one hundred pounds. She had on a flannel shirt when she was last seen.”

“They’re all tweakers,” Raven added.

“Tweakers?” Allen asked.

“Addicts,” Lindsey corrected.

Raven nodded. “Yeah, addicts would be the fancy terminology. You seen anyone like that?”

Allen scanned the road like he was looking for them. As he turned, Raven spotted the grip of a pistol holstered under his sweatshirt.

“I heard about them, but I haven’t seen anyone matching that description,” Allen said. “Do you think they came this way?”

“Possibly,” Lindsey replied. “We’re encouraging everyone to use caution. Don’t approach these people yourself.”

“I’ll walk into town if I hear or see anything,” Allen said. He patted the door. “Sorry to hear about Captain Englewood. He was a good man and an old friend.”

Lindsey nodded. “We’re all taking it hard.”

Allen started to walk away and then paused. “You know, I haven’t heard anything from the Whites for a few days. I thought it was odd, but figured they were just keeping to themselves after all that’s happened.”

“Where do they live?” Raven asked.

Lindsey looked through the windshield. “Just three houses up. Right, Allen?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“We’ll check it out. Stay safe out here,” she said with a smile.

Creek barked at the Golden Retriever again as Lindsey pulled back onto the road. This time Raven let it go. He was fine with his Akita telling the other dogs who the boss was in Estes Park.

“The Whites have one hell of a house,” Lindsey said. “Makes sense our suspects went there.”

“Lots of these folks have nice houses.”

“True, but the Whites’ is one of the biggest.”

“Maybe we should go get some backup, like the Chief said…”

Lindsey rolled her eyes. “Really?”

“Hey, I’m just trying to follow the rules for the first time in my life.”

She laughed at that. “I think we can handle this.”

“You’re the boss.”

“Don’t forget it.” Her dimpled smile was hard not to admire, but Raven forced his gaze back to the terrain.

Lindsey steered around a brand-new Dodge Ram with oversized wheels stalled in the middle lane. The next hill provided a view of the valley for several miles. A stone fortress was tucked inside the forest, overlooking the magnificent panorama.

“I’m assuming that’s the house?” Raven asked.

“Yup. I’m going to drive past and park near the trees on the east side.”

Raven pulled his Glock 22 and checked the ammo. He wasn’t taking any more chances, especially if he was going to be raiding houses. A crossbow against an armed chase in close quarters was not his idea of a fair fight.

Lindsey tucked the truck behind a wall of ponderosas a quarter-mile from the border of the property. After killing the engine, she checked the magazine

in her Beretta 92F and then tucked it back in the holster.

“No shooting unless I give you the order,” Lindsey said.

“All due respect, but I was fighting in Iraq when you were still in grade school.”

She crinkled her freckled nose. “And all due respect to you, but I’m the police officer. You’re here to assist me.”

Raven dipped his head and opened the door. Walking to the back of the truck, he grabbed his bow and then let the tailgate down for Creek to hop out.

“You okay, boy?” Raven asked, crouching beside his dog.

Creek wagged his tail and licked Raven’s face. He seemed just fine, despite being tossed into a tree the day before.

Raven loaded a bolt in the groove of his bow and scanned the property while Creek relieved himself on a bush. The main house was two stories high with windows along the east side. A carriage house and a barn were positioned on the south side of the land.

“You take Creek around back. I’ll take the front,” Lindsey said. “I’m going to do this the old-fashioned way and knock. You keep out of sight unless you see something, got it?”

“Hold up,” Raven said. “What do you know about the Whites? Does Mrs. White sit at home and knit while Mr. White reads? Or are they card-carrying members of the NRA who would have no problem taking a pot shot at a handsome American Indian?”

Lindsey shook her head and smirked. “Laurel and Steve are both retired lawyers from Denver. They’re quiet and keep to themselves. I don’t think you need to worry about getting shot, especially if you stay out of sight.” She paused and added, “That’s what you did in the Marines, right?”

“Very funny,” Raven said. He tucked his pistol into the holster at his back. This time he wasn’t carrying his hatchets. One of them was still jammed in Brown Feather’s head up on Prospect Mountain, and the other was in his gear bag.

“Come here, boy,” Raven said. He bent down to give Creek a sniff of a hat one of the suspects had dropped when fleeing the Safeway parking lot. The dog took in the smell and sat on his haunches, tail wagging, ready to hunt.

“Good luck,” Lindsey said.

“You too.”

Raven followed Creek through the woods on the eastern edge of the property. He cradled his crossbow comfortably as he crept over the beds of

fallen pine needles. Through the gaps in the trees, he watched Lindsey approach the circular drive. When she was halfway there, he emerged from the protection of the woods and ran toward the house. He stayed low, keeping out of view from the windows.

Creek followed him, sniffing the air. The dog took off for the backyard, but Raven didn't call after him. His furry best friend was smart enough not to walk into a trap.

Raven hugged the side of the house and crept under the large windows. A crow cawed in the distance, but otherwise it was quiet.

In the Marines, he had been connected to his squad by a comm link and a variety of other modes of communication. That had all changed after the EMP attack. Raven had gone back to what he learned growing up on the Rez. That meant trusting nobody but Creek, and relying on nothing but his own senses.

The rap of Lindsey's hand on the front door sounded far too loud in the silence.

Raven stopped and waited for voices, but there was only Lindsey's as she asked, "Mr. White, Mrs. White. Is anyone home?"

Overhead, the sun peeked out of the clouds, illuminating the meticulously groomed backyard. There were stone paths, a fire pit and a fountain, and shrubs pruned into the shapes of animals. It put Raven's humble abode to shame, but he still liked his house better.

He took another moment to listen and then peered around the back corner at a pair of French doors. Drapes blocked his view of the inside. A staircase led up to the deck on the back of the house. There was another set of doors at the top. Creek was already there, sitting on his haunches.

Raven scanned the sprawling backyard one more time before heading up the steps. Although his dog thought the coast was clear, Raven still kept his finger along the trigger guard of his bow.

At the top of the stairs, he slung the weapon over his back and drew his pistol. He waved Creek away from the door and approached slowly, careful not to make too much noise on the creaky decking. Past the gauzy drapes, he could just make out the kitchen. The surfaces were all clean of dirty dishes and food, which told Raven his chases likely hadn't been here. Drug addicts weren't exactly known for cleaning up after themselves.

He readied his Glock with one hand and grabbed the sliding glass door with his other hand. The door was unlocked. While it was possible the Whites

would leave their expensive house unlocked, it wasn't likely. Raven listened for Lindsey's voice, but heard nothing. The silence was disturbing. Where the hell was she?

He kept to the side of the door, out of sight, as he waited for her to come to the backyard, but the minutes ticked by. Eventually, he decided to move.

Raising his gun, he swept the muzzle over one of the biggest kitchens he had ever seen and slowly crossed the room with Creek by his side. The space opened into a living area with vaulted ceilings, a stone fireplace, and oak bookshelves lining the walls between the large windows.

The white couches and carpet were all immaculate—no sign of squatters here. To his right, French doors led to a study. Inside, he found a gun cabinet. His heart hammered when he saw the shattered glass forming a skirt around the base.

The weapons were gone.

Raven slowly stepped back into the living room to look for Lindsey. Something was wrong. She should have showed up by now.

He motioned for Creek to follow him toward the front door. Halfway there, a gunshot cracked outside the house. The sound sent his heart hammering even harder against his ribs.

Lindsey!

He rushed over to the front door, swung it open, and raised his Glock. A flurry of movement in the woods caught his attention. He holstered his gun and pulled his crossbow instead. As he brought the scope up, the red Chevy pickup screeched out onto the road. The truck backfired with another crack.

The noise he had heard inside wasn't a gunshot after all—it was just the damn muffler. He stood there staring, shocked that Lindsey would leave him. Then he saw she wasn't driving. She was in the bed of the truck, flanked by two men who were holding her down.

There was only one thing Raven could do. He aimed his bow at one of the tires and let a bolt fly.

***

Dressed in a CBRN suit, Colton sat in the back of Raven's Jeep Cherokee, pressing down on the dressing covering the woman's gunshot wound while Don raced toward the hospital. The wound wasn't fresh, but blood still

seeped out.

“Hang in there, ma’am,” Colton whispered. Her head was on his lap with her knees up against the other side of the Jeep. She squinted up at him like she was trying to see his face. She hadn’t said a word since Don had picked Colton up at the barrier on Highway 7.

She moaned, and the whites of her eyes showed as they rolled up into her skull.

“Stay with me,” Colton said.

The woman was about his age, with strands of silver in her hair and crow’s feet around her eyes. Plastic garbage bags held together by tape covered her clothing, but he’d removed her scarf and goggles now that they were inside the safe zone. The bags had apparently saved her from the radiation, but dehydration and blood loss were slowly killing her.

“Where did you find her?” Colton asked.

“About thirty-two miles south. I almost ran her over, for Christ’s sake. She was crawling down the road.” Don looked up in the rearview mirror. “She’s not the only one out there, Chief. You know that, right?”

Colton knitted his brows. “I thought you said you didn’t find any other survivors.”

“I didn’t, but there were more gunshot victims. You’ve heard about the violence on Highway 34 over the radio. That’s going to hit us eventually. We can’t save everyone.”

“I’m not leaving people to die out there if we can help them. I won’t do it.”

Don grunted and turned his attention back to the road. “She’s probably contaminated, so we just risked the integrity of the vehicle by bringing her back.”

“I’ll have it hosed down and scrubbed.” Colton touched her wrist to feel for a pulse. It was weak and irregular.

“Faster,” Colton said. “She’s hanging on by a thread.”

The engine hummed as Don raced toward Estes Park, passing the lake and the first of the hotels that surrounded the town. He honked the horn at several teenagers walking in the middle of the road. One of them threw a pop can at the Jeep.

“Damn kids,” Don muttered.

“Help,” croaked the woman.

Colton glanced back down at her. “We’re going to help you, ma’am. Just hold on.”

“Where…where am I?” she said in a strangled voice.

“Estes Park. You’re on the way to our medical center.”

Don squealed down another street, jarring Colton so that his hand slipped off the dressing. The woman grabbed his arm tightly and mumbled something incoherent. He had to keep her talking before she slipped back unconscious.

“Ma’am, my name is Marcus Colton, and I’m the chief of police. Can you tell me your name?”

“Doc—” She gave up and wheezed before she could get any more out.

Colton shook her gently. Maybe having her talk was a bad idea.

“Stay with me,” he repeated. The medical center was just around the corner, and he would be damned if she died in his arms before they got her there.

She choked again and coughed up a mixture of blood and saliva that ran in a sheet down her chin. She choked, wheezed, and struggled for air. Her eyelids fluttered and then closed. A moment later she went limp in his grip.

“Ma’am,” Colton said. He waited for her next breath, but it never came.

“Don, hurry up!”

Don’s eyes flitted up in the rearview mirror, but he didn’t reply.

Colton took off his helmet and leaned down, preparing to give her CPR.

“Chief, you could get contaminated!” Don protested.

Colton ignored him and pumped her chest, then breathed into her mouth.

No response.

“Come on,” he said. He pushed harder, gave her air, and continued the process.

The vehicle jolted to a stop outside of the medical center.

“Go get help!” Colton said between breaths.

On the next compression, he pushed so hard he heard a pop. When he went down for another breath, her eyelids snapped open and she drew in a gasp.

Colton moved back to give her some space. Her eyes widened at him and she squirmed away. The movement set off another coughing fit.

“It’s okay, ma’am. Don’t try to move,” he said. “You’re okay.”

Despite his assurances, she still reared back in fear. She held up an arm to shield her face.

“Ma’am, I’m not going to hurt you.”

“Stay back,” she said. “Get away from me!”

Colton held up his hands and scooted off the seat. He opened the door and moved out onto the pavement. Doctor Duffy was already rushing outside

with a nurse named Julie. Don followed them outside.

"Make sure you're careful with her. She's been exposed to radiation," Don called after them. He took his helmet off and set it on the concrete.

Colton couldn't believe it when he saw Don shove tobacco into his mouth. If he was so scared of contamination, why would he…

"Stay away," the woman said. Inside the Jeep, she was breathing heavily with her back to the opposite door. She tried to open it, but the door was locked.

"Calm down, ma'am," Colton said. He moved out of the way for the medical team.

"I'm a doctor and I'm going to help you, okay?" Duffy said, seemingly undeterred by the threat of contamination.

The woman slowly lowered her hands, but her eyes continued roving from face to face, stopping on Colton. She glared at him like he was the devil in the flesh. As the adrenaline faded from her body, she slowly began to relax, her eyelids drooping. Julie and Duffy reached into the Jeep and helped move her onto a stretcher. Don joined Colton near the sidewalk while they moved her.

"You brought her back, Chief. Pretty impressive, but I don't see how delaying the inevitable is a good strategy moving forward," Don said. He spat a glob of tobacco onto the sidewalk.

Colton pivoted to face Don and poked him hard in the chest. "If you ever pull that shit again, we're going to have major problems. I'm the chief of police. Don't you forget that."

***

Sandra Spears was still rattled to her core from the events on Prospect Mountain. The return of Brown Feather and his brother, Turtle, had reopened wounds that had never quite healed. She thought that being cut off from the rest of the world in Estes Park would protect her from men like Brown Feather and her ex-husband, Mark, but not even the end of the world had kept her family safe.

It seemed like nowhere was safe anymore.

The people who had cracked Officer Nelson's head were on the loose while he crashed on the table in the emergency room. The swelling in his

brain was getting worse, and without the help of life support equipment, it was almost impossible to stabilize him.

“Sandra!” Newton shouted. “Get in here. We’re losing him.”

She slipped on her gloves and pulled up her facemask. Despite everything that had happened, and as much as Sandra wanted to crawl into her bed and cuddle Allie, she was needed at the medical center.

“Heart rate is increasing,” Doctor Newton said. “We’re at one hundred and thirty.”

“Blood pressure is seventy-six over fifty,” Jen, one of the other nurses, said.

Newton bent down to examine the tube that was draining fluid from one of the burr holes he’d drilled into the patient’s head.

“It’s not draining at all now.” Newton looked over his shoulder. “Where the hell is Duffy? We’re going to have to drill another hole.”

“I think he’s with Teddy,” Sandra said.

“I thought Jen was in charge of Teddy,” Newton snapped.

Jen shook her head. “Doctor Duffy rushed outside to help a gunshot victim and told me to come in here.”

“We don’t just leave our patients, dammit!” Newton shouted.

Jen gave Sandra a meaningful, exhausted look. They were all tired, but Newton had been here for days. He was starting to lose his cool.

Rick’s raspy breathing pulled them back to the table. All three of them moved into position as his muscles started to spasm.

“Sandra, grab his legs, Jen, you take his arms,” Newton ordered.

Sandra was careful not to hold Rick down too hard at first, but he continued convulsing and jerking violently, forcing her to hold him tighter. Blood-tinged fluid dripped from his ears. His eyes rolled up into his head a moment later. Sandra could feel the life slipping away from the officer.

“Jesus,” Newton said. He checked the dressings over the man’s matted hair. Blood was running freely from the bandages, and his breathing was shallow.

“Someone get me a BVM,” Newton said.

Sandra reached for the bag-valve mask with her left hand and continued holding Rick’s legs with her right. A kick knocked her grip away. She grabbed the BVM, handed it to Newton, and then grabbed both of Rick’s legs. He kicked and jerked harder in her grip.

Newton placed the mask over Rick’s face and started pumping air into his

lungs. The officer kicked so hard it sent Sandra stumbling backward.

“Sandra!” Newton snapped. “Do your job!”

She rushed back to her position as Rick’s eyes suddenly popped open. Newton slowly pulled the BVM away, and Rick took in a long, deep gasp of air. Dazed, but seemingly aware, he looked at Newton and then at Sandra.

Blood seeped from the holes in his head, running down his forehead like red tears. His lips moved, but no words came from his mouth.

“Officer Nelson, can you hear me?” Newton said.

Rick closed his eyes, and his body seemed to relax on the table. Sandra reached out for his wrist.

“Doctor Newton, I’m… I’m not feeling a pulse.”

Newton pressed his stethoscope to Rick’s chest, but after a moment of listening, Newton shook his head.

An eerie silence passed over the room. Without the usual chirp of medical equipment, the lack of noise was beyond unsettling.

Sandra put her hands on Rick’s chest. She looked to Jen and Newton, and shouted, “Somebody help me!”

Jen grabbed the BVM mask and gave Rick air while Sandra pushed down on his chest. They fell into a steady rhythm to resuscitate him.

“Come on,” Sandra said. “Come on.”

Rick’s eyelids remained closed, but they twitched with every push on his chest. Newton stood watching with a solemn look. He might have given up, but Sandra was not going to let him die without a fight. He had a wife and baby girl at home, and Sandra knew all about being a single mom. That child needed her father.

Newton finally moved back to the table and checked Rick’s pupils while Sandra and Jen continued CPR.

“His pupils are fixed and dilated,” Newton reported. “It’s over.”

Despite the signs of what likely was a brain herniation, Sandra continued pushing, over and over. A minute passed. Then two. Her hands were numb, but she kept pumping in hopes of restarting his heart. Jen continued to help, but she was watching Sandra like she was crazy.

“Sandra,” said a voice.

She felt a hand on her shoulder but shook it away.

“Sandra,” Newton said again, louder and firmer. “He’s gone, Sandra. We can’t do anything for him, I’m sorry.”

Jen pulled the mask off Rick’s face, but Sandra made one final push on his

chest. Bloody fluid continued to ooze from Rick’s ears and the burr holes.

She finally let out a sigh of defeat. Tears blurred her vision. One plummeted onto the table, mixing with blood.

— 3 —

Charlize Montgomery raised her binoculars at the coastline from the bridge of the USS *John Stennis* aircraft carrier. Dressed in a loose-fitting Air Force sweatshirt and sweatpants, she felt more like a college student preparing for an all-night study session than the new Secretary of Defense. Albert Randall, her longtime bodyguard, stood next to her. He still hadn't changed out of his charred and filthy Air Jordans.

"Are you okay, ma'am?" he asked when she stumbled slightly.

"I'm fine." She pressed the binoculars to her eyes. They had finally reached Florida, but the sight of the Sunshine State didn't cheer her up. Her mind was halfway across the country with the unit of Marines searching for her son. They still hadn't radioed in with any information, and she was growing impatient.

I should have gone myself.

Covered in sores from her extensive burns, Charlize knew she wasn't in any shape to travel. She had only just begun recovering. The doctors had her on a strong dose of antibiotics, and they were hopeful that they'd be able to counter the effects of the radiation she'd been exposed to. But the burns would take time to heal, and required constant attention.

Albert reached out to help steady her as she wobbled again.

"Did you take your pain meds?" he asked.

"Yes," she lied. The pain continued to make even minor tasks difficult, but the alternative was worse. The pills made her so tired she could hardly function. She was the Secretary of Defense now, but she was spending more time in the hospital than the command room.

"Ma'am, I really think you should…" Albert began to say.

She turned toward him, frowning. A sharp reply was on the tip of her

tongue, but she held it back. Clint, her chief of staff, had died not long after the chopper had airlifted them from the ruins of Washington, D.C. With her son missing and her brother stuck in some godforsaken town in Colorado, Albert was her only real friend here.

"I want to say goodbye to Clint before the ceremony tonight," she said. "Will you see if you can arrange that?"

Albert hesitated.

"I'm fine, really," she said.

"Okay, ma'am." Albert turned to leave, but he shot a concerned look over his shoulder before ducking through the open hatch.

All around her, sailors were working at their stations. She felt like she ought to be doing something, too. Waiting to hear about Ty was torture. There was nothing worse than being helpless to protect your child, and this was the second time she had failed him.

Get it together, Charlize. You can't lose it now.

She pressed the binoculars back to her eyes, trying to focus. The aircraft carrier was two miles east of Palm Beach. Cars were zipping down the road as if nothing had happened. The coordinated EMP attack that had knocked out electronics in most of the continental United States hadn't reached southern Florida. After the devastation she'd witnessed at the nation's capital, Charlize had never expected to see a thriving American city again.

"Sight for sore eyes, isn't it, Madame Secretary?"

Charlize lowered her binoculars to find Lieutenant Janet Marco standing next to her. The XO jerked her long chin toward the porthole windows.

"Seeing civilization, I mean," Marco said.

"Funny, I was just thinking that."

Marco folded her arms across her uniform. "Someone waking up from a coma in Palm Beach might not even know the rest of the country was under attack. There's still power, police officers, and working vehicles. A hundred miles north, it's complete chaos."

"So I've heard," Charlize said with a sigh. "How about an update on the North Korean sub?"

The Lieutenant hesitated and then said, "We think there are two out there, but they're very hard to detect. They must be relying on battery power and are managing to come to snorkel depth where we're not looking for them. We lost several of our satellites during the attack, so that leaves us with airborne radar. Except we're also low on aircraft. What wasn't fried by the EMP is

being used for evacuations and supply drops on the mainland.”

“Our priority is finding those subs and stopping another attack,” Charlize said. “We need to reallocate our aircraft and create multiple Helicopter Maritime Strike squadrons. Get someone on the horn who can make that happen. Those North Korean subs can’t evade detection forever.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Marco said with a grin. She turned to leave, but Charlize grabbed her arm.

“Wait. I’ve spent too much time recovering from my injuries and not enough being briefed. I want a better picture of what’s happening in Florida.”

“Absolutely,” Marco said, gesturing for Charlize to follow. She led them to a station with dual monitors. Several officers stepped away as Marco spread a map of Florida across the surface.

“The cutoff line is here,” she said, drawing a line south of Orlando. “The grid is down everywhere north of that line. We’ve deployed resources to all major highways and are concentrating on holding back refugees here and here.”

Marco pointed at Highways 95 and 4 south of Orlando. “We’re hearing some pretty ugly reports. There have already been thousands of deaths on the highways.”

Charlize picked at her bandaged hand while she listened. The country was under martial law, and although President Diego was ultimately in charge, he had tasked Charlize with directing the men and women out there trying to keep law and order. So far, she felt like she hadn’t been able to do anything to help.

She studied the map and said, “When I was deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan, I saw a lot of things from the sky—crumbling infrastructure, highways clogged with refugees, and despicable violence. But I never thought I would see it back home. I don’t see how we can come back from this.”

Marco narrowed her eyes slightly like she was trying to figure out if Charlize was being serious.

“This is the United States of America, ma’am. Not Iraq or Afghanistan. We will recover, just like we have from every other attack since the founding of our great nation,” Marco said.

“You’re right,” Charlize said, feeling a little embarrassed. She shouldn’t have expressed her doubts. “We will come back from this stronger than before.”

A smile beamed across Marco's face. "Yes, indeed, ma'am. I'll go make that call about those HSM squadrons."

Charlize nodded and moved away from the maps. She walked with a renewed sense of energy and a thirst for answers. She reached up out of habit to tuck her hair behind her ear before remembering that it had been cropped to almost masculine shortness. Instead, she straightened her sweatshirt and walked over to the man in charge of the ship.

"Good afternoon, Captain," Charlize said.

It took Captain Dietz a second to turn from the view, but when he did, he offered a half smile. "Secretary Montgomery, how are you feeling today?"

"I'm fine," she lied. "Have you heard anything about my son?"

"No, not yet, but rest assured, I sent our best team to find him. Lieutenant Jeff Dupree is spearheading the mission. Man's a hero. If anyone can find him, it's Dupree."

The name meant nothing to Charlize. She huffed in frustration. "That fire team was deployed yesterday, right? When can I expect a SITREP?"

Dietz paused, his wind-weathered forehead creasing in deep thought. "My family is out there, too. In the radiation zone in Virginia."

Charlize clenched her jaw, realizing how she had sounded. She wasn't herself today. Constant worry and the pain from her injuries had her on edge.

"I'm monitoring the situation and will let you know as soon as we hear something from Lieutenant Dupree," Dietz said. Behind them, Marco was gesturing for the captain to pick up his headset.

"Ah, maybe that's him now," Dietz said.

She took a step back and waited as he listened to the incoming message. His features suddenly hardened, and he glanced up at Charlize. He cursed under his breath as he pulled off the headset and stood.

"Everyone, listen up. We have a contact detected on the sonar. Sound the alert, Lieutenant, and order the evacuation of all top-level officials."

Marco nodded and turned to another officer to carry out her orders.

"We're evacuating?" Charlize asked. "Is that necessary?"

"Our anti-submarine warfare officers have picked up more pings on the sonar, but they still haven't been able to get a lock on whatever craft is out there. Admiral Luke has made the decision to—"

The wail of an emergency siren cut him off. It was the same sound she had heard right before D.C. had been hit by the nuclear warhead. On the flight deck, crews ran toward their aircraft. Rotors fired on a pair of Seahawks and

an Osprey.

“We need to move, Madame Secretary,” Albert said. Somehow, he’d managed to reappear by her side right when she needed him. Just as they were about to leave the room, Marco waved at Charlize.

Albert gave his approval with a nod. He followed her over to the Lieutenant’s station. Marco held up a finger as she listened to her headset. Albert tapped his right burned Air Jordan on the ground nervously. A moment that felt more like an hour passed before Marco slipped the headset off. Her features remained stern.

“I have bad news about your son, Madame Secretary.”

She could barely hear the XO over the sirens, and at first she hoped she’d misunderstood. Then she felt Albert’s gentle hand on her shoulder.

“Tell me,” Charlize choked out.

Marco hesitated. It was the first time she’d ever seen the eager young officer balk at following an order. “Lieutenant Dupree’s team has reached the Easterseals camp, ma’am, but they haven’t found any sign of survivors.”

***

Dupree was having a hell of a time not throwing up in his CBRN suit. He bent down to examine another body. The young woman lay face down in the dirt outside one of the lodges that served as dormitories for the campers. Her exposed skin was covered in blisters and sores. One of the blisters had recently popped, oozing out a trail of pus.

Over his career he had seen a lot of nightmarish scenes, but dead children with radiation poisoning was a new level of horror.

He bumped the comm link in the helmet to report the death to the pilots, who would relay the info to Lieutenant Marco on the USS *John Stennis*.

“Black 1, this is Fox 1 confirming another casualty,” Dupree said. “Still no sign of Falcon.”

“Copy that, Fox 1.”

Dupree looked over at Sharps and Emerson. The two Marines stood guard with their M4s cradled across their chests as they scanned the surrounding area for anyone that might still be alive. The odds of that were growing slimmer by the minute. They had searched the camp for an hour without locating a single survivor, and they were running out of places to look.

To the east, McCabe and Rodriguez exited another lodge. McCabe stood on the porch and motioned for Dupree to join them. He glanced down at the dead woman one more time. Leaving her out here alone seemed wrong, but they didn't have time to bury these people.

"Clear this lodge," Dupree said to Emerson and Sharps. The men nodded, but they didn't look eager. The scene was taking a toll on all of them. He jogged through the central gathering area and past a large fire pit ringed with benches. Branches shifted in the warm breeze, reaching for the bluffs that flanked the camp like medieval guard towers.

"No sign of Falcon," reported Snider over the comms.

"Have you searched those sheds we saw on the way in?" Dupree asked.

"Yes, sir," Snider said. "Runge just cleared both of them."

Dupree cursed. Where the hell was this kid? They had found several dead counselors and staff members over the past hour, but the numbers weren't adding up. It appeared many of the children were missing, including Ty Montgomery.

Had someone beat his team here and evacuated the others?

He jogged the rest of the way to the other lodge, where McCabe ushered him inside.

"Sir, I think I found the kid's bunk. Come take a look."

Dupree jogged up the ramp that led to the cabin, and Rodriguez opened the swinging door to let them inside.

The room was furnished with about a dozen beds, some of them set up for special needs children. Toys and stuffed animals were scattered on the floor. Dupree stepped over a blanket crumpled on the floor. The mess was yet another sign of a quick and possibly chaotic evacuation.

But if these kids had been evacuated, where were they now?

McCabe walked down the aisle separating the bunks. Dupree followed him to a bed with wheelchair access and the name "Montgomery, Ty". A model F-15 fighter jet lay on the sheets.

"Check out the inscription," McCabe said.

Dupree picked up the model and read the bottom.

To Ty - Dream big and someday you will soar to reach your goals.

"Where the hell is this kid, LT?" McCabe asked. "And where are all the other kids?"

Dupree set the model jet back down gently. "Good question."

They met back outside where Rodriguez was waiting. To the west,

Emerson and Sharps emerged from the lodge where Dupree had found the dead woman.

“Snider, Runge, give me a SITREP,” Dupree said into his mini-mic.

“About to enter the main lodge for a second pass, sir. Stand by,” Snider said.

“The kids have to be here somewhere,” Dupree said. He wasn’t sure if he was talking to his men or himself. He waved for Sharps and Emerson to join him near the fire pit with Rodriguez and McCabe.

“Found a few dead kids back there, LT, but not our target. The kids were hiding in a closet,” Emerson said. “I’ve never seen anything like this.”

“Jesus in heaven,” McCabe said. He made the sign of the cross over his CBRN suit.

Dupree remained silent, using the time to think. A drop of rain pelted his visor as they waited. He stared out at the outside world like a fish inside of a bowl. Within minutes, the sky opened up, sending sheets of rain over the camp.

“What is this black shit?” Sharps asked, holding up a glove covered in what looked like wet ash.

“People, trees, buildings…” McCabe said.

Sharps eyes widened. “What do you mean?”

“It’s what’s left over when the world burns,” Dupree said.

“Is it toxic?” Sharps asked.

“Could be, but our suits will protect us,” McCabe said. He craned his helmet toward Dupree. “Right, sir?”

The comm link fired before Dupree could reply.

“Sir, I’ve got movement inside the cafeteria,” Snider reported. “Looks like we have a survivor!”

“On our way,” Dupree said. He jerked his chin, and his men quickly fell in behind him. They fanned out, moving slower than normal in the downpour. An armada of angry storm clouds had rolled in from the west. They bulged like overflowing garbage bags, swollen with ash and smoke from the forest fires.

He flashed hand signals to his men as they approached the main lodge, running through the camp layout he’d memorized during the long flight. There was a cafeteria and several community rooms inside this building, but nothing to indicate a shelter or basement.

“Sergeant McCabe, on me,” Dupree said. “Sharps, you and Emerson hold

security outside.”

Dupree made his way up the wide stairs to the front doors. He strode into the main seating area, which looked like it had seen a stampede, not an evacuation. Chairs were upturned, and rotting food had splattered on the ground. He stepped around a paper plate cemented to the floor by what looked like mashed potatoes.

“Sir,” McCabe said, pointing toward the center of the room.

Dupree moved around a long table to find another dead camp counselor. He was curled up in a fetal position, his hands gripping his stomach, which told Dupree he had died of radiation poisoning.

McCabe approached slowly, looking up every few feet to scan the entrances to the other community rooms for contacts.

“Snider,” Dupree said. “Did you see the body in the cafeteria? Bearded guy, red hat?”

“Yes, sir. I thought I reported it already.”

“No, you didn’t,” Dupree said.

“Holy shit,” McCabe said as he bent down next to the body. “This guy was shot.”

“Shot?” Snider asked over the comm.

Dupree moved around the side of a table and saw the small pool of blood under the corpse that he hadn’t noticed before.

“Shit,” Dupree said, bending down. A sloppy grouping of three rounds to the chest had taken this man out. He stood and raised his rifle at the crack of shattering dishes in the kitchen. A flash of motion came from the entrance, and a figure limped into the mess hall. Dupree lowered his muzzle when he saw it was just a boy.

“Stop!” Snider shouted. He ran out into the mess with Runge right behind. The kid halted in the middle of the room as the Marines closed in around him. His eyes darted back and forth like an animal being surrounded by wolves.

“Stay back,” the child said. He tried to escape, but only staggered a few feet before Snider tackled him to the ground.

“Get off!” the boy screamed.

Runge bent down to hold his legs.

“Kid, stop fighting,” Snider said. “We’re not going to hurt you.”

“Liar!” the boy yelled. He bit at Snider’s suit and clamped down on the sleeve. Snider brought a hand up to smack the kid, but Dupree caught his

wrist in mid-air.

The boy, suddenly silent and lying on his back, glanced up at Dupree. Black hair matted his forehead and rashes marked his cheeks and chin. He reached up with a curled right hand.

“Get off him,” Dupree said.

Snider and Runge loosened their grips. Dupree slung the strap of his rifle over his back. He bent down, forcing a smile that the boy returned with a scowl. It wasn’t all that much different from the look Dupree’s sons gave him when he would show up late to a birthday party or sporting event—if he showed up at all.

“We’re here to help you,” Dupree said.

The boy scooted backward across the floor. “That’s what the other soldiers said.”

“Soldiers?” McCabe asked. “What other soldiers?”

Dupree waited for the boy to respond, but the kid averted his gaze.

“We’re the good guys,” Dupree said. He reached into his vest and pulled out a sealed bag containing a chocolate bar. He had brought it along just in case they found survivors and needed bait to get them to leave the camp.

The boy licked his cracked lips and held out a hand, suddenly not so scared. “I’m really hungry, but they told us not to eat anything because of the rad nation.”

“Radiation,” McCabe corrected, chuckling.

Dupree shot the sergeant a look that told him to back off.

The boy reached for the bag again, but Dupree held it just out of his reach.

“What’s your name?” Dupree asked.

“Alex Stephens.”

“My name is Lieutenant Jeff Dupree, and I’m going to help you, but first you need to tell me what happened here. Who took your friends and where did they go?”

Alex swiped the sweaty black hair from his forehead. “The soldiers said they were going to take us somewhere safe, but I could tell they were bad men so I ran. I ran and I hid.”

“Did they say where that safe place is?” Dupree asked.

Alex shook his head, and Dupree finally handed him the bag. The boy unsealed it and wolfed the chocolate bar down, eyes flitting from face to face like he still wasn’t sure if he could trust them.

“Call in our ride, Sergeant,” Dupree ordered. He helped Alex to his feet,

but the boy was having a hard time walking. He was weak and sick, but it was more than that. The boy appeared to have cerebral palsy or something like it. As they crossed the room, Alex stumbled, and Dupree reached out to help.

“No touching!” Alex shrieked. Dupree quickly took his hands away from the boy.

By the time the group moved out of the building, the Black Hawk was flying over a bluff to the north. It set down in a soccer field on the edge of the camp. Sheets of rain fell across the path to the helicopter.

“Go get Alex a suit,” Dupree said.

McCabe ran to the Black Hawk while Dupree took a knee next to Alex.

“Is there anything else you can tell me about what happened? Did you see Ty Montgomery?” Dupree asked. “He would have been in a wheelchair.”

Alex lowered the bottled water they’d given him after he’d finished the chocolate. “Ty’s my best…” He staggered slightly from side to side, like he couldn’t find his balance.

Dupree reached out to grab him, but held back at the last moment. The kid did not like to be touched, and he reminded himself to be patient.

“It’s okay, buddy,” he said helplessly. As bad as he was at talking to kids, he was even worse at lying to them.

“I’m really sick, aren’t I?” His teeth chattered as he looked at Dupree.

“We’re going to give you medicine to make you feel better.”

Alex shivered and lifted his curled hand to his face.

“I know it’s hard, but can you please tell me what else you saw? Ty is counting on you, buddy,” Dupree said.

“They put him and the other kids into trucks and drove off. I wanted to help Ty, but I couldn’t…” Alex whimpered. “I couldn’t help him.”

“It’s okay, we’re going to help him,” Dupree said. “But I need to know where they went.”

Alex shivered violently. He reached up and pointed to the south with a shaky hand. “They went that way.”

“Where’s that suit?” Dupree shouted. He glanced over his shoulder and saw McCabe running back toward the building. In the split second that it took for Dupree to turn, Alex collapsed. This time, Dupree reached out and caught the boy in his arms.

— 4 —

The sound of violence echoed through Estes Park. Colton rushed out of the station to listen, but he couldn't pinpoint the source of the gunshots. Don stood on the sidewalk next to Officer Tom Matthew. Both men had their hands on the grips of their holstered weapons like they were preparing for a shootout.

"I don't hear anything else," Colton said. He walked over to the other officers and stood in front of them. "Did you—"

Pop. Pop.

Colton heard that. The sound was distant but unmistakable. "Where the hell are those shots coming from?"

"Devils Gulch Road, maybe," Matthew replied. "You think it's someone out hunting?"

"You'd have to be pretty stupid to try to bring down an elk with a 9mm," came a rough voice. Nathan was limping toward them through Bond Park, wearing his rucksack. He had been sitting there waiting for his ride, but the Marines still hadn't shown up to evacuate him.

More distant pops echoed west of town. Colton looked in that direction, past the restaurants, t-shirt shops, and ice cream parlors. He fully expected citizens to be outside hunting for food, but Nathan was right. This was small arms fire, and it was coming from the direction he had sent Detective Plymouth and…

"Raven," he muttered.

"You think they ran into trouble?" Don asked.

"Sure as hell sounds like it," Colton said. He faced his men with a scowl. "Matthew, get the Jeep. Don, grab our rifles."

Both officers took off running in opposite directions.

“Goddammit, I should have given Lindsey my walkie-talkie to stay in touch with Margaret,” Colton said. “If Raven is shooting it out with another damned debt collector, so help me…”

Nathan remained silent, his bruised face turned toward the mountains.

Another flurry of gunshots rang out, followed by the boom of a shotgun. The popping of a pistol quickly replied.

“Sounds like a battle,” Nathan said.

Colton paced the sidewalk. Every passing second was one closer to losing control of the situation. He couldn’t—*wouldn’t*—see any more of his people hurt.

Squealing tires sounded from the other side of town hall. Matthew sped out of the side parking lot in the Jeep, the sides still dripping wet from being hosed down earlier. He brought it to a halt in front of the sidewalk. Don hurried over with a pair of Colt AR-15s and ammunition.

“Let’s go,” Colton said.

Nathan moved to follow, but Colton blocked his way. “Not you, Major. You need to stay here with the radio in case those Marines come to get you. I’ve got this.”

The pilot hesitated and then held out a hand. “If I leave before you get back, good luck.”

“Likewise,” Colton said. He shook Nathan’s hand and then jumped into the Jeep with Don. Matthew stomped the gas pedal as soon as they were buckled in. He tore away from town hall and turned onto the street leading up to Devils Gulch Road. People on the sidewalks turned to watch the Jeep fly by at fifty miles an hour.

Colton didn’t bother telling Matthew to slow down.

“Are you all wearing your vests?” he asked.

“Yes, sir,” Don said.

Matthew didn’t answer.

“Officer Matthew?” Colton asked.

“I took mine off earlier,” Matthew said, keeping his eyes on the road. “Sorry, sir.”

No matter how many times Colton harped on his officers about wearing ballistic vests, someone always decided not to bother.

“Jesus,” Colton said. “My vest saved my life yesterday. When are you guys going to start listening to me?”

“Sir, I’m sorry. I usually —”

“Just stay low,” Colton said. “I have a feeling we’re about to walk into a firefight.”

Matthew nodded, and Colton turned to watch the trees race by on the side of the road. With the windows down, it wasn’t hard to pick up on the distant pop of gunfire. Each shot made Colton tense. The cool breeze carried the familiar, calming scent of cedar, but it did little to settle his nerves.

Constant violence was the new normal. Colton would have to deal with it, just like he had in Afghanistan. He pulled out his revolver and snapped open the empty cylinder. Then he plucked rounds from his father’s old duty belt and loaded his weapon. Would one of these bullets end a life today?

“That gunfire stopped,” Don said.

Colton looked up from his pistol, trying to listen past the wind rushing into the vehicle. All was quiet again. He cursed under his breath.

Matthew turned the Jeep onto Devils Gulch Road. He eased off the pedal as they approached a big truck blocking the center lane. The Jeep rolled up and over a hill that provided a rolling view of the terrain beyond. Several houses were nestled along the south side of the street. A natural border of rocky bluffs protruded over the trees to the north.

“Where the hell are they?” Colton muttered.

Matthew pointed down the road. “Is that Jake’s truck?”

Colton leaned forward, squinting at the red vehicle parked in the grass on the right shoulder about a quarter mile down the road from the White estate. The passenger door was wide open, like someone had jumped out in a hurry. The back right tire was pancaked.

“Looks like someone shot an arrow into that tire,” Matthew said.

“Not just someone. Raven and his damn crossbow,” Don said. “But why?”

“Maybe he was trying to stop someone from taking the truck,” Colton said. He shook his head. He didn’t have time to make sense of the scene.

“Slow down and park over there,” he said, pointing to the shoulder right outside the White estate.

Matthew eased off the gas and brought the vehicle to a stop. Colton ordered everyone to take up position behind the Jeep and then unclipped his walkie-talkie. He took a knee behind the bumper and scanned the road with the radio to his lips.

“Margaret, do you copy? Over.”

Her prompt reply crackled from the speaker. “I’m here, Chief.”

Colton turned the volume down and checked the truck and woods to the

south.

“Anyone have eyes?” he asked.

“Negative,” Matthew replied.

Don shook his head. “They must have taken off into the forest.”

Colton brought the radio back up. “Looks like Detective Plymouth and Raven Spears ran into some trouble outside of Steve and Laurel White’s house. There’s no sign of either of them, but it looks like they may have fled into the woods to the southeast of the White property. Over.”

“Roger that, Chief. I just heard—”

Static crackled from the speakers.

“Round up any available officers and send them this way,” Colton said. “I’m heading out to find Raven and Lindsey.” He glanced over at Matthew. “You stay here and wait.”

“But—” Matthew began to say.

“That’s an order, Officer Matthew.”

The radio sputtered again. “Chief, there’s something else you should know.”

Colton stood and began to move around the side of the Jeep, raising his AR-15 with his right hand and keeping the radio close to his lips.

“Go ahead,” he said.

“I have some bad news about Officer Nelson.”

The world seemed to slow. Static buzzed from the speakers as he watched the wind sway the branches of ponderosas under a sky full of clouds that looked like bullets.

“Rick passed away about thirty minutes ago,” Margaret said. “I just got word from the hospital. I’m sorry, Chief.”

Colton drew in a long breath, grief washing over him. He tucked the radio in his vest and gripped his rifle with both hands. Two officers had died in the past twenty-four hours. He refused to lose another.

***

“Where are we?” Ty asked. His voice seemed to go on and on like they were in some sort of tunnel. It was warmer here than the last place the Sons of Liberty had taken them, and it smelled damp, like a basement. They still hadn’t removed Ty’s blindfold, although they had taken his mask off. The air

didn’t taste burned anymore, which was good, but his back hurt and he felt like he might throw up. Someone had pushed his wheelchair up a rocky path for a while, every bump rattling his teeth and making his tummy feel queasy, before moving him and the other kids into this building.

“You’re safe,” Tommy said.

Carson grunted and spat on the floor. “I don’t get why the General wanted us to grab these cripples.”

Tommy didn’t reply, but Ty snapped at the word.

“I’m not a cripple. You’re going to be sorry you said that. My mom is coming to get me, and when she does—”

“Shut up, kid,” Carson replied. “Your mommy isn’t coming.”

Raised voices sounded in the distance, reverberating off the walls. Ty’s heart was racing, partly from anger, and partly from fear. What if Carson was right?

She won’t give up, he told himself. *She’s the bravest, toughest mom in the whole world, and she will find you and beat these guys up.*

And if his mom couldn’t find him for some reason, his uncle would. Uncle Nathan was probably in his fighter jet right now, looking for him. The idea made him feel better, but he was still mad. Hadn’t anybody ever taught these men it was rude to call someone names?

“Stay quiet, kid,” Tommy said. He brought the wheelchair to a stop, and Ty heard the smooth, deep voice of the General issuing orders.

“Max, I want these kids sprayed down and evaluated by Doc Rollins as soon as possible,” he said.

“Sir, what should I tell Rollins if these kids have severe radiation poisoning? He’ll want to know if he’s authorized to treat them.”

The approaching footfalls abruptly stopped not far from Ty.

“I’ve already told the old man not to waste medical resources,” said the General.

The rap of boots hitting the ground continued onward. Ty gritted his teeth and waited. When the footfalls sounded like they were about to pass, he did exactly what Tommy had told him not to do.

“Hey, over here. You see me?” Ty tried to wave his bound hands. “My mom is going to come here and she’s going to put you all in prison.”

Laughs rang out from all directions.

“Go ahead and laugh,” Ty said. He was used to being teased, but his mom had taught him to draw strength from it instead of shame. Ty had survived

just about the worst things that could happen to a kid, and he was still strong. Nobody could take that away from him with stupid, mocking laughter. “You’ll be sorry when my mom gets here. She’s friends with the president. He’ll have you all arrested.”

A finger snapped, silencing the chuckles like a switch being flipped. A single pair of boots tapped the ground and stopped directly in front of his chair.

“What did you say?” asked the General.

“I said you’ll be sorry when my mom comes to find me.”

Under his blindfold, he could see muddy boots in front of his wheelchair. They stepped closer.

“After that, kid.”

“I said my mom knows the president—”

“President of what?”

“The United States of America,” Ty said proudly. “She’s a United States Senator and she—”

The blindfold was stripped off Ty’s face. He blinked at the bright lights hanging from cords overhead. It took him a moment for his eyes to adjust, but he quickly realized he was somewhere underground in what kind of looked like a cave. The walls and ceiling were rough rock, but the floor was concrete. Crates of supplies and large orange barrels were stacked against the walls.

The General was crouched in front of his wheelchair. He was still wearing the space suit, but Ty could see his blue eyes behind the visor. The squiggly scar on his forehead caught Ty’s attention.

The man pointed at it. “You like my scar? This is what happens when you get captured in enemy territory. You should have seen what I did to the monsters that did this to me. Sometimes you have to become the fiercer monster to survive, kid.”

Two overweight men with long beards chuckled behind the General. They held large rifles and wore black baseball caps with snake symbols. Every inch of exposed skin below their necks seemed to be covered in tattoos.

The General held up a hand for silence. “My name is Dan Fenix. General Dan Fenix, but you can call me Fenix.” He paused a moment, licked his lips, and leaned closer. “What’s your name, son?”

“You don’t scare me, mister. None of you do,” Ty said.

“Kid, I couldn’t care less if I scare you or not. I told you and your friends

that we came to help you at the camp, remember? If it weren't for us, you'd be dead."

"Then why are my hands tied, and why did you shoot Mr. Barton and Mr. Gonzalez? They didn't do anything to you."

"They got in my way," Fenix replied. He let out a short sigh like he was getting frustrated. "And we tied your hands because…"

He looked back at his men and raised his voice. "Why did you guys tie this poor boy's hands? Carson, did you do it?"

Carson nodded. Ty saw his tormentor clearly for the first time. He had a shaved head and greasy black eyebrows. A big, ugly eagle holding a flag was tattooed on his neck.

"Well untie him, damn it," Fenix snapped. He crab-walked closer to Ty and put his gloved hands on the armrests of the chair. For the first time since the gunshots on the road, Ty felt a paralyzing fear grab him. There was something wrong with this man. It wasn't just that strangers weren't supposed to touch his chair. His eyes were so cold and flat. His words sounded nice, but his eyes gave him away.

Ty remained silent, terrified that if he did talk, he would stutter. His mom always taught him to never show his fear.

Fenix stood and clasped his hands behind his back. "Fine, you don't want to talk to me? I guess I'll just have to ask one of your little friends. I might even have to hurt them. Is that what you want?"

"My name is Ty."

"Ty what?" Fenix turned halfway with one ear in his direction.

"Montgomery."

Fenix's cold eyes lit up as he turned back to Ty. "You're Senator Charlize Montgomery's son?"

Ty nodded proudly, although something felt wrong about doing so. Maybe he shouldn't have told Fenix his mom's name. Maybe… but no. His mom would come find him, and she would make these men pay for what they had done to Mr. Barton and Mr. Gonzalez.

Fenix clapped his hands. "Hot damn. See? I told you guys this plan was golden. We got ourselves a real valuable hostage. We're going to be able to buy enough ammunition to take over Colorado and purge it of the filth. Nobody is going to be able to rise up against us."

Everyone in the tunnel, even the other kids, stared at Ty like he was some sort of celebrity. His stomach ached, and he reached down to grip his belly.

He gagged, and swallowed the acid boiling up his throat.

“I think I’m going to be sick,” Ty mumbled.

The words wiped the smile off Fenix’s face. He snapped his fingers at Tommy and Carson. “Get this kid showered off and take him straight to Doc Rollins. Anything the old man needs, tell him it’s authorized.”

Fenix leaned down in front of Ty and gave him what appeared to be a genuine smile. “We can’t let anything happen to little Mr. Ty Montgomery.”

— 5 —

“They took him, Nathan. They took Ty.”

The words crackled out of the speakers of the analog radio. Nathan’s heart hammered his rib cage. For a moment he didn’t respond. He couldn’t.

He was sitting at a picnic table in Bond Park outside of town hall, trying to make sense of what his sister had just said. The gunfire to the west had ceased, but none of the police officers had returned. There was no one here to see him if he broke down, but he had to hold it together for Charlize and Ty.

“Nathan, are you there?” his sister asked.

He brought the receiver to his lips. “Yes, I’m here. I’m sorry, there’s a situation here in Estes Park.”

Charlize continued like she hadn’t heard him. “Some soldiers took Ty and the other kids from the camp.”

“But he’s alive?”

“I’m… I’m not sure. Oh God, how is any of this happening?”

“Charlize, I know this is hard, but you have to calm down,” Nathan said. “Start over and tell me exactly what happened.”

There was a short pause and what sounded like Charlize taking a few deep breaths on the other end of the line.

“The Marines I had deployed to the camp found a boy named Alex. He said soldiers shot two of the counselors and took several of the children.”

Nathan nodded, recalling the boy’s name from Ty’s enthusiastic tales of his time at the camp. He kept the receiver out, holding back his questions. Right now, he needed to listen.

“He said he saw the soldiers load Ty into a pickup truck and take him away.”

“Where?” Nathan asked, unable to hold his questions any longer.

“I… I don’t know. Lieutenant Dupree is combing the area from a Black Hawk, but they don’t have much fuel left, and they have to take Alex to a hospital. They aren’t going to be able to come get you right now, either.”

There was commotion on the other line, a humming of some sort and then the unmistakable sound of helicopter rotors.

“Are you going somewhere?” Nathan asked.

“I’m being evacuated. The North Koreans still have subs in the water.”

Nathan cursed. “I’ll go find him, Charlize. You just get somewhere safe.”

“No,” she replied without hesitation. “The roads are dangerous. The briefings I’ve gotten…it’s chaos out there, Nate.”

“Which is all the more reason I should be out there looking for Ty. Especially if Dupree has to return to base.”

A male voice sounded in the background. “We have to move, Madame Secretary. We can’t delay any longer.”

“Hold on, Albert,” Charlize said. Wind crackled over the channel, followed by the chop of a helicopter taking off.

“All due respect, Sis, but I’m going out there.”

A hard pause passed over the channel. Nathan wasn’t sure if it was because she was considering his request or because she had run out of time.

Static came over the channel, followed by his sister’s voice. “Do you still have access to a CBRN suit and a working vehicle?”

“I’m sure I can get both,” Nathan said.

“What time is it there?”

“Five or so in the afternoon.”

“It’s too late to leave today,” Charlize said. “Give Dupree one more shot at this. If he doesn’t find Ty by morning, you have my authorization to search for him yourself.”

Nathan thought about it for a moment. He was only eighty-six miles away from the Easterseals camp. He didn’t like waiting any longer, but the roads would be worse at night. He looked over his shoulder at town hall as the doors creaked open. Margaret, the police dispatcher, stepped outside. She seemed to be crying.

Charlize’s voice pulled him back to the radio.

“Is there someone who can go with you tomorrow?” she asked.

“I’ll be fine on my own.”

There was another short pause.

“Keep that radio with you. I’ll call you with an update as soon as I can. I

love you, Nathan.”

“I love you, too. Everything’s going to be okay, I promise. Now go get on that bird and fly somewhere safe.”

Nathan lowered the receiver and shut off the radio to save the juice. After packing it up, he limped across the grass toward the station. First thing he had to do was get the CBRN suit, a rifle, and then a vehicle.

Margaret pulled her hands from her face and looked up at him.

“You okay?” he asked.

“No, I’m not. Officer Rick Nelson just passed away.”

Nathan looked at his boots, then back to Margaret. “I’m really sorry to hear that, ma’am.”

“He won’t be the last,” she said gravely. “Things are getting worse by the minute. Chief Colton’s out there looking for Raven and Detective Plymouth right now. There’s been some sort of a shootout. I can’t get my head around all this violence. We’ve lived in peace for so long.”

Nathan tried to think of something else to say, but couldn’t find the words to comfort her. He looked to the west. The Estes Park police department and Raven were on their own this time. Nathan had his own mission to prepare for.

As soon as Colton got back, Nathan was going to do what he should have done all along. He was going to head south. Not in the morning, not in six hours. As soon as he had a vehicle and a weapon, he was heading out there to find Ty.

***

Raven worked his way through the trees, steady but fast, following the trail—a crushed sapling here, a few drops of blood on the ground there. His best friend trotted to the east, sniffing the ground. Creek was in his element, following the scent of the bastards that had tried to steal the pickup truck and kidnapped Lindsey. They weren’t far ahead, but they were armed with a shotgun and Lindsey’s pistol.

After firing an arrow into the Chevy’s back tire, two men and a woman had bailed and opened fire on Raven. He was only able to get off a few shots before they had fled into the woods with Lindsey. A shotgun blast had almost taken off Raven’s head, ponytail and all.

He kept low and raked the barrel of his Glock over the terrain as he pursued his chases. His view had transformed into a two-dimensional grid. Scanning it systematically, he looked for the bright blue of the Old Navy sweatshirt that the man with the shotgun was wearing.

Snapping and crunching branches sounded ahead, followed by a raised voice.

“Keep moving, bitch!”

Raven moved around a tree and crouched next to a boulder covered in orange moss. There, to the southeast, he finally spotted Lindsey’s uniform through the gap in the trees. He bolted for another rock.

A thin man with a red poncho had a gun pointed at Lindsey’s back—her gun, Raven realized. The cuffs around her wrists were hers as well. How these idiots had gotten the drop on her was going to be a matter of discussion over a cup of coffee at some point, but first he had to get her out of this mess.

The second chase, a frail woman with wild red hair and a red flannel shirt to match, followed the group through the woods. She was gripping her shoulder where Raven had clipped her with a round back on the road.

“Look at me again and I’ll shoot you!” the man with the poncho said to Lindsey.

She glared at him and tried to speak, but there was something jammed in her mouth. A sock or glove, maybe. The guy with the shotgun was leading the group. He stopped at the bottom of the slope and looked in Raven’s direction.

Raven ducked back down. His plan was to take that guy out with his bow, but now that they had Lindsey’s weapon, he was going to need to get closer and bring them down swiftly. He would need Creek’s help.

With a flash of his hand, Raven ordered Creek to flank the group. Then he took off running for the cover of a massive ponderosa. The kidnappers were moving down a ridgeline that led toward the town. Raven knew this area well. He had guided an illegal hunting party here. The rich idiots had paid extra for the night vision goggles and suppressed rifles. The night hunt was supposed to end with a trophy bull elk. Instead, they had gone home empty handed. Raven had a bad feeling this hunt wouldn’t end the same way.

Someone was going to die. He just had to make sure it wasn’t him, Creek, or Lindsey.

Keeping low, he ran for the crest of the hill that overlooked Estes Park. His body ached and the slash to his chest burned, but the adrenaline made him

forget the pain.

He ducked under a branch and crouch-walked over to the side of a tree to look out over the lush valley below. Smoke swirled from chimneys into the sky. His chases were getting closer to town. A shootout in the forest was one thing, but in a residential area it could result in innocent casualties.

Raven hugged the ground as he scanned the woods down the slope. He could hear two voices and more snapping twigs somewhere to the southeast.

He slung his bow over his back and pulled out his Glock. Then he slipped around another tree and moved his finger from the outside of the trigger guard. Creek was somewhere out there and moving into position.

The woman in the flannel shirt and the man in the red poncho emerged in the dense trees below. Lindsey was walking between the two, but where the hell was the guy with the Old Navy sweatshirt?

Raven swung his Glock toward a flash of motion to the southeast. He ducked just as the boom of the shotgun sounded. The blast slammed into the tree behind him, and splintering wood rained down onto his head. It was the second time he had almost lost his brains in the past hour. He wouldn't get so lucky a third time.

He dropped to his stomach and squeezed off two shots at the center of the Old Navy logo. Both rounds went wide, punching into the bark of an aspen tree to the man's right.

Another shot kicked up dirt to Raven's left. He rolled away and pulled the trigger as soon as he had the sights lined up. This time the round hit the man's shotgun. He stumbled backward, crazed eyes looking down at his weapon. The shock quickly passed and he brought it back up to fire.

Gunfire cracked to the southwest—not handguns, but rifles. The shots distracted the man long enough for Creek to attack. A ball of fur slammed into his side and knocked him to the ground. The bastard screamed and jerked his arm as Creek tore at his sleeve.

"Good boy," Raven said with a grin. He pushed himself up and looked to the southwest, where Colton and Don were moving in with their AR-15s shouldered.

The man in the red poncho got off a single shot with Lindsey's pistol before a volley of 5.56mm rounds tore through his chest. He slammed into a tree and slid down the trunk, blood streaking down the bark in a sheet.

The woman screeched in a primal voice and took off running for Colton. Lindsey stuck out her foot and tripped her. She landed on the ground face

first, her flannel shirt a mess of mud and pine needles.

Don strode forward with his rifle aimed at her head.

“Stay down!” he shouted.

Colton went to check the man in the red poncho. He had slumped to the dirt, unmoving. Colton kicked the gun away and then walked back over to Lindsey and un-cuffed her. The detective rubbed her chafed wrists, scowling at the woman on the ground.

“You’re lucky they showed up!” Lindsey shouted, kicking at the dirt. “I would have killed you.”

“Detective Plymouth, go pick up your weapon,” Colton ordered. She hesitated and Colton arched his brows. That got Lindsey moving. She walked away from the woman, who was now crying while Don cuffed her.

Satisfied that they had the situation under control, Raven jogged over to Creek and the third kidnapper. The Akita stood over him, snarling, with a chunk of the man’s shirt in his maw.

“Call him off,” the man begged. “Please!”

Raven grabbed the shotgun off the ground and waited a few more satisfying seconds before ordering Creek to stop. By the time the dog obeyed, Don had the woman cuffed and Colton was running over toward Raven with Lindsey.

“You okay, Raven?” Colton asked.

Lindsey grunted. “So much for having my back.”

“*What*?” Raven said. “I just saved your ass. I mean, these guys helped, but it was mostly me.”

“Cut the shit. Both of you. All that matters is everyone’s okay and that we got these sons of bitches,” Colton said. “Detective, you’re lucky to be alive at all.”

“I know,” she said quietly. “They were using me as a hostage, but I have no doubt they would have killed me if you guys hadn’t shown up.”

Creek let out a low whine and brushed up against Raven. He reached down and the dog proudly presented him with the ripped cloth from the man’s sweatshirt.

“It’s okay, boy, you did good. You did really good.”

The soft fur of his best friend usually helped calm Raven’s nerves, but his pulse continued to throb across his scratched, bruised body.

“Thanks, Raven,” Lindsey said like she actually meant it. She bent down to pet Creek. “And thanks to you, too, handsome boy.”

Raven had to chuckle. Even his dog had better luck with the ladies than he did.

***

Colton opened the back door of the Jeep outside the rear entrance to the police station.

“Get out,” he snarled.

Milo Todd and his sister, Cindy, scooted across the seat and out onto the pavement with their hands cuffed behind their backs. Colton could smell their body odor from where he stood. They were both filthy, and Cindy was bleeding from her shoulder.

“I need a doctor,” she said.

Lindsey laughed. “Get in line. There are plenty of people in need of medical attention right now that haven’t killed police officers.”

Don parked Jake’s pickup truck in the stall to the right of the Jeep, giving Colton a view of the corpse in the back. Eric Thornton, a friend of Milo and Cindy, lay in the back of the truck. The man’s red poncho was soaked with blood from the bullet wounds that had ended his life.

Colton refrained from spitting on the body. He needed to be a role model in front of his officers, but it was hard to stay professional. These people had killed a good man, not out of self-preservation or some misguided cause, but simply to feed their addiction.

He grabbed Milo under the arm and pulled him away from the Jeep. “Let’s go, asshole.”

“Hey!” Milo protested.

“Shut up,” Colton growled.

Officer Matthew directed Cindy toward the building. Nathan, Lindsey, Raven, and Creek stood watching them lead the prisoners across the parking lot. Behind them, a small crowd of citizens had gathered on the street outside Bond Park.

“Keep them back!” Colton shouted.

Detective Tim Ryburn and Officer Sam Hines hurried over to the park.

“Take them inside, Don,” Colton said.

As soon as the door shut behind them, Colton stalked through the parking lot away from Bond Park. He needed a moment to breathe and a moment to

think alone. He passed the H1 Hummer and moved around the side of the station, where he had a view of Prospect Mountain. What he really wanted was a cigarette, but he'd smoked the last one when they were putting the spare tire on Jake's pickup truck. With the nation's infrastructure broken, there wouldn't be any more cigarettes delivered. Maybe it was just as well.

"Chief? Can I have a word?"

He sighed. Colton should have known better than to think he would have a moment of peace and quiet. Nathan limped around the corner, holding his cast with his good hand.

"I'm sorry about Officer Nelson," Nathan said. "I wish I'd been able to stop what happened that afternoon."

"Me too," Colton said. "It's time I start realizing that evil doesn't give you a second chance."

Colton eyed the aerial tramway at the top of the mountain. He still hadn't fully dealt with the events that had occurred there, and he wasn't sure if he would anytime soon. Throughout the day, he found himself wanting to ask Jake's opinion or share a joke, and then he'd remember all over again that his best friend was dead.

"I've got a favor to ask of you, Chief," Nathan said.

Colton stiffened and faced Nathan. "What's that?"

"Remember that gear you promised me?"

"Yeah," he said slowly.

"I'm going to need it. Some soldiers took my nephew before the Marines got to the Easterseals camp."

"What do you mean they took him?"

"Apparently some soldiers showed up, shot two camp counselors, and went off with a bunch of the kids."

Colton wiped his forehead with a sleeve. He was so goddamned tired. It was hard to think. "Why would they…unless…do you think they knew who your nephew is?"

"I highly doubt that, but it's possible. Either way, I'm heading out to track Ty down."

Colton's day kept getting worse. They were already stretched thin on resources, but Nathan had risked his life to help him catch Brown Feather and Turtle. He couldn't let the pilot down now.

"Hold here a minute," Colton said. He walked back to the corner and looked around the side of town hall. Raven and Creek were still outside the

back entrance to the police station with Lindsey.

“Raven, come here a second,” Colton called out.

Raven trotted over with Creek in tow. “What’s up, Chief?”

“I’ve got another mission for you and Creek.”

— 6 —

After years of being poked and prodded by doctors in hospitals, the sight of needles no longer bothered Ty. He watched Dr. Rollins insert the needle into his upper arm without even flinching.

“Tetanus shot,” Dr. Rollins said. “Just to be safe. The General wants to make sure you’re as healthy as a horse.”

A bank of lights overhead illuminated Ty’s skinny legs dangling over the elevated bed. His skin was so pale he could see his veins. Sometimes his legs didn’t feel like a part of him, and other times he could almost feel them. Today was one of those days. He willed them to work, to stand up and run away from this man.

Dr. Rollins forced a smile full of yellow teeth. “Almost done,” he said.

Ty looked out the open door into the main medical facility. Several of the other kids were there sitting in chairs, waiting to be treated. Micah and Emma, the two kids from the road, were shivering together on a bench. He shared a room with them now. There were also Tim, Jack, Shana, and Rhonda from the Easterseals camp. The other children were being held in a different room than Ty, and the men wouldn’t let him talk to them.

For some reason, the General wanted Ty to be looked at first. It wasn’t the first time he’d gotten special treatment because of his mom, but he never felt good about it.

“Help them,” Ty insisted, pointing at the siblings. Emma had already thrown up twice since they got to the Castle. “They need it, I don’t.”

“Soon, I promise.” He shifted his glasses up to look at the other kids and then shut the door, sealing them inside the small room with a click.

Ty wanted to believe that Dr. Rollins was a good person. He didn’t have tattoos or a shaved head like the soldiers. He decided to take a chance and ask

some questions.

“What is this place?” Ty asked.

“Med ward,” the doctor said, distracted by writing something down on a pad.

“No, I mean what’s the Castle?”

Dr. Rollins looked at the window at the top of the metal door and then crossed to a glass cabinet. He pulled out several pill bottles, set them down, and looked over his shoulder at the window again.

“Your mom is really Senator Montgomery?”

Ty nodded. He waited for a response, but Dr. Rollins continued working. He counted out some pills onto a tray, grabbed a bottle of water, and returned to the exam table.

“Take these,” he said.

“No,” Ty said. “Not until you answer my questions.”

Dr. Rollins glanced at the window again. A tattooed man with a sharp nose strode by the room and stopped just outside the door. Rollins turned back to Ty and held the pills out.

“Please, just take them,” he said. There was fear and sadness in the old man’s eyes. Ty knew then he wasn’t bad like the other soldiers.

“I’ll take them if you answer my questions,” Ty whispered. “I promise not to tell anyone we talked.”

Dr. Rollins waited for the man outside to walk away. “You’re going to get me into trouble.”

“I promise I won’t tell. What is this place, and why am I here? I want to go home.”

The doctor checked the window a third time. “You don’t tell anyone this. Okay? I mean *anyone*.”

Ty nodded firmly, and Dr. Rollins continued in a hushed voice. “The Castle is the Sons of Liberty’s home base. General Fenix started building it and stockpiling supplies here years ago for his army.”

“Army?” Ty asked. “So what do they need me for? I can’t fight.”

Dr. Rollins frowned. “You’re not going to fight for his army, son. You’re going to help him build it.”

***

Charlize sat in the troop hold of a Seahawk helicopter, tucked between a team of Navy SEALs and Albert. They had just taken off from the roof of a hospital in Palm Beach after being diverted earlier that day. The pilots were taking them to a secure location President Diego had picked after the evacuation from the USS *John Stennis*.

On the horizon was the aircraft carrier. Clint's body was still on board, and they hadn't been able to hold a remembrance ceremony for him. Leaving without saying goodbye broke her heart—not that there was much of it left intact to break.

"That's not Clint down there anymore. His soul is in a better place, and if you have anything to say to him, he can still hear you," Albert said, as if he could read her mind. He put his massive hand over hers. "Try not to worry about Ty, either. I bet this is all just a misunderstanding and he'll be home soon."

"Hard not to worry, but thank you," Charlize said. She doubted Albert was right, but she had to hold onto hope that maybe this was some sort of mistake. Maybe it had been the Colorado National Guard or another unit who had picked up the kids. She could get a call any minute explaining the mix up.

Charlize reached up and dabbed her burned forehead with the medicated gel she kept in her pocket. The pulsing pain was really starting to bother her, resulting in a headache that had settled behind her eyes. The constant rattle from the rotors overhead didn't help. She should have taken her medicine before leaving the ship.

Albert watched her from the side, concerned but keeping quiet. He had severe burns too, and had never complained once. He had lost his entire family—his wife, two daughters, brother, and mother-in-law—in the blast that leveled D.C., and he had hardly said a word about it since. She could see he was hurting deep down, beneath the layers of muscle and grit.

"How are you doing, Big Al?" she asked.

He managed a smile. "I'm all right, ma'am."

"I'm so sorry about your family."

"Not your fault, ma'am."

"If you ever want to talk to me—"

"I know," Albert interrupted. It was his way of saying *not now*. He looked away to scan the interior of the troop hold. He was easily the biggest man there, but he wasn't a trained killer like the Navy SEALs. The men, in turn, all averted their gaze from Charlize and Albert. They were either anxious at

the presence of the Secretary of Defense or else their minds were simply elsewhere. She had a feeling it was the latter. Her own mind was racing like the F-18 Hornets still peeling off the deck of the USS *John Stennis*.

Every head turned to watch the fighters scream away, one at a time, from the aircraft carrier. One squadron fanned out to sea while the other tore off to Palm Beach. The Seahawk was following a dozen other helicopters in the same direction.

Charlize eyed the Osprey carrying President Diego, which was sandwiched between the small fleet of choppers. The other birds buzzed around it like wasps protecting their queen. She cupped her hands over her headset as the F-18s roared past them.

"Aren't those Hornets going the wrong way?" Charlize shouted over the thump of the rotors.

Senior Chief Petty Officer Fernandez, a handsome Latino man with a graying mustache, looked in her direction with the hardened, non-judgmental gaze of a career warrior who had seen action all over the world.

"They're heading toward the line, Madame Secretary," he said.

"What line is that, Chief?" Albert asked.

"The line separating paradise from hell," Fernandez said without emotion.

"Florida has been cut in half by an invisible border just south of Orlando. The grid north of it is down," Charlize explained.

Fernandez nodded. "That line is a moving target. We've already had to fall back in several areas. We're headed to Highway 4 after we drop you off at Constellation."

"It seems to me they need men of your caliber for more important missions than holding security on a highway," Charlize said, frowning.

"There are a hundred thousand refugees pouring in from the north, Madame Secretary. We're needed to help coordinate the units there," he said.

Charlize could feel Albert looking over at her, but he remained silent, too. He went back to tapping his burned Air Jordans, and Charlize lost herself in her thoughts.

The number of refugees was staggering, and it would only get worse. It was hard to picture when she looked at the city below. While the streets were busy, vehicles were still moving and the grid was still working. There was no sign of looting or riots, no sign of people suffering from radiation poisoning.

It won't last, she thought. The refugees would kill to get down here. It was all about self-preservation now.

Charlize shook her head. The country was collapsing after less than a week.

To the east, the North Korean submarines were watching it all unfold. They were hiding in their subs, but they would have to surface for fuel eventually, and when they did, she would nail them with the HSM squadrons.

But even with the North Korean threat eradicated, the country would still be tearing itself apart. Her job as Secretary of Defense was to try and hold it all together, and do it while she was losing her mind with worry.

“Madame Secretary,” one of the pilots said over the comms. “Lieutenant Marco is on the line requesting to speak with you.”

“Patch her through,” Charlize replied. She pushed the mini-mic to her lips and tried to remain calm. The XO of the USS *John Stennis* was her lifeline to Nathan and Dupree now that she didn’t have access to a radio.

“Ma’am,” Marco said. “I have a SITREP for you. Lieutenant Dupree is heading southwest over Interstate 70. There’s still no sign of Falcon. The pilots have about an hour of fuel left. Then they’ll need to fly east to refuel and drop that sick boy off at Buckley Air Force Base.”

Charlize wanted to order Dupree to stay out there as long as he could, but Ty’s life wasn’t the only one on the line. Alex was sick and needed help, too. Instead, she thanked the lieutenant for the update and went back to looking out the windows. She wondered if she had made the right call in telling Nathan to wait until the morning to leave Estes Park, but there was no turning back now.

For several minutes, no one said a word in the troop hold. Albert and the Navy SEALs all stared ahead blankly. Each of them had families to think about. There wasn’t a single American alone in their misery. Of everyone here, she was the only one who got to pull rank, and she was starting to feel pretty awful for doing it.

The silence ended with another transmission from one of the pilots.

“We’re ten minutes away from putting down,” he reported. “Senior Chief Fernandez will escort you to Constellation by boat after we land.”

“Take a look northwest,” said the other pilot.

Charlize leaned to her right for a view out the starboard side window. Her headache was worse, and the pain behind her eyes blurred her vision. The tops of skyscrapers glittered and flickered across an unfamiliar skyline. Plumes of smoke rose among the buildings. Dozens of dots circled the city—helicopters, she realized.

“That’s Orlando,” the main pilot said. “Or what we’re calling the Hornet’s Nest.”

Charlize could see why the city had earned the nickname. The bird continued turning, providing a view of Highway 95. Cars were creeping down the southbound lane, so slowly she could hardly tell they were moving at all.

On the shoulder, a small convoy of Humvees and military trucks drove north like fish battling against the current to get backup river. In between the vehicles, a crowd of people were making their way on foot. From her vantage point, they blended into a single snake.

“My God, there are thousands of refugees down there,” Albert said quietly.

“Hundreds of thousands,” Charlize replied, remembering what Fernandez had said earlier. She hadn’t wanted to believe it, but now she could see them with her own eyes. Even the pictures of refugees pouring out of cities in war-torn regions overseas didn’t compare to what she saw below.

At least the American military was supporting these people. In Iraq and Afghanistan, fleeing civilians were killed by bombs and missiles, leaving scenes of carnage on the road. Charlize had been there to see one of them firsthand.

Fernandez patted his helmet and cleared his throat. “Listen up, men. After we get Secretary Montgomery safely to Constellation, we’re heading down there. There are—”

“Looks like a skirmish on the highway,” reported one of the pilots. “Someone just open fired down there!”

Charlize and Albert joined the Navy SEALs on the other side of the helicopter. Fernandez held up a hand to keep her back.

“Better to stay seated, ma’am,” he said. “I don’t want you getting hit by a stray bullet.”

“That’s why I’m here,” Albert said. He crowded in front of Charlize with his hulking frame. Below, she could see a mob of civilians fanned out across the highway. More gunshots tore into the crowd, and those fleeing stampeded to escape.

“What’s happening down there?” she asked.

Fernandez shook his head. “Who knows? Maybe someone wanted a bottle of water. The stories I’ve been hearing…hell, I heard about a guy that shot someone for a candy bar.”

“Looks like the military is moving in,” Albert said.

Humvees raced down the shoulder of the road even as the pilots pulled away from the scene. Charlize cupped her hand over her mouth when she saw the bodies on the highway they were leaving behind. Dozens of civilians had already been shot or trampled to death in the chaos.

“Our job is to stop shit like that from happening,” Fernandez said to his men.

Charlize returned to her seat with Albert, still shocked by what she had witnessed. This wasn’t supposed to happen here, not in America. It took her several minutes to get control of her breathing.

As the Navy SEALs finally moved away from the windows, she spied a landmark she hadn’t seen in years. The rocket launch towers of the Kennedy Space Center rose like missiles above the horizon.

“Prepare for landing,” one of the pilots said. He glanced back from the cockpit and said, “You’re almost to Constellation, Madame Secretary, but this is as far as we can take you.”

She watched the ground rise up to meet them as realization set in. Constellation wasn’t some top-secret military base. It was somewhere at Cape Canaveral, the same place that had launched missions into space.

Years ago she had toured the facilities, first as an Air Force pilot, and then as a United States Senator. When she’d been a kid, she’d dreamed of becoming an astronaut for a mission to outer space, but those dreams were no more. She was the Secretary of Defense now, a role she’d never dreamed of taking on, and it was time to get down to work.

***

Raven had made a lot of promises lately. He’d promised himself and Sandra that he would protect his family and Estes Park from evil after he killed Brown Feather and Turtle.

He’d also promised to help Colton maintain law and order in whatever way Colton saw fit. Now the Chief was asking Raven to follow through with that promise by helping find and rescue Nathan’s nephew, who also happened to be the son of the new Secretary of Defense. Funny how that little detail hadn’t really come up much in conversation before now.

Raven crouched next to Creek and scrutinized the lawman and the pilot. He hadn’t particularly liked Nathan when he’d met him the night of the North

Korean attack, but Nathan had helped save Sandra and Allie. There wasn't anything less honorable in life than a man who refused to pay his debts, and Raven owed Nathan.

"I'll go with you to find the boy," Raven said, standing up and joining them.

"You sure your sister won't mind?" Nathan asked.

"Of course she will. That's why you're going to tell her we won't be gone long and that everything will be fine."

Nathan grinned. It looked like it hurt.

"I'm sure she'll understand," Colton said. "I'll make sure she's well looked after while you're gone, Raven."

"Promise?"

Colton nodded, and Raven shook his hand to seal the deal.

"Sandra might forgive me, but Creek isn't going to for leaving him here. Are you, boy?"

The dog looked up, eyes flitting from Nathan to Raven.

"I won't risk him getting radiation poisoning, and I don't guess there are any suits that will fit him," Raven said.

Nathan held down a hand for Creek to sniff, but the dog put his head back on his paws and snorted.

Good dog, Raven thought.

Around the corner of town hall came Patrol Sergeant Don Aragon. He pulled up his duty belt and jerked his chin at them. "Sounds like Cindy Todd's going to need stitches. She's bleeding pretty bad."

"You clipped her good, Raven," Colton said.

"Sorry," Raven muttered.

"I'm not," Don said. "I'm also not keen on the idea of wasting medical supplies on her. I say we let her bleed, but Lindsey told me to run it by you."

The words seemed to take Nathan by surprise. He turned to Colton. "You decided what you're going to do with her yet, Chief?"

"Need to talk to Mayor Andrews first before I do anything," Colton replied. "For now, get her stitched up."

Don rolled his eyes, but tipped his cowboy hat before walking away.

"I really don't like his attitude," Colton snarled.

Raven shrugged. "I really don't like him at all."

Colton shook it off and pointed at the VW van tucked between Raven's Jeep and the department's Humvee. "How do you feel about driving that?"

“You sure it can be trusted on the open roads?” Nathan asked. “Looks like it’s slower than a donkey.”

Colton laughed. “Not that slow.” He reached into his pocket, pulled a key off the ring, and handed it to Raven. “I wouldn’t feel right about sending you two out there in that swag mobile, so I’m going to let you take your Jeep.”

“Mighty generous of you,” Raven said with a grin. “Considering she’s *mine*.”

There was no trace of an answering smile on Colton’s features. His mind was clearly elsewhere. Raven plucked the key out of his hand and bent down to check a dent on the back bumper. When he looked up, Colton had already turned away to look at the crowd on the sidewalk outside Bond Park. Fifty people were gathered there. Some of them were shouting, but Raven wasn’t sure what they were carrying on about.

“I’m going to have to go deal with this,” Colton said with a sigh.

Nathan set his rucksack down next to the Jeep. “And we better get moving while we still have light.”

“Okay, but I need to swing by the hospital to drop off Creek and say goodbye to my sister before we head out. Otherwise, she *will* kill me.”

Nathan grinned. “My sister is going to kill me too when she finds out I didn’t wait until morning to head out there.”

“It is very dangerous on the roads, but I’ve already told you so a dozen times,” Colton said.

The back door to the police station opened, and Lindsey stepped outside holding two large duffel bags. She brought them over to the Jeep and dropped them on the ground.

“Your CBRN suits, gentleman. I’ve also added a Geiger counter. I’d say good luck, but you’re going to need more than luck out there. You’re going to need one of these.”

She unstrapped a third pack and pulled out a handheld GPS device and pair of night vision goggles.

“These work?” Nathan asked.

“Yup. Leroy Travis donated them to the department. Apparently Bill Catcher wasn’t the only prepper in town with faraday cages. Leroy also gave us a digital radio that actually works.”

“I’ll be damned,” Raven said, reaching out for the night vision goggles. The optics looked ancient, nothing like the advanced “four eyes” type he was used to wearing, but they would do the job.

“Detective Plymouth, I don’t remember authorizing you to give out our supplies, but I suppose Nathan and Raven need them more than us right now,” Colton said. He examined the optics. “They should help you drive in the dark with your headlights off. Might make the roads a bit less dangerous.”

“That’s what I was thinking,” Lindsey said. She was clearly rattled from the incident just hours before, but she still managed a smile.

“I owe you a coffee when I come back,” Raven said. He massaged the scruff on his chin. “Actually, now to think about it, I think you owe *me* one for saving your ass earlier today.”

Lindsey rolled her eyes. “Wouldn’t that make us even? Guess we don’t have to get a drink at all.”

“Wait, so I don’t have a chance at all now?” Raven said, frustrated and kind of confused.

“Maybe if you cut your hair,” she said, shooting him a sideward glance. “I don’t date men with hair longer than mine.”

Nathan let out a laugh, and Colton shook his head wearily.

“Go help Don with Cindy, Detective,” Colton said. “Raven and Nathan, I’ll meet you at the hospital after I finish talking to these people.”

“You got it, Chief,” Lindsey said. She walked back to the building, and Colton hurried across the parking lot and to Bond Park.

“Settle down, everyone,” he said, hands raised.

A flurry of questions rang out all around him. Raven didn’t envy Colton’s job. He was trying to keep the town from falling apart, but between the shootout with Nile Redford’s men, the brutal killings by the Tankala brothers, and the manhunt for the addicts who killed Officer Nelson, things were hanging on by a thread.

Raven listened to Colton try and reassure the crowd. Everyone had a question. Some people wanted to know about food, others about the killings, and others about military support. Colton didn’t have many answers.

“Chief’s going to need a lot of help up here,” Nathan said quietly. “When you get back, I mean.”

“Yeah, I know,” Raven replied. He looked over at Creek. He hated leaving the dog, but he couldn’t risk bringing him out there. For this hunt, he was going to have to sit on the sidelines.

“You take care of Sandra and Allie when I’m gone, okay, boy?”

Creek sniffed the duffel bags as Nathan opened them and rifled through the contents. Raven bent down next to him to examine their gear. In addition to

everything else Lindsey had shown them, she’d also included a medical pack. Raven opened the other bag to reveal food, water, and extra magazines for their Colt AR-15s.

They had everything they might need to track Nathan’s nephew to hell and back. Raven just hoped they would find the boy alive.

— 7 —

Alex was dying inside the oversized CBRN suit, and there wasn't much Lieutenant Dupree could do about it. He held the boy in his arms as the other Marines stood at the open door of the Black Hawk. It was a sign of how bad off the kid was that Dupree was able to hold him at all. They were headed back to Buckley AFB, low on fuel and low on morale after failing to find Ty Montgomery.

Sergeant McCabe crouch-walked back to the seat next to Dupree.

"Sir, there's no sign of survivors down there," McCabe said. "Although we did see some recent tire tracks in the ash. Two vehicles appear to have been heading east not too long ago."

"That might be the kidnappers," Dupree said. "We'll start the search along this road once we re-fuel and drop Alex off."

"Are we going to be able to sleep at all, sir?" Sharps asked. "I haven't gotten more than two hours in the past two days. This chopper isn't the only thing running on fumes."

Dupree looked at each of his men in turn. Even with the visors obscuring their faces, he could see the exhaustion in their eyes. No, it wasn't just exhaustion—it was doubt.

Watching the country collapse had taken a harsh toll on the team. Everyone was worried about their own families, and while it wasn't a Marine's job to question orders, Dupree knew all of his men, and not just Sharps, were wondering what made Ty Montgomery so damned important.

"Everyone gets two hours of R&R when we get to Buckley," Dupree said. It wasn't much, but it was better than nothing, and his men needed the shuteye to function.

McCabe exhaled in his helmet. He reached down into his rucksack and

pulled out a plastic sealed medical kit.

“Buckley AFB, ETA thirty minutes,” one of the pilots said. “They’ve scrubbed the base pretty good, but we’ll need to stay in our suits for now.”

“I’m tired enough to sleep in this thing,” McCabe said as he rummaged through the medical kit.

Dupree wasn’t tired at all now. The adrenaline was still pumping through his veins, and he had a feeling it was because things were about to get worse. He gripped Alex tighter as the pilots pulled farther into the sky.

“Jesus, look at that,” Sharps said from the doorway.

The change in direction provided a view of the horizon to the southwest. A black wall of smoke being fed by the burning forests choked the sky. Where there had been a gold and green ocean of trees, there was now only a bed of embers. If the rain continued, Mother Nature might have a chance of stopping what man had started, but Dupree had learned a long time ago not to hope for miracles.

“Close those doors,” Dupree said.

Crew Chief Locust got up from his seat across the troop hold and closed off the view.

“Am I going to die?”

The voice came from Alex. He shifted his helmeted head so he could see Dupree’s face. Tears streaked away from the boy’s filthy cheeks.

“You’re going to be fine, kid,” Dupree said. “We’re taking you to get help right now.”

“I want to see my mom and dad.” Alex licked his cracked lips. “Can you take me to my mom and dad?”

He began to squirm in Dupree’s grip. He nodded to McCabe, and the Marine pulled a syringe out of the medical kit.

“My friend Sergeant McCabe is going to give you something to help you sleep, okay?”

Alex glanced up at McCabe with bloodshot eyes and coughed. His small body practically vibrated in Dupree’s arms. Saliva mixed with blood peppered the inside of Alex’s visor.

“I want to see my mom and dad,” Alex said again.

Dupree kept the kid talking while McCabe prepared the needle. “Where are your parents?”

“Richmond, Virginia, United States, North America, Earth,” he rattled off in quick succession, his eyes briefly clearing.

Dupree held in a curse. Richmond was smack in the middle of another radiation zone.

“I want my mama,” Alex whimpered.

“We’re taking you to a hospital first. I’ll talk to someone there and see if they can contact your parents.”

“Okay,” Alex said. Tears continued to fall down his face as he watched the needle.

“This might hurt,” McCabe said. He pulled back Alex’s sleeve to expose the skin without puncturing the suit and then injected the morphine. It only took a few seconds to kick in, and Alex relaxed in Dupree’s arms. He was asleep a few minutes later.

“Help me,” Dupree said to McCabe.

Together, they gently laid Alex on the floor of the helicopter.

“He’s not going to make it, is he?” Sharps asked. There was empathy in the Marine’s eyes Dupree hadn’t seen before. War brought out a lot in men, and it wasn’t always bad. He had seen Sharps grow into a man over the past few years, and even though he was still a jokester, he was as courageous as any Marine Dupree had ever met.

“Sir, I’ve got eyes on a working vehicle,” Locust said from the door, saving Dupree from answering. “A Humvee…make that two Humvees heading east. Looks like a Colorado National Guard unit, sir.”

Dupree checked Alex again to make sure he was still sleeping and then made his way to the cockpit. He motioned for McCabe to follow.

“How much fuel do we have left?” Dupree asked.

The main pilot checked the gauges. “Thirty minutes worth, maybe a bit more.”

“And we’re about twenty minutes from Buckley?”

“Yup,” the pilot confirmed.

Dupree cursed. “That’s a small window, and Alex is running out of time.”

“Sir, all due respect, but that kid probably isn’t going to make it no matter what,” McCabe said.

Deep down Dupree knew it was true. He wasn’t ready to give up on Alex, but their primary mission was to locate and evacuate Ty Montgomery from Colorado and return him to the Secretary of Defense.

“Alex said those soldiers loaded the kids into a pickup, right?”

McCabe nodded. “I believe so, sir,”

The Humvees zigzagged around the cars stalled along the highway. There

was no sign of a pickup or any kids, which suggested this wasn't related to their mission. Still, it was their first sighting of any military presence out on the road. To Dupree, it was worth checking out.

"Cut 'em off," Dupree said. "We have to make this fast."

Both pilots turned to look at him like he was crazy.

"That's an order," Dupree said. He moved back into the troop hold, adrenaline rocketing through him.

"Locust, get on the M240. The rest of you, lock and load. I want to ask those soldiers some questions and see if they have any info that could lead us to Falcon."

The fatigue plaguing the Marines seemed to evaporate. They snapped into action, checking their weapons and suits as Locust opened the door. The other Marines crowded around, their weapons cradled and ready.

The Black Hawk shot over a forest spared from the flames, the wind from the rotors whipping the tops of pines like ripples in a pond. Dupree brought the scope of his M4 to his visor. The Humvees trailed a black cloud of exhaust on the off-ramp and turned onto another road that snaked through the forests.

"They have to see us up here," McCabe said. "Why aren't they stopping?"

Dupree pushed his scope back to his eye. The Humvees' turrets were armed with M240s, but he didn't see anyone manning the weapons. They raced down the road without slowing. A bridge crossed a stream about a mile ahead. From the sky, this tiny sliver of terrain still looked beautiful, but everything down there was likely toxic. Bluffs coated with moss towered over the road on the other side of the bridge. Gangly trees protruded out of the rocks.

The Humvees stopped on the bridge. The doors opened, disgorging soldiers in green CBRN suits.

"Look like they finally got the message," McCabe said.

Dupree lowered his rifle and turned to the cockpit. "Put us down behind that minivan."

"Yes, sir," replied one of the pilots.

"McCabe, Emerson, and Sharps you're with me," Dupree said. "Everyone else, you stay in the bird and watch our back."

McCabe hesitated. "Sir, I got a bad feeling about this. What if those guys are the same ones that took Falcon?"

"I'm hoping they are," Dupree said.

Sharps chuckled. “Me too. I’ve been itching for some action.”

Dupree shot him a glare. “Goddammit, Sharps, you’re a Marine. A few minutes ago, I was actually thinking about how you were growing up. Do you still not see what the fuck is going on down there?”

The tall Marine glanced outside at the burning skyline and the road dotted with stalled cars.

“That shit down there is our new world,” Dupree said. He let the words sink in and bent down next to Alex as the bird lowered into position. The boy was breathing slowly, lost in a deep sleep. Dupree was relieved to see he wasn’t suffering.

“I’ll be right back, kid,” he whispered. He touched Alex’s arm and then stood. At the door, he chambered a round in his M4 and turned the selector to single shot.

The rotors whipped up ash and dust below, spinning it in all directions. As soon as the wheels touched the ground, Dupree hopped out and ran at a crouch toward a minivan. The Humvees—and the men guarding them—were about three hundred feet away.

Wind from the rotors slammed into Dupree as he jogged away from the bird. McCabe, Sharps, and Emerson followed close behind. They fanned out in combat intervals, their weapons cradled.

“Eyes up,” Dupree said over the comm link. He scanned the bluffs bordering the road and then counted five contacts dressed in ash-caked CBRN suits. They all carried M16s, but one man’s was equipped with a grenade launcher attachment. He stepped away from the group with his weapon lowered toward the concrete.

Dupree motioned for his team to hold security here. He walked out to meet the man with the grenade launcher. They stopped five feet from one another.

“Lieutenant Jeff Dupree with the United States Marine Corps. Identify yourself.”

“I’m Sergeant Jack Smith with the Colorado National Guard.” He looked up at the helicopter, then back at Dupree.

“What are you guys doing out here?”

“Was about to ask you the same question. Sir.”

Dupree didn’t like Smith’s tone, the slight and faintly sarcastic emphasis he’d placed on *Sir*.

“We were ordered to help evacuate any survivors and bring them to a refugee camp south of Denver,” Smith finally said when Dupree didn’t

volunteer any information. “My unit split up about thirty miles west of here a few days ago after we were ambushed by some raiders. Bunch of skinhead fucks.”

“Skinheads?”

“Aryan Brotherhood types,” Smith clarified. “I’ve lost contact with two of my Humvees and a Bradley since the attack.”

Dupree sucked in a breath. He’d fought Taliban forces during the war, but even he was wary of the Aryan Brotherhood.

“We’re on our way back to Denver now,” Smith said. “Got more survivors suffering from radiation poisoning. Anyone out here is probably as good as dead, to be honest, and I fear my lost men are, too.”

Dupree looked over Smith’s shoulder. The other four National Guard soldiers were checking the bluffs. If Smith and his men were trying to trick Dupree, they were doing one hell of a job.

“How many civvies you got?” Dupree asked.

“Six, including a couple kids.”

“Mind if I take a look? We might be able to airlift them out of here, but I don’t have much time. We’re low on fuel.”

Smith gestured with a gloved hand. “Be my guest, sir.”

The distant whoosh of rotors reminded Dupree that he had a half dozen rifles on his back, but that didn’t relieve the anxiety swirling through his body. Even if these soldiers could be trusted—and his gut said they were on the level—his mission was falling apart.

Dupree motioned for McCabe and the other Marines to follow him toward the Humvees. His men kept their rifles cradled, but Dupree knew they were all on high alert. He still hated the idea of shooting Americans, but he wouldn’t hesitate to kill the bastards that ambushed Smith’s unit. Any coward that could do that deserved a round to the skull.

“Eagle 1 and Eagle 2, you got eyes on anything?” Dupree said into his mini-mic.

The pilots responded with a negative. Dupree relaxed slightly but kept his weapon at the ready as he approached the Humvees. Smith opened the back door of the first vehicle and Dupree halted, half expecting someone to pop out and shoot him in the head. But no one inside the first Humvee was going to be shooting anyone.

Two women were slumped against one another in the back seat, their skin red with rashes and shirts covered with vomit. A girl no older than nine was

sobbing and clutching a doll to her chest.

“It’s okay,” Dupree said, holding up a hand. “I’m not going to hurt you.” He slowly backed away and checked the other Humvee. Another woman and two men were resting in the back seat. The man was doubled over in pain, clutching his gut.

“They’re in bad shape, and the roads ahead are going to be blocked once we get close to Denver,” Smith said. “Think you can help get ‘em somewhere safe?”

“There’s plenty of room on our chopper.”

“Thank you, sir,” Smith said. This time, he sounded sincere.

“All clear down here,” Dupree reported over the comms. “Requesting evacuation for six more civvies.”

“Copy that, sir,” replied one of the pilots.

Dupree motioned for Sharps and Emerson to help him. McCabe stood guard while they helped the guardsman pull the survivors from the Humvees.

“Hurry up,” Dupree ordered the pilots. The bird circled once and then lowered back toward the highway. The two women from the first Humvee were in such bad shape, Sharps and Emerson had to carry them. They moaned as the Marines picked them up and slung them over their shoulders.

Dupree squeezed past and reached out to the girl in the back seat.

“It’s okay, sweetie, we’re going to get you out of here.”

She clutched the doll tighter to her chest with one hand and brushed a hank of brown hair from her face. Several strands of hair came off in her fingers. That made her sob even harder.

Dupree reached inside the truck and grabbed her, repeating, “It’s okay, sweetie.”

The mantra didn’t seem to calm her much. She struggled in his grip as he carried her away from the trucks.

“Good luck!” Dupree said over his shoulder to Smith.

Dupree didn’t like turning his back on anyone with a gun, but he was out of time. He looked skyward as the Black Hawk began to descend.

A hot flash of panic rushed over Dupree when the pilots suddenly halted their descent, hovering overhead. The rotor drafts slammed across the road, wrinkling his suit and whipping the girl’s hair around her head like a halo.

“Sir, we got eyes on a vehicle heading your way through the canyon. Looks like a pickup truck.”

Before he could react, a crack sounded. Locust, who’d been on the heavy

gun aboard the chopper, grabbed his gut before plummeting out the open door of the troop hold. He crashed to the concrete ten feet in front of Dupree, screaming all the way down. His bones shattered with a sound like the boom of a shotgun.

“AMBUSH!” McCabe shouted.

Dupree ducked down with the girl as a bullet whizzed past his helmet. He set her gently on the ground and turned to fire his M4 at the guard soldiers. Damn it all to hell. He’d believed they were all right. What the fuck was this country coming to when one soldier couldn’t even trust another?

Just as Dupree centered the muzzle on Smith, the man’s visor exploded outward. The exit wound formed a crater where his nose had been, making it look like he had two mouths. He crashed to the ground in front of the Humvee.

A few feet away, Emerson fell to his knees, gripping his neck. Blood streamed through his fingers and sheeted down his CBRN suit.

All around Dupree, Colorado National Guard soldiers and Marines scrambled for cover. Two of the guardsmen fired M16s at the bluffs.

Smith’s men weren’t con artists leading the ambush after all, Dupree realized. They were caught right in the middle of it, just like the Marines.

Dupree snapped into action. “McCabe, Sharps, covering fire!” He pulled the girl back to the relative safety of the Humvees. “Someone, get on the M240!”

The bark of 7.62 mm rounds sounded a few seconds later, and Dupree caught a glimpse of Snider manning the big gun in the sky. The tracer rounds lanced into the bluffs. Whoever the bastards were, they were dug in. Dupree couldn’t see a single hostile from his position.

He shielded the girl with his body and reached for his rifle. It lay on the ground a foot away. A round ripped through his hand, and he pulled it back like a kid that had touched a hot stove. Blood gushed out of a hole in the center of his knife hand.

Dupree reached for the Beretta M9 on his holster instead. He pulled the pistol with his left hand. The pain in his right was severe, but it was already turning numb. He peeked around the bumper for a target just as the other two guardsmen collapsed to the ground, their bodies riddled with bullet holes.

It was just Dupree, McCabe, and Sharps now. The other two Marines hid behind the Humvee to his right. Sharps was gripping his right shoulder where he had taken a round. Three of the civilians were there, too, eyes all wide

with terror.

“Give us covering fire!” Dupree shouted over the comm.

Snider, Runge, and Rodriguez were firing from the open door of the Black Hawk, but it wasn’t enough to deter their attackers. Automatic gunfire replied from the bluffs. Dupree still couldn’t see any of them.

“It’s too hot to land, sir!” yelled one of the pilots.

The other pilot yelled back. “We can’t leave them down there!”

A hard pause passed over the channel that felt like an hour. Dupree raised his M9 and searched for a target. Rounds punched into the concrete, pushing him back.

“Dupree, you got fifteen seconds to get to the troop hold,” one of the pilots said.

Fifteen seconds, Dupree thought. Fifteen seconds stood between life and death. He looked down at the girl. She was staring blankly at nothing, catatonic.

“McCabe, grab this kid and get her to the chopper. Sharps, you and I are going to lay down covering fire.” He pointed his bleeding hand at the other civilians. “You three, run as soon as we start shooting!”

Sharps met his eyes. There was fear in his gaze, but Dupree could see he was prepared to give his life in this moment. Dupree spared a precious second to nod at the young Marine.

“Ooh rah!” Sharps shouted.

Dupree yelled back, “Give these bastards hell!”

The moment Dupree stood to fire, he was hit by a round in the side. The bullet seized the air from his lungs. He grabbed the wound with his bleeding hand. Stars floated before his vision from the intense wave of pain.

Dupree looked up to a rocky outcropping and spotted the shooter. He lifted his M9 in his shaky left hand while the man who’d shot him pulled a magazine from his rifle. He tried to duck down, but there wasn’t cover.

In the stolen moment, Dupree squeezed off three erratic shots. The first streaked into the sky, the second hit the rock in front of the man, and the third hit the tree to his right. Overwhelmed by pain, Dupree fell to one knee and dropped his pistol.

Above, the man stood and aimed his rifle.

So this is it. This is your last moment.

He was never going to see his boys or his ex-wife again. The extra salt on the wound was not knowing if she would even care. He had been a bad

husband and a lousy dad, but he had to hope she still loved him to some degree.

To the side of his blurred vision, he saw Sharps running and screaming. The former basketball player was zigzagging like he was about to put up a layup. The fancy moves drew the attention of the man aiming his M4 at Dupree. He shifted the muzzle just as Sharps shouldered his rifle and fired a burst into the man's chest.

Sharps turned to run again, but he took a round from another shooter on the other side of the bluff. The bullets knocked him to the ground. He pushed himself up, but a second bullet ripped through his back, forcing him to the pavement. Lying flat, he looked over at Dupree wearing a mask of terror. The sniper finished the job with a shot to Sharps' forehead.

Dupree tried to shout, but all that came out was a muffled grunt. He picked up his pistol, stood, and staggered out into the street to distract the remaining snipers. There were two left that Dupree could see.

"Snider, two o'clock," he gasped into the comm.

Snider directed the M240 fire on a short man perched on a rock to the north of the road. The rounds took off his arm.

Dupree turned slowly, looking for other targets. As he spun, he saw the carnage on the road. Sharps and Emerson were both lying in puddles of blood. The guardsmen were all sprawled out and leaking red. Three of the civilians were also down.

But some of them had escaped.

McCabe carried the little girl to the chopper as the pilots lowered to the ground. Two of the women had managed to limp away under the covering fire from Snider, Rodriguez, and Runge.

"Hurry, sir!" McCabe shouted.

Dupree tried to move toward the Black Hawk, but he only made it one step before he crashed to the ground, his legs giving out.

Over the crack of gunfire, Dupree made out what sounded like an engine. A pickup truck was racing toward the bridge. The men standing in the bed were already firing at the chopper.

"Get out of here," Dupree said.

"Sir!" McCabe shouted back. "I'm coming, just hold on."

"No!" Dupree yelled, his voice cracking. "Get Alex and those civilians to safety…"

"We can still—"

“And tell my wife…tell my ex-wife I love her and the boys.”

The chirp and crack of gunfire sounded all around him. A round bit into the ground to his right. He lifted his head to watch the chopper pull away before collapsing to his stomach. Ribbons of red swarmed his vision. Dupree closed his eyes so he didn’t have to look at Sharps.

At least some of them got away, he thought. Dupree found he was okay with dying, knowing that he’d done his best.

He opened his eyes to watch the Black Hawk traverse the skyline. He took in a breath of air that crackled in his chest. Blurred shapes flickered across his vision.

“Which one of you idiots shot this Humvee?” snarled a voice.

Dupree gripped his pistol and tried to lift it as a pair of boots stopped right in front of him.

The man kicked the gun from Dupree’s grip, then bent down close enough that Dupree could see a squiggly scar on his forehead.

“You killed several of my men…” he said in a smooth, deep voice. He flicked the tag on Dupree’s chest. “Lieutenant Dupree.”

“Who are you?” Dupree managed to whisper.

“Who am I?” The man pointed at his chest and looked back at his men. “Who am I, boys?” He laughed and leaned back down.

“The General of the Sons of Liberty!” The men behind him raised their fists into the air.

“That’s right,” the man said. “I’m General motherfucking Fenix. I’ve been waiting years for something like this to happen. Ever since I got back from that sand trap shithole in the Middle East.” He spread his arms out to point at his men. “*We’ve* been waiting.”

He licked his lips, leaving them glistening. “The government has failed us. From one soldier to another, you already know that the tree of liberty must be refreshed from time to time with the blood of patriots and tyrants. I will lead the Sons of Liberty to take back what’s ours.”

“Fuck you,” Dupree snorted. “Don’t quote a Founding Father, you psychotic piece of shit.”

“Man,” Fenix said, his smile widening. “I was going to give you a swift death, but you just pissed me off. Let’s go, boys. I want to get these vehicles and weapons back to the Castle before dark.”

Dupree tried to raise himself up. He’d made his peace with dying, but he wasn’t going to do it at the feet of some White Supremacist jack-off with

delusions of grandeur.

Fenix watched him with an amused smile still plastered on his face. After a moment, Dupree collapsed back to the pavement, his strength gone. He reached out in vain for his pistol, which lay several yards away, his fingers raking through the mess of ash and blood.

The man mimed a gun with his thumb and forefinger, like a kid playing cops and robbers. “Bang, bang,” Fenix said, chuckling to himself, before walking away.

— 8 —

“You’re lucky he didn’t shoot you in the head,” said Sandra Spears.

Cindy Todd sat on the hospital bed in front of Sandra, both hands cuffed to the rails. The bullet had grazed her right shoulder. From what Sandra could see, the damage appeared to be limited to the epidermis and outer dermis.

The wound wasn’t nearly as bad as the other gunshot victim, Martha. The woman Colton and Don had brought in from Highway 7 was lucky to be alive. It was remarkable, really. She should have been dead after the exposure to radiation, dehydration, and blood loss.

Some people are survivors, Sandra mused. *And some just get lucky, whether they deserve it or not.*

She continued cleaning Cindy’s wound to prepare it for Doctor Duffy. When she had finished, he began stitching up the skin. That task became increasingly difficult every time Cindy opened her mouth. Sandra wanted to slap her—or worse—and Duffy didn’t seem much more enthusiastic about treating their latest patient.

“The pig killed Eric. That piece of shit killed him!” Cindy said. She yelped in pain as Duffy yanked on a knot. “C’mon, at least gimme something. This fucking *hurts*.”

Sandra reached for the nearby cart for a topical anesthetic, but hesitated when Duffy shook his head.

“Chief Colton said no pain meds.”

“What? That’s barbaric!” Cindy protested. “I need them. Those pigs shot me!”

“My brother shot you,” Sandra said. “He’s not a police officer.”

Cindy looked away from the wound to meet Sandra’s gaze. Sweat dribbled down Cindy’s forehead and snot dripped from her nose—signs that she was

suffering from opiate withdrawal. Sandra had seen this hundreds of times in patients. She had also seen it in both her ex-husband and Brown Feather. There was nothing like first-hand experience to identify an addict.

Without the opiates, Cindy would continue to crash until she was debilitated from a fever and terrible pain. It was like having the worst cold imaginable for weeks straight. Normally Sandra would have shown empathy, but she felt none for this woman. She was glad they weren't wasting medicine to treat her. Part of her wished Raven had finished the job.

No, you're both better than that.

Thoughts of Officer Rick Nelson and his family filled her mind as she waited for Doctor Duffy to finish stitching up the woman's shoulder. Did Cindy have any idea what she had done? Could she comprehend how her actions had ruined lives?

"You're lucky you didn't hurt my brother," Sandra said, unable to hold back her anger.

"Whatever, bitch," Cindy said.

Duffy shot Sandra a glare that told her to back off. She took a step away from the bed and watched as he continued to stitch up the wound. Cindy wiggled and squirmed against her restraints.

"Hold still," Duffy said. He paused and waited for Cindy to relax, then continued with the stitches.

A knock on the door interrupted him on the last loop. Sergeant Aragon stepped inside the emergency room. He fixated on Cindy, his nostrils flared like an enraged animal. It seemed Sandra wasn't the only one who wanted to give Cindy a good dressing down.

"Miss Spears," Don said, his gaze shifting to her. "Your brother is outside in the parking lot and needs to talk to you."

"About what?" Sandra asked.

Don shrugged. "Didn't say." Sandra shook her head. If Raven was in trouble again, so help her…

"I'll finish up here," Duffy said.

Sandra didn't bother saying anything else to Cindy on her way out. Nothing she could say would have an impact on a delusional, addicted mind.

Sandra tossed her gloves into a wastebasket and reached for the hand sanitizer in her pocket as she followed Don into the hallway. He pushed open the double doors that led to the intensive care unit, where the smell of bleach filled her nose. White partitions separated beds from one another in the open

space.

She tried to slip by unnoticed, but Doctor Newton called after her. “I need some help with Martha when you have a moment. Meet me in the isolation ward.”

“I’ll be back in a few minutes,” Sandra said. She hustled through the room but slowed when she saw the drape cordoning off Teddy’s bed was partially open. He was sitting up, blond hair ruffled in all directions, concentrating intently as he tried to figure out how to open a water bottle with only one hand.

“Hi, Teddy,” Sandra said, waving.

He smiled, his cheeks dimpling. “Hi, Nurse Spears.”

Seeing the boy smile was a miracle in itself, but watching him struggle with a small task like that made her heart ache. Children were resilient; even Allie was recovering just a day after being kidnapped and threatened by Brown Feather. But neither of them was out of the woods yet. It was going to take a lot of therapy to help Allie, and Teddy needed constant medical support.

Sandra left the ward, promising to bring Allie for a visit later, and jogged toward the lobby. Her daughter came running over from her seat next to Marie Brown, Teddy’s mother, who’d become her usual babysitter during Sandra’s shifts at the hospital.

“Mama, Uncle Raven and Creek are outside,” Allie said, extending her hands.

Sandra hugged Allie, but kept her eyes on Raven in the parking lot. He was talking with Colton and Nathan next to his Jeep. Creek was sitting on his haunches near the bumper, looking up at the open lift gate. Inside were bags of gear and two CBRN suits.

“Allie, stay here,” Sandra said.

“But Mom—”

Sandra hunched down in front of her daughter. “Baby, I’ll be right back. Okay?”

Eyes downcast, Allie nodded solemnly. Sandra walked over to the doors, palmed them open, and strode out into the cool breeze.

“Raven, you want to explain all that gear in your Jeep?” Sandra said.

“Hey, sis,” he replied gingerly.

She could tell by his sheepish grin that he was nervous.

“Where are you headed?” she asked.

Raven looked at Nathan and then Colton for support, but Sandra snapped her fingers to draw her brother's attention.

"Don't look at him. I asked you a question, Sam."

Nathan limped forward. His features were so swollen Sandra hardly recognized him. Her brother didn't look much better. The three men remained silent, none of them wanting to answer her question.

"Well?" she asked, moving her hands to her hips.

"I asked Raven if he would help track Nathan's nephew," Colton said. "I can't send any officers out there with them, and Raven's skills are perfect. If anyone can find Ty, it's—"

Sandra interrupted with a huff. "I thought a team was sent to find this boy?"

Nathan squinted as if he was in pain, probably because he was. The pilot had been through the meat grinder over the course of the past few days. If it were up to Sandra, he would be lying in a hospital bed.

"Ma'am—" he began to say when she cut him off.

"I told you not to call me ma'am."

Nathan sighed. "Sorry, Sandra. Someone took my nephew and killed two camp counselors. My sister is going crazy with worry."

Sandra brought her arms up and folded them across her chest. The cold bit through her scrubs, but it wasn't the wind that had just given her the chills.

"Who would do such a thing?" she asked. All trace of anger had slipped from her voice.

"We're not sure, but I'm hoping we will find out with your brother's help," Nathan said.

"Creek's going to stay here to look after you and Allie," Raven added, finally remembering how to speak. The dog stood and let out a low whine. "It's okay, boy. I won't be gone long."

Sandra shook her head in disbelief. "I don't understand how either of you think you're in any shape to go out there. You both look like shit. Do you know what will happen if you get an infection, Raven? Without antibiotics, you could die from a cut. And Nathan, you have a broken arm, for God's sake."

"All due respect, but I'm trained for this sort of thing," Nathan said.

Raven nodded in agreement. "Same here. Have you forgotten I was a Force Recon Marine?"

A beeping sound came from the back of the Jeep. Nathan limped back over

to his gear.

"That's probably my sister," he said.

A female voice sounded over the channel, but it didn't sound like the one Sandra had heard on Prospect Mountain.

"Major Sardetti, do you copy?"

Nathan pulled the radio from his rucksack and brought the receiver to his lips. "Roger that, this is Major Sardetti."

"This is Lieutenant Marco of the USS *John Stennis*. Secretary Montgomery asked me to get in touch with you to relay a message."

Nathan clicked the receiver. "Go ahead, over."

"Lieutenant Dupree's team was attacked on Interstate 70 about fifteen minutes ago. The Black Hawk managed to escape with half the team, but Lieutenant Dupree and several other Marines are MIA, presumed KIA."

Nathan cursed and lowered the receiver.

"Secretary Montgomery was moved to a secure location, but has given you the green light to head out and find her son."

A voice pulled Sandra back to the medical ward.

"Allie, get back here," said Marie Brown.

Sandra turned to see Allie walking into the parking lot. Marie stood in front of the building, lipping *sorry* to Sandra.

"Come here, sweetie," Sandra said. The girl buried her head in the crook of Sandra's arm.

"Major, do you copy?" Marco said over the radio.

Nathan held the receiver out in hesitation, then brought it back to his lips. "Tell my sister I'm heading out right now."

***

Raven watched Creek run after the Jeep in his side mirror. He almost slammed on the brakes to pick up his dog. For the past eighteen months, they had been best friends. Inseparable, even. Creek never talked back, always had Raven's back, and was a hell of a companion. That's exactly why Raven wouldn't risk bringing him. He simply couldn't ensure the dog's safety in the radioactive landscape.

He gunned the engine on the road out of town, leaving behind his dog, his family, and the town he now called home. This wasn't goodbye—it was just

see you later.

Or so he kept telling himself.

Sandra was going to be pissed at him for a while, but he owed Nathan. Raven was the only one who could help the pilot right now.

“Still got a couple good hours of sunlight,” Nathan said. “We should be able to make it most of the way before it gets too dark.”

“Where was Dupree last seen?”

Nathan draped a map over his knees. “Somewhere around this area on Interstate 70.”

“Okay, then that’s where we’re headed,” Raven said.

“Normally it would be quicker to take US-36, but I have a feeling those roads will be packed with refugees.” He studied the map for several minutes. “Yeah, let’s take Highway 7. It turns into 72 and then 119 intersects with Interstate 70.”

Raven looked up as they passed Prospect Mountain. Brown Feather and Turtle were still up there.

Let them rot.

He slowed as he approached the roadblock on Highway 7. John Palmer, the firefighter turned soldier, was manning the barriers. He lowered his rifle and walked up to the driver’s side window, eying the Jeep and their CBRN suits quizzically.

“Headed south?” Palmer asked. “Chief Colton approved this?”

“Yeah,” Raven said.

Palmer looked to the south, then back at Raven, shaking his head.

“Good luck,” he said, patting the Jeep. He motioned for his men to move the barriers out of the way.

As the Jeep growled away from Estes Park, Raven steeled himself for the road ahead. The men who had taken Ty weren’t his only concern. From the sound of it, they were going to run into bodies. Lots of bodies.

He looked over his shoulder at his gear bag. The empty back seat made Raven sigh. He already missed Creek. Nathan was checking his Colt AR-15. He pulled a magazine from his rucksack and palmed it in the gun. Then he chambered a round with a click. He rested the gun next to him and pulled his M9. He placed the loaded pistol on the dashboard.

“I’m going to charge your rifle, too,” Nathan said.

Raven reached out to stop him. “I’m good with my crossbow.”

“No,” Nathan said firmly. “You’re not taking a knife to a gun fight.

Whoever took out half of Lieutenant Dupree's team are very well trained."

"How do you know?"

"You don't know who Lieutenant Jeff Dupree is—was—do you?"

Raven shook his head.

"He was awarded a Silver Star for gallantry in Iraq several years ago."

"What did he do?"

"Called an airstrike on his position to save a dozen Marines," Nathan said. "I know this because one of the pilots who nearly killed Dupree is a buddy of mine."

"So he survived the airstrike but then got murdered by a bunch of American assholes back at home. Jesus Christ, that is awful."

Nathan grabbed the other Colt AR-15 from the back seat. "Don't worry, we're going to avenge Lieutenant Dupree, but you're going to need to pack some heat, brother."

Raven wasn't sure what surprised him more—the fact Nathan had called him "brother," or the fact he'd said, "pack some heat."

"Whoever ambushed Dupree and his men know what they're doing. We have to be smart. There's only two of us," Nathan added.

"Fine," Raven said. He focused back on the road while Nathan prepared their weapons and pulled out the Geiger counter.

The road wound through the hills outside of Estes Park. Abandoned vehicles were sporadic here. Most of them had already been pushed off to the side of the road, allowing Raven to gun the Jeep. He punched the gas down, speeding through the winding roads at sixty miles an hour.

They passed the remaining homesteads bordering the town, but there was no sign of people out here. No refugees, no raiders—nothing but open road surrounded by rolling hills dotted with pine trees. They climbed out of the valley, leaving civilization behind for a view of the fires to the southwest. A fortress of smoke drifted over the mountains.

"That looks bad," Nathan said. "I hope we can get through."

Raven took in a breath of filtered air and studied the fires in the distance. There was no way to tell exactly how far away they were. In the mountains, it was always hard to gauge distance. What looked like two miles could end up being ten.

They drove in silence, Raven using the time to think. As his Jeep continued the climb, he couldn't help but feel like he had somehow climbed out of the hole he had dug himself into after leaving the Marines. He had a purpose

again, a mission, thanks to Colton. Raven hadn't realized how much he'd been drowning without that. He still felt the weight of responsibility on his shoulders because of the disastrous raid in North Korea his squad had been part of, but he realized now that there had probably been countless factors leading up to the attack. In a way, the bombs had given him a fresh start—a chance to prove the man he was.

"So, what's next?" Nathan said. "How do you plan on finding my nephew?"

Raven pulled his thoughts back to the present. "Growing up on the Rez, I was taught two ways to hunt animals and people. The first you already know. You look for tracks, broken vegetation, droppings, or some other sort of trail. You listen for any sounds the chase might make and pay attention to your other senses. The smell of a campfire, for example."

"And the other way?"

Raven cracked a grin. "You let your chase find you."

"Sounds like a terrible plan to me."

"Most of mine seem to be pretty bad at the beginning," Raven said with a chuckle. "But they have a roundabout way of turning out all right."

His smile faded when he saw the lumps on the road ahead.

"Look like bodies," he said, easing off the gas. "Better check for radiation."

Raven scanned the area as he drove up the steep slope. To the left of the road, a metal barrier separated them from plummeting over the side into the valley below. To the right, ponderosa pines and aspen trees grew out of the sandy brown dirt. Farther up the hill, boulders and trees speckled the terrain.

There were hundreds of places for people to hide. His eyes were working in overdrive, flitting across the canvas for contacts. Anyone out here would be a potential hostile, especially if they were suffering from radiation poisoning—desperate, delusional, and violent.

At the top of the road were two bodies, a male and a female. Both were wearing blue ponchos and blue jeans. He slowed on the approach, one hand on the wheel, the other on the handle of the Glock he had holstered on a strap around his right leg.

The Geiger counter ticked to life, and Nathan held the device up. The crackling told Raven they were entering a red zone.

"It's bad," Nathan confirmed. "Really bad."

Raven's suit suddenly seemed to tighten around his chest, and he found it

hard to breathe. “How long do these filters last?”

“Don’t worry, we have plenty,” Nathan said.

Raven killed the engine and slipped the key inside his tactical vest. He joined Nathan in the street after grabbing the other Colt AR-15. Side by side, they swept their rifles over the landscape.

“Check them,” Nathan said, pointing at the bodies.

Raven gripped his rifle as he made his way toward the corpses. Gusting wind swept across the bodies, rustling their ponchos. Nathan raked his rifle over the trees, paused, and then continued roving the muzzle over the terrain. He gave the all clear with a hand signal.

“She’s dead,” Raven said. He looked down at the woman’s features. They seemed to be frozen in agony. Her mouth was agape, and her eyes were wide open. He checked the man by rolling him over while Nathan continued up the road.

“Raven, come check this out,” Nathan called.

He left the corpses and hustled up the hill, stopping at the crest to stare at one of the grimmest sights he had ever seen in his entire life.

Plumes of smoke billowed away from Longs Peak like a volcano had just blown its top. Hundreds of thousands of trees burned to the southwest of Rocky Mountain National Park.

“I can’t tell if the road goes through those fires, but there’s no way we’ll make it through if it does,” Nathan said.

“What other options do we have? We could go around, or you could wait for your sister to find you a ride via helicopter. But by then it could be too late for Ty.”

Nathan continued to stare at the smoke as if he was searching for something.

“Come on, let’s get back to the Jeep,” Raven said. He stopped at the two corpses to shut their eyes and then hurried back to his vehicle.

Nathan climbed in the passenger seat and exhaled. “Let me see if I can reach anyone on the radio who might know how the roads are east of here. Maybe we can backtrack and take the other route.”

He pulled out his radio and scrolled to the channel he had been using to contact his sister.

“Lieutenant Marco, this is Major Sardetti. Do you copy? Over.”

The reply of static hissed out of the speakers.

“Pull over for a sec,” Nathan asked.

Raven eased to a stop and looked out over the valley. Nathan fiddled with the antennae, and then opened the door.

“Stay here, I’ll be right back,” he said.

Raven kept one hand on the steering wheel, and the other on the gears. He tried to listen to Nathan talking outside, but the stuffy helmet made it difficult to hear.

A few minutes later, Nathan jumped back into the Jeep.

“So?” Raven asked. “Did Lieutenant Marco—”

“I couldn’t get through to Marco. I tried my contact at Cheyenne Mountain though, and he said the roads to the east are…not an option.” Nathan paused, and then explained, “They’ve been overtaken by raiders. Our only option is to continue south.”

Raven tapped the steering wheel and put the vehicle in first gear. “All right, girl. Into the gauntlet we go.”

— 9 —

Colton walked toward Bond Park with his wife and daughter. Their hands felt so fragile against his calloused skin, but his girls were tougher than they seemed. He tightened his grip, thankful that he could still hold them. Rex and Lilly Stone would never be able to hold Melissa's hands again. Parents had lost children and children had lost parents. Officer Rick Nelson's little girl wouldn't even remember hearing her daddy's voice.

That was the new reality. America wasn't at war—they'd already lost it. The battle they faced wasn't for victory but survival.

But tonight they weren't gathered in despair. Despite everything, they were gathered in celebration. Estes Park had avoided the radiation that had blanketed the region to the south, Brown Feather and his brother were dead, and Milo and Cindy Todd were in jail. For the first time in days, people weren't afraid to leave their homes.

Colton forgot some of his worries as the scent of barbeque drifted through the heart of the town. The torches burning around the perimeter of Bond Park cast a glow over platters of food the local restaurants and stores had donated. The display stacked on tables made his stomach growl. He had a feeling this was going to be the last time he would see this much food for some time.

"What do we do when it's all gone?" Kelly asked.

"You better start liking elk," Colton said. "You, too, kiddo."

Risa looked up at him, curious eyes meeting his own. "We can't eat Rudolph, can we?"

Kelly and Colton both chuckled.

"Rudolph is a reindeer, sweetie. Elk are a different type of animal," Kelly said.

"I'm already putting together hunting parties. We have a good supply of

wild game up here." Colton lifted his chin at the tables. "Plus, that isn't the only meat in town."

He looked over his shoulder to make sure no one was listening, then whispered, "I had Officer Hines take several loads up Trail Ridge Road and store the reserves in a meat locker we built. The rest I decided to have cooked up before it goes bad."

"Good thinking," Kelly said. She brushed her braided hair over her shoulder and smiled warmly at him. Colton still hadn't told his wife about Martha, or the violence on the road, but he wasn't going to spoil the mood now by scaring her.

"I'm hungry," Risa chirped.

"Okay, okay," Colton said. "Let's go grab some plates. Tonight, you can eat all you want."

Risa skipped ahead to join a growing crowd. Kelly hurried after her, but Colton took his time, enjoying the smiles and listening to the friendly conversations. For a moment, it almost seemed like a normal night in Estes Park—until he saw Detective Lindsey Plymouth, dressed in uniform, jogging over to him.

"Chief, we just got a report of a break-in at the coffee shop on MacGregor Avenue," she said. "I've also got some more bad news."

Colton wanted to sigh, but instead he jerked his chin for Lindsey to follow him away from the crowd. Neither of them spoke as they moved through the locals. He tried to hurry past the picnic table where Mayor Gail Andrews and Tom Feagen, the town administrator, were sitting, but they spotted him.

"Hey, Chief," Gail called. "Can I have a word?"

Jim Meyers, the owner of the Stanley Hotel, sat down at the table and nodded at Colton, but Tom merely shoved a spoon of beans in his mouth and looked back down at his food.

"How's the Stanley?" Colton asked.

Jim shrugged a shoulder. "Could be worse."

Gail tapped a finger on the table. "Colton, do you have a few minutes?"

"I'll be right back, Mayor."

Colton didn't wait for the inevitable protest. He put his hand on Lindsey's shoulder and guided her away from the table. This time they didn't stop for anyone until they got to the street. Looking back over the celebration, Colton had a feeling the chance to enjoy a barbecue with his family had just slipped away.

“I always thought I was lucky working up here. I was insulated from politics,” he said.

Lindsey raised her eyebrows. “Insulated from most everything else, too,” she said.

“I did get a little bored, but at least we had peace and quiet,” Colton admitted. He shoved his hands in his pocket and said, “Spill the bad news.”

Lindsey didn’t hesitate. “Officer Matthew is checking out the report of the break-in on MacGregor, but this is the third one today, Chief. We’ve been seeing vandalism across town. So far it’s been limited to a few broken windows and spray paint, but I’m worried it will get worse.”

Colton shook his head. “We don’t have enough officers, damn it.”

“I know, which is why I thought I’d make a suggestion…”

Lindsey looked over Colton’s shoulder at the citizens gathered in the park. He turned to see what she was checking out. Then he realized what she was thinking.

“No,” he said.

“But Chief, there are thousands of people in town who don’t have a damn thing to do but wait for help to come. And think about all those tourists stranded here.”

“I’m having them all vetted. If we find any police officers, then I’ll gladly deputize them if they want to join our department.”

Lindsey flicked her nose with a thumb like a rapper about to bust a rhyme. Colton really hated it when she did that.

“Just say it,” he said.

“You’ve got to start trusting people, Chief. I know you have issues with Don, but that’s exactly why we need more help. I about got killed today, and things aren’t getting any better out there.”

Damn it, she was right. Jake was gone, Raven might not make it back from the rescue mission, and Don was about as trustworthy as a snake.

“I know a few former soldiers that could help us keep things under control…for a small price,” Lindsey said cautiously.

“A mercenary force,” Colton muttered. He shook his head warily. “If this is going to happen, then I want you in charge. Not Don. Okay?”

Lindsey smiled. “I got your back, sir. Don’t you worry.”

She jogged back to the station, and Colton returned to the barbecue. He spotted Kelly and Risa eating at a table with several of their neighbors. His mouth watered when he passed a platter of chicken wings. Before he could

start loading up a plate, Mayor Andrews called out for him again.

Colton let out a short sigh to prepare for what would likely be worse than a grilling in front of a congressional committee. Every face looked up from their meals with the same skeptical gaze.

Gail set her fork down neatly on her plate. “I heard you gave a large amount of our gear and the Jeep to Sam Spears and Major Sardetti.”

“Yes, I did, Mayor. It’s Raven’s Jeep.”

“No, it *was* his,” Tom cut in. “Just like this food *used* to belong to the stores in town. Things changed when those bombs dropped. If we’re going to survive the winter, we need our resources, Marcus.”

“Chief,” Colton corrected. “And if we’re going to survive the winter, you need to get off your ass and start doing something other than complaining and eating free chicken wings. Raven and Nathan helped me kill Brown Feather and Turtle, and now they’re off trying to find the lost son of the Secretary of Defense. What do you plan on doing?”

Tom wiped barbeque sauce off his lips with a napkin and stuttered, “I—that’s hardly—”

“Listen, Chief,” Gail said mildly. “I think Tom’s point is that we need to be careful with valuable resources. For example, the woman you brought into town today.” The mayor looked at those around her and then back at Colton. “I was told she was nearly dead.”

“But she pulled through,” Colton said. He didn’t know where Gail was getting her information, but he was starting to lose his patience.

“But what will it cost to keep her alive?” she asked.

“Ma’am, if you think I’m going to let innocent people die, then we need to have a very serious talk. I’m all about securing our town and having a vetting process on who we let in, but part of my job is protecting those who can’t protect themselves.”

Gail rubbed her forehead. “We can’t save everyone, Chief.”

“It’s us or them,” Tom said gravely.

Colton mastered his temper with difficulty. “Martha was *shot*, Mayor. That’s different. Did you just expect me to let her die on the road? What if that was your mother, or sister, or daughter?”

“But she isn’t from Estes Park,” Tom argued.

“I’m making the best choices I can in a bad situation,” Colton said, trying to sound reasonable. “It’s my job to make those calls.”

Gail looked at him over her green-rimmed glasses. “Your own officers are

questioning your orders.”

Several other families enjoying their meals turned to listen to the conversation. Colton clenched his fist. Now he knew where she was getting her info. Don was worse than a snake; he was a weasel.

“Ma’am—” Colton began to say.

“Do you really think Raven and Major Sardetti are coming back?” Gail interrupted. “Raven is hardly reliable. How many times has he been in and out of jail?”

“Excuse me?” snapped a voice that Colton knew all too well. He turned to see Sandra Spears standing nearby with Allie by her side.

“What did you say about my brother?” Sandra said.

Gail looked Sandra square in the eyes. “I’m only expressing an opinion held by many of my constituents.”

“My brother is coming back, and I worked all afternoon to make sure Martha does make it. Turns out she’s a doctor, someone this town really needs, and Colton saved her life. You should be thanking him,” Sandra said.

Gail smiled warmly. “I’m grateful to hear she might pull through, Nurse Spears, but we need to figure out—”

“Hey!” Tom shouted, cutting her off. He stood and pointed as Creek darted away from the table with a barbequed rib in his mouth.

“That stupid dog took my food,” Tom said.

Sandra let out an impressive whistle. Creek trotted over, his prize still clutched in his jaws. She pointed at the ground. The dog reluctantly dropped the bone and sat on his hind legs.

“You’re wrong about Raven, Mayor. He and Major Sardetti will both return. With that Jeep,” Colton said confidently. “Now if you’ll excuse me, it’s been a long day and I’m going to have dinner with my family.”

Gail nodded curtly. “Good night. I’ll see you in the morning.”

Colton didn’t return the formality. He strode away with his hands in his pockets and his head down. He didn’t want to talk to anyone else but Kelly and Risa.

“Wait up, Chief,” Sandra called after him. “Do you mind if we join you for supper? I just got off a fourteen-hour shift, and they told us to come down here to get some food.”

Colton didn’t have the heart to tell her no. He smiled and gestured at the table where Kelly and Risa were already seated.

“How’s Martha doing?” Colton asked.

“She’s a tough lady, but she wouldn’t be here if it weren’t for you,” Sandra said. “You did a good thing, performing CPR. Did you get checked out for radiation exposure afterward?”

“I’m fine,” Colton said. “Don’t tell my wife about that, by the way.”

They reached the table and Colton made the introductions.

Kelly stood and wiped her lips with a napkin, then held out a hand. “Nice to meet you. I’ve heard a lot about you and your brother.”

Sandra scowled. “I get that a lot.”

“No, mostly good stuff,” Kelly said. She hid her lie with a smile.

“Sweetie, you remember Allie, right?” Colton said.

Risa nodded and offered Allie some of her potato chips. Creek looked like he wanted to take her up on the offer, but Allie pushed her face against Sandra’s side. He didn’t remember Sandra’s daughter being so shy, but she’d been through a lot recently.

“Please, have a seat,” Kelly said.

“We’re going to grab some food first,” Sandra said. “You stay, Creek.”

The dog sat next to Colton, looking up with dark, pleading eyes.

“Let me guess, you’re starving to death,” Colton said with a grin.

“I made you dinner,” Risa said proudly.

A hearty meal of chicken wings, mashed potatoes, and beans was lumped on a plastic plate in front of him, but Colton was no longer hungry. Tomorrow would mark the sixth day since the attack. Things weren’t getting better, and help might never come. Gail still seemed to think she was in charge of a quaint little tourist town in the mountains, but the truth was that Estes Park was in the middle of a warzone. People like Don, Gail, and Tom would never see the situation as Colton did: with a soldier’s eyes.

His gaze swept across the park, taking in both familiar faces and strangers who’d been stranded in town. How many of them understood what was really going on? And how would they react when they realized things were never going to go back to the way they were?

Colton grabbed the plate and set it down in front of Creek. At least one of them was going home with a full stomach tonight.

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A twelve-foot bank of grass bordered the circular island about the size of two

football fields. The walls protected Charlize from the wind, and it also blocked the view from any tourists who might pass this way on a boat.

The island was too perfect to be natural. It was manmade.

She stood at the edge of the boat ramp, the only spot where she could actually see the ocean. Chief Fernandez and his Navy SEALs were climbing back into the boat that had dropped her and Albert off. He threw up a stiff salute and said, “Good luck, Secretary Montgomery.”

“Stay safe, Chief,” she replied.

She watched the boat zip over the waves toward the mainland. They were going back out there, but this time they weren’t being inserted under the cover of darkness in some foreign country. Their duty was to hold security on an American highway used for decades by tourists traveling to Cocoa Beach, the Kennedy Space Center, and Disney World.

One of the Marines nearby called out to her over the whistle of the wind. He guided them across the island toward a blocky concrete structure. It towered over a group of soldiers. In the middle of the group stood a man in a blue uniform with a chest full of medals. He stepped out to meet them and offered his hand to Charlize.

“Welcome, Madame Secretary,” he said. “It’s good to see you again. As you may remember, I’m General Justin Thor. Please follow me inside.”

His voice was rough, and his face was even rougher, with one brown eye recognizably larger than the other. The pain was making it difficult to think, but she only vaguely remembered this man. Her eyes flitted to his three-star rank, but nothing rang a bell. Usually she had a good memory, but the meds and constant anxiety had jumbled her mind. Charlize thought she might have met General Thor at a budget hearing on special projects, but before she could recall anything else, the screech of the blast doors derailed her train of thought.

“Thank you, General,” she said, shaking his hand.

“This way,” Thor said, gesturing for her to proceed into the hallway beyond the blast doors. Banks of lights guided them toward elevator doors at the end of the short passage.

“I certainly hope this facility was better designed than the PEOC,” Albert said.

Thor looked over his shoulder and smiled. “It’s the safest place in the world, in my opinion. I’m a bit biased, though, because I helped oversee the construction. You’ll see why I’m so confident shortly.”

Charlize was too tired and in too much pain to care much about the engineering that went into this place. She stepped into the elevator and rested her back against the wall. The bandages on her burned hand felt tight, pain pulsating down her forearm. She needed to have them changed soon.

The elevator chirped and began to descend. Beads of sweat dripped down her forehead. She used the sleeve of her sweatshirt to dab away the sweat, and with it the residue of the burn gel. The one painkiller she'd taken today had worn off completely. Her nerves prickled, and her breathing had become shallower.

"Are you feeling okay, ma'am?" Albert asked.

Charlize tried to arrange her face into an expressionless mask. "I'm fine." The truth was that she felt like she might start screaming if she had to be stuck in this tiny metal box a moment longer. She'd never been claustrophobic, but being trapped in the nightmarish remains of the destroyed bunker beneath the White House had apparently done more than just physical damage.

"We have a very good medical facility here, Madame Secretary," Thor said. "I've already spoken with our doctors, and they are prepared to continue your treatment."

"I want to get to the command room first. I assume President Diego is already there."

Thor offered a brusque nod. "He asked me to escort you to Command personally."

The elevator jolted slightly when they reached the bottom and the doors whisked open, revealing another hallway and a second pair of doors ahead. Two rigid Marines holding M4 carbines stood guard.

They both snapped to attention as she approached. The one on the right moved aside to allow Thor access to the control panel. This time the doors opened to reveal a short metal platform leading to even more doors. The seams of those doors parted, and Charlize saw what looked like a fancy subway car. A dozen white leather seats furnished the windowless space.

"What's this?" she asked, hesitating on the threshold. She wiped more sweat from her forehead.

"Our ride to Constellation."

"I thought this *was* Constellation," Albert said.

"Not yet," Thor said. "We're still two miles away. This train will take us underneath the ocean floor to the main facility."

Charlize followed him across the platform into the train car. She took a seat next to Albert, wincing at the pain that raced up her back. The panel of lights above flashed green after the door sealed behind them. She immediately felt as though the air was being sucked from the small, enclosed space. General Thor sat across from them and clasped his hands together, fiddling with a gold Air Force ring.

A soft vibration reverberated through the train. There was a jolt as they separated from the docking station, and then a series of smooth clicks. The train quickly picked up speed, and all sense of motion vanished.

Charlize took in short breaths, trying to manage the growing pain and anxiety. She was going to have to take another pill if she wanted to function today. There was no way around it now. She blinked several times and eyed the Marine sitting to Thor's right, who was cupping an earpiece. The younger man leaned over and said something to the general.

Thor looked up at Charlize and proudly announced, "Constellation is officially now the home of U.S. Northern Command and our recovery efforts. President Diego just gave the order."

Charlize sank into her seat. The news meant she was going to be here for a while.

"Do you have a family?" she asked him.

Thor lifted a brow. "Pardon me?"

"Do you have a wife and kids?" she asked. There was a reason for her question. She wanted to know right away if he was going to help her get Ty back.

"No, Madame Secretary. Live free and die free. That's the way I've lived my life."

Charlize couldn't help but nod. "Easier to focus on a war when you don't have to worry about kids. I get that."

"Indeed, ma'am."

He looked at his watch. "We should be under the ocean now and will reach Constellation in about ten minutes."

Charlize closed her eyes for several moments. When she opened them again, her vision blurred and her stomach churned.

"Ma'am, I think we should go straight to the medical facility," Albert said quietly.

"No," she said, stiffening in the leather seat. "Take me to the command center first."

He hesitated this time. “You said if I ever needed to talk to you, I could speak freely.”

She glanced over and met his sad eyes.

“I can’t protect you if you don’t let me help you,” Albert said. “You need to see a doctor.”

“I know, and I will, right after the command center, I promise.”

Albert moved his lips to the side and then nodded. “Fine, but right after that. Even if I have to carry you there.”

“I promise.” She managed a smile and considered talking to him about his wife, Jane, and daughters, Kylie and Abigail. Charlize was all too aware that he’d chosen to protect her instead of going to them during the attack on Washington. If he regretted his choice or resented her, he didn’t show it. Then again, Albert rarely ever let any emotion show on his face. Sometime soon, they’d have to talk about what had happened.

But this was not the time or the place for that conversation. Instead, she closed her eyes to transport herself to a place where there was no pain or worry. She imagined the cockpit of her F-15 Strike Eagle, tearing over the ocean. Too soon, a hand on her arm brought her back to reality.

“We’re here,” Albert said.

He helped her stand with deliberate care. As soon as she was on both feet, the world began to spin. The green light seemed to flash in and out, and the white walls blurred. She blinked away the dizziness, swallowed, and drew in a shaky breath.

Albert helped her through the doors. Outside, Thor was talking to a Marine next to a sign that read *Level A*. He gestured for her to follow them down a windowless passage.

Boots pounded the tile floor behind them, the three Marines following. Charlize leaned on Albert. He was enough of a gentleman not to mention it, but his forehead wrinkled in concern. Movement flashed ahead in the first junction. A woman and man in white lab coats walked by with tablets in their hands. They glanced in her direction before disappearing around the corner.

The next hallway was filled with more people dressed in the white lab coats. Some of them chatted quietly, but others hurried to and fro with urgency. People flowed through the open double doors ahead.

“That’s the cafeteria,” Thor said. “There’s also a large study, library, and entertainment center on this level. Barracks and restroom facilities are on Level B. Labs and the medical facility are on Level C.”

“Labs?” Charlize asked. “I thought this was a bunker.”

Thor smiled like he was happy she asked the question. “This is a research facility, ma’am. We built Constellation to house over three hundred people, mostly scientists. Over the past five days, we’ve brought in the brightest minds our country has to offer.”

A flashback to the budget briefing years ago emerged in her mind. There had been a line item in that funding request for a top-secret facility. Was this it?

“President Diego wanted me to wait to give you the full tour,” Thor said. “Come on, we’re almost to Command.”

He continued walking, but Charlize had more questions.

“What is the purpose of this facility?” she asked.

Thor looked over his shoulder. “Constellation was designed to help lead recovery efforts in case of a major disaster like an asteroid strike. Needless to say, it’s also helped us hit the ground running with the response to the EMP attack.”

Thor stopped outside a pair of wide black doors, where a pair of Marines came to attention. They pushed the doors open to reveal a two-level circular room with a domed ceiling. Monitors lined every wall, and a holographic map of the United States was projected in the air over a long table at the bottom.

President Diego stood in front of that table, his arm in a sling. Staff, scientists, and military personnel bustled around the room, the worker drones in the hive of the command center. Diego looked up when the doors opened and nodded to Charlize.

Charlize tried to focus on Diego’s face, but it seemed to split into three overlapping images. She blinked several times until her vision returned to normal.

The president was smiling. “Welcome, Secretary Montgomery. Now that you’re back on your feet, I’m hoping you can start to lead the war effort.”

“Yes, sir, I’m ready.” Charlize staggered slightly, and Albert reached out. She hardly felt the pressure on her arm from his grip. She pulled away, determined to stand on her own.

“Wonderful,” Diego said.

“I’m anxious to get started, sir. We need to find those North Korean submarines before they can inflict more damage on our country,” Charlize heard herself saying, but she felt strangely disconnected from the present

moment. “I ordered HSM squadrons deployed before leaving—”

The migraine that had settled behind her eyes pounded, driving a spike of pain into her brain. A powerful wave of nausea and light-headedness followed, but she remained upright. Diego reached the top of the stairs. Once again, he blurred into triplets.

“Are you ready to help me take back our country?” Diego asked.

The room began to spin, and her knees wobbled.

“Madame Secretary,” Diego said. He turned to Albert. “Is she okay?”

“No, she’s not, sir,” Albert said.

Charlize tried to protest, but the world suddenly changed orientation and she found herself staring at the domed ceiling. The white lights brightened into a blanket overhead, searing her eyes and igniting her migraine.

Albert’s kind face moved into view above like an eclipse, and she felt her body rising into the air as he hoisted her up in his arms.

“Guess I’m carrying you to that medical ward after all, ma’am,” Albert said.

— 10 —

It sounded like someone was being tortured in another room. Ty Montgomery wrapped his arms across his chest, shivering. He was trapped in a cell smaller than his cabin at camp. There were two beds, but three kids were locked inside. Micah tried the handle again and then sat down next to Emma on the other bed. Their hair was still wet from being hosed down.

“Why did they lock us in here?” Micah asked.

“We’re hostages,” Ty said. “They don’t want us to escape.”

His mom’s bodyguard had gone over all kind of drills with him in case something bad happened, but Ty had forgotten Albert’s rules when it mattered. He never should have told General Fenix his name. But if he hadn’t, they might have hurt him like they were hurting someone right now.

The screaming stopped abruptly, but Ty continued shaking. Dr. Rollins had told him he was going to be fine, but now he was starting to wonder. The sweatpants and sweatshirt the men had given him were hardly enough to keep out the cold, and his stomach felt sour again.

Ty pulled the quilt up over his legs. Since he couldn’t feel anything below his pelvis, it was vital to keep his legs and feet warm.

Emma started sobbing into her brother’s shoulder when another scream reverberated down the hallway outside their room.

“It’s okay,” Ty said. “My mom is going to come get us out of here.”

The light bulb dangling from a cord illuminated Emma’s frightened, rash-covered face. She sat with her small legs hanging over the side of the bunk. Both her and her brother were younger than Ty by a few years, and he decided it was his responsibility to look after them.

“I want my mama,” Emma cried.

“Mama and Papa are gone,” Micah said. It sounded to Ty like it wasn’t the

first time he'd explained this to his little sister.

"I'm sorry for your loss," Ty said solemnly, just like his mother had taught him to say when someone was grieving.

Micah wiped the tears from his sister's face. She stopped crying after a few minutes, and her sobs were replaced by the plop of water from the ceiling into a bucket near the metal door. Water careened down the side of the rocky walls and collected in a puddle at the foot of Ty's bed. He wasn't sure where they were, but he guessed they were inside a mountain. Too bad there were a lot of those in Colorado.

"They called this place the Castle, right?" Ty asked.

Emma's eyes widened. "Like the kind with a prince and princess?"

"No. Not a real castle," Micah said, shaking his head at his sister.

"Why did they bring us here?" Emma looked at Ty for an answer.

Ty wasn't exactly sure, and he didn't want to scare the kids with his ideas. He still didn't understand what Dr. Rollins had told him about helping the General create an army. How was Ty going to help him with that? All he knew for sure was that most of these men were bad and they couldn't be trusted.

"Don't worry," Ty said again. "It's going to be—"

A long, pained screech split the air like someone was being burned with a hot iron. Micah and Emma's eyes both widened.

"Why are they hurting that man?" Micah asked, his lips trembling.

Ty tilted his head, trying to listen, but the screaming faded away, replaced with the plop, plop of water in the bucket and approaching footsteps.

"They got Joshua and Bernie," said a smooth, deep voice that had to be General Fenix. "How the hell did you fuck this up so bad, Carson? I thought you said it was the perfect ambush."

"They had a helicopter, sir."

"I know they had a helicopter," Fenix snapped. "I was in the pickup truck, but I should have been on those bluffs. Maybe then Joshua and Bernie would still be alive. You're a lousy shot, Carson."

The footsteps were growing louder. Micah and Emma moved away from the side of the bed, pressing their backs against the wall and huddling together.

"I-I'm sorry, sir," Carson stuttered.

Another scream rang out.

"I'm starting to think we'd have been better off with a vet or butcher, or

even that lady from the highway you shot," the General said. "Are we sure that Rollins is a real doctor?"

Ty understood then. The man crying out wasn't being tortured after all. He was being operated on by Dr. Rollins.

"He really needs pain meds, or we're going to have to hear that for a while," Carson said.

"If he's not going to make it, then why would I do that?" Fenix said. "If he makes it, he makes it. But we need to save those meds for someone who has a better chance."

"Yes, sir."

"How about Tommy?" Fenix asked.

Ty's teeth were chattering from the cold. He locked his jaw so he could hear the next response. Aside from Doctor Rollins, Tommy was the only one of the men who had actually treated Ty decently since the men took them from the Easterseals camp.

The footsteps stopped outside the door.

"He took a bullet to the shoulder, but he should be okay," Carson said.

"Good, I need his help with something later," Fenix replied. "In the meantime, I'm going to pay a visit to our celebrity guest."

Ty pulled the quilt up around his chest as the metal door shrieked open. General Fenix stood in the entry with a toothy grin. He stroked the bottom of his beard several times as he looked at the kids with blue eyes colder than a glacier. Carson hovered behind Fenix, his beady eyes hidden by the bill of his black baseball cap. Tattoos—some faded, some bright black, lined his exposed hands, arms, and neck.

"So, you're really Charlize Montgomery's son?" Fenix asked. "I heard she just got a major promotion."

Ty decided he wasn't going to talk to the General this time. He sat on the bed, eyes downcast.

Fenix kicked the bucket of water near the door. It hit the wall with a crack, and water blossomed across the floor. Emma sobbed into Micah's shoulder.

"Stop crying, kid," Fenix said. He turned back to Ty. "You don't want to talk to me? I get it. I wouldn't want to talk to me either, but you're going to have to eventually. Because if you don't talk, Little Mr. Montgomery, then I might have to hurt someone."

Fenix looked back at Emma and Micah with a crazed grin.

***

The jagged mountains had swallowed the setting sun, but the magnificent glow from the forest fires in the next valley brightened the view atop the hill. Nathan watched the fires licking the terrain like the devil's tongue, spreading out to consume everything in their path. Pillars of smoke rising off the inferno clouded the dark horizon, blocking out the stars.

He had thought they would need the night vision goggles, but the fires provided plenty of light to see that the road was blocked below. He cursed and pounded the dashboard with his gloved hand. There was no way through. They had spent over an hour on a dirt road to get back to the highway, but now they were stuck again, close to the area where Lieutenant Dupree and his men had been ambushed. There wasn't a doubt in his mind that his nephew was somewhere on the other side of the blaze.

"Reminds me of the burning oil fields in Iraq," Raven said quietly, as if he was lost in a memory.

"We have to make a run for it," Nathan said.

"You nuts, Major?" Raven shot him a sideward glance, his dark brows arcing behind his visor. "We'll get cooked like jerky down there. It's already been hell just getting here."

"You heard what they've been saying over the radio," Nathan said. "This is the only way."

Raven looked back at the windshield. "I think I'd rather take my chances with raiders than fire. At least you can fight back against men."

Nathan reached for the door handle and opened the door before Raven could stop him. He was sick of arguing. For the past few hours they had bickered back and forth about continuing through the mountains and which routes to take.

"What are you doing?" Raven shouted. He grabbed at Nathan's uninjured arm, but Nathan yanked it away.

"Listen, Raven, I came out here to find my nephew. If it means I have to walk through those flames, then I will."

Raven slowly pulled his hand back and put it on the steering wheel.

"Jesus," he muttered, staring at the flickering glow. "I get it man, I do. I'd go through hell and back for Sandra and Allie. But this shit is crazy."

"The entire world has gone crazy, brother."

Raven tapped the wheel. "I know, believe me. But driving down this road

is suicide. Our tires will freaking catch fire!”

Nathan pulled out his binoculars and scoped the valley. The flames had consumed half of the terrain, leaving behind a path of destruction. The fire was now engulfing the forest on the western and eastern sides of the highway. The jagged bluffs at the other end of the valley served as a natural barrier that seemed to be holding the fire from moving into the next ravine.

He felt like he was on a roller coaster that was about to rocket through an oven. It was hard to imagine a situation where they would come out the other side unscathed.

Nathan zoomed in on the path, stopping on a bridge crossing a stream about a quarter mile from the bottom of the hill. Steam rose off the banks from the heated water.

The trees on the other side had been reduced to piles of embers, and several charred vehicles simmered on the asphalt just beyond the bridge. He centered the binoculars on the softened, deflated tires of a pickup truck. Raven was right; if they blew one of the Jeep tires, they were toast. But that didn’t mean there wasn’t a way forward.

Nathan looked at the stream snaking through the smoldering landscape one more time.

“I have an idea,” he said, lowering his binoculars and closing the door. “I think we can get through if we keep to the right side of the road.”

Raven pulled out his binoculars with one hand and brought them to his visor. He quickly lowered them. “I can’t see shit with these.”

“Try the night vision goggles,” Nathan said.

Raven placed them over his helmet and raked them back and forth.

“Still can’t see a way through, Major,” he said a moment later.

“Just trust me. If we take a dip in that stream first, we have a shot of making it across the road.”

“What if there’s another fire on the other side of this valley?”

“Then we get in that water and wait it out. Our gas masks will protect us from the smoke as long as there is enough oxygen.”

“Yeah, but not the heat,” Raven said. “These filters remove the particles, but it doesn’t cool the air. Our lungs will burn.”

A sudden explosion flashed on the highway beyond the bridge. The gas tank of a pickup truck had burst into flames.

“That could be us in a few minutes,” Raven said.

Nathan felt his heart catch in his chest. This was a risk, a really big one,

but it was the only way forward. If they turned around, they would lose hours. It was a treacherous, slow path back to the turnoff, which would take them through territory that had fallen into anarchy.

“Please,” Nathan said. “This isn’t for me. Ty is just ten years old.”

Raven let out a long sigh, tapped the steering wheel, and then shifted into gear.

“All right, sweet girl, time to show Major Sardetti what you got,” he said to the Jeep.

He pushed down on the gas. Nathan fastened his seatbelt and watched the flames flickering across his vision. The headlights cut through the smoke drifting across the road at the bottom of the hill, capturing a graveyard of burned-out vehicles.

Flakes of ash and soot slowly coated the windshield. Raven turned on the wipers and sprayed the glass, but all it did was spread the ash into a streaky paste. Raven was leaning from side to side to see around the obscured view.

Just ahead, Nathan saw something lying in the middle of the road. “Don’t hit that!”

“Shit, shit, shit,” Raven cried. He tried to correct their trajectory, but that sent the Jeep on a crash course for another bulky object half-covered in ash.

“Watch out!” Nathan reached for the steering wheel, but it was too late.

The tires thumped over it with a sickening crack and squish.

“Oh God,” Raven moaned. “That was a dead body, wasn’t it?”

Nathan didn’t respond. He grabbed the handle grip on the ceiling as the shocks jolted up and down again. Raven pushed down on the brakes, sliding across the road straight for a burning tree.

“We can’t stop or we’re going to catch on fire!” Nathan yelled. “Go left, go left!”

“Were those bodies?” Raven asked again. “Did I just run over bodies?”

“Yes, and there’s another one at three o’clock!”

Raven turned left and fiddled with the windshield wipers, but that made things worse. The heat was rising inside the Jeep, making it harder to breath. Sweat beaded across his face.

“Ten o’clock!” he yelled.

Raven maneuvered past the corpse and swerved around a motorcycle lying on its side.

“Twelve o’clock!” Nathan shouted.

They came up on two charred vehicles framing the middle of the road.

Raven squeezed through the gap, losing the passenger mirror in the process. He cursed, but kept the vehicle steady.

Nathan focused on the blaze. From this vantage point, the wall of fire looked larger than it had from the top of the hill. They weren't even in the thick of things yet, and the vehicle was already taking a beating. Even worse, the rising heat was almost unbearable inside the suit. He felt like he was slowly being cooked alive.

"Hold on," Raven said. He slowed and pulled onto the shoulder where there was a gap in the guardrail large enough to let a vehicle through. Rocks crunched under the tires as he drove toward the edge of the bank beside the stream.

Another body lay curled up at the water's edge below, a last and desperate attempt to survive the flames. Nathan looked away from the charred corpse and held on to his seat, preparing for the jarring descent. Nathan's bones rattled along with the chassis.

Raven steered around a boulder and pulled down the slope. The bloodied cow guard scraped against a rock before hitting the water. He drove out into the flow of mountain run-off. Normally the water was icy cold, but not tonight. Steam rose off the water where it lapped against the banks.

"My poor baby," Raven said, gritting his teeth.

He powered through the weak current, the water coming up over the tires. Nathan wasn't sure it would make much of a difference now that he could see the flames in the distance.

"You ready for this?" Raven said. He pulled up the other side of the bank and veered back onto the road, tires squealing over the pavement. The wipers finally cleared the windshield, providing a clear view of the fire eating the forest along the road.

Nathan gripped the handle tighter. Sheets of sweat poured down his face, stinging his skin. It felt like he was breathing inside a sauna.

"Punch it," Nathan said. It was the same thing he had said to his old wingman and best friend, 1st Lieutenant Mark Blake, a hundred times. He didn't know Raven well—and to be honest, he hadn't made much of an effort—but Nathan was suddenly glad to have a wingman again.

Raven pushed the pedal to the floor, the engine groaning in response.

"Come on, baby," he said.

Nathan leaned against the door to look at the front right tire.

"How's it looking?" Raven asked.

“Good… I think.”

They swerved around a State Trooper’s cruiser and sped between a pickup truck and cargo van, losing the driver’s side mirror this time.

“Dammit,” he cursed. “I’m so sorry, girl.”

“Slow and steady, Raven.”

Despite Nathan’s warning, the speedometer continued to climb past fifty miles an hour. The inferno blazed like a tidal wave of fire. Nathan stared into it, determined. There was no turning back now.

Smoke seeped into the vehicle through the vents, squeezing past the towels they had covered them with. It swirled in the cabin, filling it with a black haze. The temperature continued to rise, too, and Nathan resisted the urge to take off his helmet and wipe his forehead.

This was it. They were almost to the flames.

Another pair of corpses smoldered on the asphalt just ahead. Raven twisted the wheel with calculated precision. Nathan tried to relax, but every muscle in his body was taut. He eyed the speedometer again. Sixty miles an hour.

The headlights cut through the smoke and hit a curve in the road ahead. Burning logs covered the path. Raven cut the gas and turned sharply, but there was nowhere to go but through the fire.

“Hold on!” he shouted.

The tires squealed. Fire licked the passenger side window, and Nathan reared back, gripping the seat with his broken arm. The Jeep tipped slightly, but then steadied out.

Nathan loosened his grip, pain setting in as Raven picked up speed again on the next stretch. Where there had once been a forest, there was now a cemetery of blackened timber and charcoaled boulders. Raven kept to the right side of the road, as far from the flames as possible.

Nathan twisted to see the terrain they had just passed through. The charcoaled cars, smoldering bodies on the ash covered road, and the flattened trees along the steaming river didn’t seem real. He’d never seen anything like this.

He turned back to face the windshield as Raven drove up into the safety of the cliffs. It was hard to tell where the smoke ended and the night sky began. Both men were breathing heavily from the adrenaline rush and the heat. Nathan blinked away the sweat around his eyes and focused on the orange flicker rising over the gray rocks.

He already knew what it was before they’d reached the crest of the road.

Raven brought the vehicle to a stop. He shut the Jeep off and stepped out onto the hot pavement with Nathan.

They grabbed their rifles and stared out over what looked like the epicenter of a nuclear warhead strike. He imagined this was how D.C. had appeared after the ground detonation.

“My God,” Nathan muttered. He took a step forward, his boots crunching over debris scattered over the road.

“Winds are changing,” Raven said.

“And keeping the smoke away from us for now.”

“Yeah, but look at the way we came.”

The shifting winds were spreading the fire behind them. They were trapped on a hilltop between two burning valleys. But at least the air wasn’t as hot up here. He brought up his rifle and zoomed in on the bridge below. A burning Humvee blocked the road just in front of it.

Nathan backpedaled, his boots crunching over metal. He bent down and picked up a bullet casing, realization setting in. “Looks like someone ambushed that Humvee from up here.”

Raven eyed the casing and then looked back down at the bridge. “You think those were Lieutenant Dupree’s men?”

“I’d bet money on it,” Nathan finally said.

“Come on, we better get back to the Jeep,” Raven said.

They climbed inside and kept their rifles at the ready while the smoke rose off the fires all around them. It was hot, like sitting in a sauna. Nathan’s clothes were soaked beneath his suit, but as long as the smoke and fires didn’t shift, they would be safe up here for a while.

“You think anyone’s still out here?” he asked.

“No way they could have survived the flames or the smoke.” Raven squirmed in his seat. “Guess we’re going to have to wait it out up here.”

“The fires won’t spread over the rocks, right?” Nathan asked, suddenly unsure.

Raven shrugged and closed his eyes. “You better hope so, Major. This was your bright idea.”

“You’re going to sleep, just like that?” Nathan asked.

He shrugged again. “We both need rest. I have a feeling tomorrow’s going to be a big day if we survive the night. You should try—”

A bloody hand slapped the passenger window and Raven let out a high-pitched scream. Nathan scooted back from the door.

“What the hell?” he muttered, staring at the blood streaks on the window.

Raven fumbled for his gun and Nathan grabbed the door handle. He pushed it open, throwing the person outside backward.

Nathan grabbed his rifle and aimed the muzzle at a soldier in a CBRN suit. He was doubled over, gripping his stomach.

“Help me,” he said. “Please…”

Nathan lowered his rifle and got out of the truck. He approached the soldier carefully.

“What happened to you?” Nathan asked.

The man coughed and pointed toward the bridge. “We were ambushed down there.”

Nathan glanced over his shoulder at Raven. He stood with his AR-15 aimed at the bluffs overhead, already hunting for threats.

A distant crack made Nathan flinch. The boom of thunder followed.

Nathan held up a hand toward the man. “What’s your name?”

“Jeff,” he said, his teeth chattering. “Jeff Dupree.”

Raven and Nathan exchanged an incredulous look.

“Lieutenant Dupree,” Nathan said. “I’m Major Nathan Sardetti… Charlize Montgomery’s brother.”

Dupree looked up, squinting behind his visor as if he was trying to see into the sun. He tried to talk, but blood bubbled out of his mouth.

Nathan took another step closer. “Let’s get back to the Jeep so we can take a look at that wound.”

Dupree allowed Nathan to help him back to the truck, grunting as they moved. Raven opened the back gate and helped Dupree sit down.

Nathan held in a breath when he saw the wounds. The lieutenant had taken a round to the side and another through his hand. It was remarkable he was still alive, but he’d lost a lot of blood.

“Lieutenant,” Nathan said. “I know you’re in a lot of pain, but I need to know about the men that shot you. I think they have my nephew.”

Dupree winced and looked Nathan in the eye, lips quivering. “I’m sorry, Major,” he choked and bent over, gripping his stomach. “We tried. I promise we tried.”

“I’m sure you did,” Nathan said. “I appreciate it more than you know. If there’s anything you can tell me…”

The lieutenant coughed again, and dark blood seeped from between his fingers.

“Shit,” said Raven.

Nathan waited for Dupree to regain his composure. The lieutenant licked his bloody lips, closed his eyes, and drew in a breath before opening his eyes again.

“The Sons of Liberty have Falcon,” he said, his voice little more than a rasp.

“Who the hell are the Sons of Liberty?” Raven asked, looking from Dupree to Nathan. “And what’s Falcon?”

Dupree reached up and gripped Nathan’s hand. “Fenix,” he said from between gritted teeth. “He called himself General Fenix. The Aryan bastards took Falcon to the Castle.”

— 11 —

Colton was up early enough to watch the sun rise above the Rockies the day after the barbecue. Streaks of purple and yellow climbed above the highest jagged peak. To the south, smoke continued to fill the sky.

Mornings were his time, a peaceful hour to reflect on the day before and the day ahead. At least, they used to be. The cough of a diesel engine shattered the calm not long after Colton wandered outside. Lindsey Plymouth pulled into the driveway.

He held up a hand, motioning for her to wait, and then slipped back inside his house. Kelly and Risa were sitting down to eat a breakfast of bread and jam. Kelly pointed to a paper bag on the table.

“What’s that?” he asked.

“Lunch,” she said. “Don’t forget to eat today.”

Colton grinned, grabbed the bag, and kissed his wife and daughter goodbye. They followed him to the front door to watch him leave like they had virtually every morning before the attack.

“Mornin’, Chief,” Lindsey said. She waved at Kelly and Risa from the truck.

Despite the events of the day before, Lindsey didn’t look too rattled. She smiled as he hopped into the passenger seat.

“Do you have good news or bad news for me this morning, Detective?”

Lindsey swiped her hair from her freckled forehead and looked in the rearview mirror as she backed out. “Little of both, Chief. I’ve already got a good list of people that qualify to be deputies. Got an Army Ranger and a guy that served two tours in Iraq as an MP.”

Colton checked his bagged lunch. A tuna salad sandwich. Same thing he used to eat almost every day in Bond Park with Jake in the spring and

summer, chatting about sports and fishing. It still hadn't quite hit Colton that he'd never have lunch with Jake again.

"What's the bad news?" he asked.

Lindsey started down the winding roads back into town. "Had another break-in. This time two men were spotted. I've already interviewed the clerk who thinks they're from the Harmony Foundation Treatment Center at the edge of the park."

"More addicts?" Colton said. "Jesus. I knew that place could end up being a liability. I want someone to head over there to see which residents have checked out or left."

"I'm already on it, sir."

"That it?" he asked hopefully.

"We're hearing reports of raiders over the new radio. Robberies, violence, and…a rape, sir."

Colton blinked. He had prepared himself for this, but hearing the word was a powerful reminder of how dangerous the world was becoming.

"You were right, Lindsey."

She tilted her head. "About what, sir?"

"Needing more deputies. I'm also going to run something by Mayor Andrews this morning. I've been thinking we should put spotters throughout the valley, now that we're going to have more bodies to help."

"Not a bad idea," Lindsey said. "Maybe we should assign someone to the Crow's Nest at Prospect Mountain at all times."

Colton nodded. "We're going to need more rifles. Might need to ask around if some of our residents are willing to donate some for our new officers."

"I'll put that on my list, sir." She paused, and then shot him a sideward glance. "Why do you have to run this stuff by Mayor Andrews? Woman doesn't know a damn thing about protecting Estes Park. She owns an art store, for God's sake."

"She's the mayor. She was elected. That still means something."

"Yeah, but—"

"You going to start questioning me like Don?" Colton asked.

Lindsey shook her head. "I've got your back one hundred and ten percent, sir." She parked the truck in front of town hall. Colton opened the door and went to get out but hesitated, remaining halfway inside the vehicle. Hearing about the rape and the increasing violence had him on edge.

“You watch your back out there today, kiddo,” Colton said.

Lindsey’s pale cheeks flared. “Kiddo?”

“Sorry. I meant to say Detective Plymouth.”

“Uh-huh.”

“Just be careful.” He wished he had someone to send out there with her, but his officers were all busy protecting critical facilities or at road blocks that Don had assigned them.

“I’ll report back in a few hours,” Lindsey said. “Good luck with Mayor Andrews.”

He patted the top of the truck and then walked into town hall. The mayor’s office door was already propped open. He knocked anyways and stepped into the room. To his surprise, Don wasn’t out checking on patrols—he was sitting in the chair in front of Gail’s desk with his cowboy hat on his lap. He nodded at Colton, but didn’t make an effort to stand.

“Good morning,” Gail said.

Colton looked at Don. “What are you doing here?”

“Sergeant Aragon is here to discuss a few items,” Gail said.

“Sergeant Aragon has work to do,” Colton replied. “These daily briefings are supposed to be between just us two.”

Gail took off her glasses and set them gently on the table. “Colton, please have a seat. Let’s not make this meeting any more difficult than it needs to be.”

She gestured for the chair next to Don.

“I’ll stand,” Colton said. He controlled his anger by counting to ten in his head. Starting a fight now wasn’t going to do anyone any good.

“Suit yourself,” Gail said. “Let’s get right down to it. I want an update on what’s going on outside this valley.”

Colton gave her a rundown of the major law enforcement and recovery activities since the EMP attack, including the capture of the Todds, as well as his plans for elk hunting and water preservation. He finished with the task that he’d given Detective Plymouth to find new officers.

“How many officers?” Gail asked.

“As many as it takes,” Don said before Colton could answer. “We can’t let anyone in. We have to cut off the borders.”

Colton narrowed his eyes at the sergeant. They’d butted heads before, but Don had never shown this kind of attitude. Maybe it was because Jake was gone, but Colton had the feeling Don had finally decided to make a power

play.

“I’d like to be in charge of the deputizing,” Don said. “Lindsey is a smart young lady, but she isn’t trained in hiring.”

“She’s more than capable, and I’ve already put her in charge,” Colton said.

Gail tapped her finger on the desk. “Back to the elk. How are we going to protect the herds? We need to be careful about how many we kill.”

“I’ve already talked to Ranger Field, and he’s going to help monitor the hunts and make sure the rules are enforced.”

“When the food is gone, we’re not getting more,” Don said. “We need to consider evacuating all non-locals. There’s no way we can feed everyone indefinitely.”

“*Evacuating*?” Colton clenched his fist. “Is that what you’d call it?”

“Anyone who doesn’t have a valuable skill set is a burden on our town,” Don said. “You’re the one who told our officers to not let anyone in who can’t contribute.”

“I also said anyone already in town the night of the attack would be safe here.” Colton’s fingers twitched as though they wanted nothing more than to curl into a fist and sock Don in the jaw. “I’m not going back on my word, Sergeant.”

“All due respect, but you’ve made some poor decisions lately,” Don said. “First with the handling of the murders, letting Raven and Nathan take our best vehicle, and then using medical supplies on a woman who probably won’t live.”

Colton shook his head. “Not this bullshit again.”

“Stop it, both of you,” Gail said.

Colton continued to glare at Don, who held his gaze.

“If you’re both done,” she said, looking between the two men, “there’s something else I want to discuss. Our jail was never meant for holding prisoners long term. What do you suggest we do about Milo and Cindy Todd?”

“Hang them,” Don said.

Colton couldn’t believe his ears. He gawked at his patrol sergeant. Was this the world they were living in now—a world where justice was decided in an office instead of a courtroom?

“That’s insane,” Colton said. “We can’t start executing criminals.”

“I’ll do it if you won’t,” Don said.

“Are you sure they helped kill Officer Nelson?” Gail asked.

“Not a doubt in my mind,” Colton said. “They would have killed me, Lindsey, and Raven in the forest off Devils Gulch, too.”

Gail bowed her head and massaged her wrinkled forehead. When she looked up, she gave an order Colton wasn’t sure he could follow.

“Execute them, Chief. We have to be strong. We have to show everyone that Estes Park will not be broken by violence and fear.”

“Damn straight,” Don said, his black eyes gleaming.

If Colton didn’t know better, he’d think the sergeant was excited about the notion.

What the hell was happening to the people of his town?

***

Sandra was exhausted, but she made herself put on a clean set of scrubs. It was her last pair, so she’d need to figure out the best way to wash her laundry soon.

Teddy was first on her rounds when she got to the hospital for another fourteen-hour shift. She stopped at her station and put on gown, gloves, facemask, and goggles, all necessary for extra protection while checking his wounds. Necrotizing fasciitis was a complex condition. It required constant monitoring and lots of antibiotics. If Teddy didn’t heal soon, they would have to venture out of Estes Park to find him the meds, or else they’d have to cut off any newly infected tissue. Hyperbaric oxygen chambers and other high-tech treatments were not an option with the power off.

Teddy was sleeping on his back, blond hair matted to his head. She checked his vitals with care, trying not to wake him. His pulse, blood pressure, and respiration were normal, but she could tell he was running a slight fever by the sweat on his forehead. She checked it with an old-school thermometer and watched the mercury rise to one hundred and one degrees.

Teddy blinked several times when she dabbed his forehead with a cold cloth. When he finally focused on her, a smile dimpled his cheeks.

“Hi, sweetie,” she said. “How are you feeling?”

“I’m kinda hot.” He craned his neck to look around. “Is my mom here?”

“No, she’s looking after my Allie right now.”

Teddy raised his stump and examined the bandage. “It hurts this morning.”

“I’m going to check it in a second, okay?”

He nodded and rested his head back on the pillow, his smile gone. Over the past few days, Sandra had seen his mood slipping. It was beginning to sink in that his arm was gone. He always looked away when she checked the dressing, as she was doing now. He'd been in the hospital for weeks now after being rushed here with gangrene-like symptoms. At that point he had already been suffering from the flesh-eating bacteria, and it had been too late to save his forearm.

She slowly rotated his arm in her gloved hands to examine the site of the amputation for inflammation. It all seemed to be healing nicely, until she saw the red, swollen patch of skin.

"Am I okay?" he asked.

Sandra hesitated, wondering if she should call Doctor Duffy over right away. She bandaged his arm back up and smiled. "Don't worry. I'll be back soon, okay?"

"Okay," Teddy said. He positioned himself on his side, hugging a stuffed bear against his chest.

Sandra walked back into the main area to look for Doctor Duffy. He was standing outside the isolation room where they were keeping Martha.

Duffy looked up from a clipboard as she approached. "Sandra, good morning. How's our youngest patient?"

"Teddy has some inflamed skin around his elbow."

"I'll go take a look," Duffy said. He cursed under his breath. "We're running low on antibiotics."

"I know," Sandra said.

"Martha's in pretty rough shape, too," Duffy said. "She still hasn't said a single word since Colton and Don dropped her off. Colton asked me to try and figure out what happened out there. I'd like to see if you can get her to talk when she wakes up."

Sandra looked through the glass panel into Martha's room. She was sleeping, her chest slowly moving up and down. Duffy arched his bushy brown eyebrows and held the door open for Sandra.

"Check her vitals," he said. "I'll go check on Teddy."

Sandra nodded.

Duffy stepped back into the other room and Sandra prepared to check Martha's vitals. Just as the door clicked shut, Martha's eyelids fluttered open.

"Doctor Duffy," Sandra cried out. "She's awake!"

Footsteps pounded the tile floor outside, and Duffy opened the door a

second later. He joined Sandra at the bedside.

“Ma’am, can you hear me?” Duffy asked.

Martha struggled to raise her eyelids. Half open, her eyes flitted from Duffy to Sandra.

“I’m Doctor Duffy and this is Nurse Spears.”

The woman looked at Sandra with frightened eyes. “The children,” she mumbled through cracked lips. Her voice broke, and she brought a hand up and pointed to her mouth.

“Water,” Sandra said. “She needs water.”

Duffy returned with a bottle and helped position the straw at Martha’s mouth.

She took several long gulps, then jerked her head away from the straw.

“The children,” she said again. She was breathing faster, lungs wheezing. “You have to find the children.”

Duffy looked at Sandra, then back at Martha.

“What children?” he asked.

“The soldiers…they took the children on the road. Have to find them.” Martha gasped for air. You have to—” Her voice cracked again, and her eyes rolled up into her skull as she lost consciousness.

***

Raven put another blackened rock on top of the pile covering the fresh grave. Hundreds of years ago, his ancestors had buried their dead like this, but Raven never thought he would be doing the same thing on the side of a highway.

“He was a hero,” Nathan said.

“There wasn’t anything else you could do for him,” Raven said.

They had spent the night trying to save Lieutenant Dupree’s life while the fires raged around them. Four hours before sunrise, the Marine had succumbed to his wounds.

Raven stood beside the grave in the gray morning haze and looked out over the smoldering valley below, shaking his head. Dupree hadn’t been able to tell them much before he died—and what he had said left Raven wondering if the lieutenant had gone crazy. He’d been ranting about castles and birds and Nazis.

“You follow any of what he was saying?” Raven asked.

Nathan nodded thoughtfully. “Ty’s code word is ‘falcon.’ Not sure about the castle, but it sounds like some kind of Aryan Brotherhood, white supremacist types are behind the kidnapping.”

“So you think we’re looking for a bunch of skinheads?” Raven asked.

“Yeah, and I think we should get moving,” Nathan said. His boots sank into the mud as he walked back to the Jeep. The rains had finally suffocated the fires and turned the charcoaled terrain into a soggy mixture of mud and ash. Their CBRN suits were smeared with the black residue.

Nathan held the Geiger counter toward the sky. The chirp of the counter sounded, rising into a steady tick.

“I’ll be damned,” Nathan said. “The radiation readings have gone down. Makes sense, I guess. Last night’s storm must have further precipitated the radiation.”

“Precipitated?” Raven asked.

“Yes,” Nathan said confidently. “We should be good to take our suits off.”

Raven didn’t hesitate in removing his helmet. He pulled it off and took in a breath of steamy air that carried the overwhelming scent of smoke.

“Come on,” Nathan said. “I want to cover as much ground as possible today.”

He glanced down at Dupree’s grave one last time and then patted Raven on the shoulder.

“We’re going to avenge him, and we’re going to find Ty,” Nathan said.

Raven pulled his ponytail behind his head and tied it in a knot on the way back to the Jeep. He wasn’t overly optimistic, and he was beyond exhausted. He shook away the fog of war, something he hadn’t experienced since North Korea.

Raven went to open the Jeep door but stopped when something strange caught his eye. He stared at the blackened carcass of an animal resting by a boulder on the side of the road. Bending down, he pulled out a quill from the dead porcupine. He held it in his fingers, a chill going through his fatigued body. He set the quill on the dashboard and grabbed a cloth from his backpack. He dabbed it in water and then wiped his forehead clean.

“Shit. This is the end of the world, Major. No doubt about that now,” Raven said. “I thought maybe we could come back from this, but I think this is the end of the line for the human race.”

Nathan swallowed a piece of granola and tilted his head to one side.

“What?”

“I said the same thing to Colton the other night. The signs are all around us.”

“Yeah,” Nathan said. He dumped water onto a cloth to scrub his face. “North Korea did nuke us. I’m not sure if the country is going to bounce back for a while, but I don’t exactly think this is the end of our species.”

“It is,” Raven said with confidence. For some reason, the revelation didn’t bother him as much as he thought it would.

“Maybe not today, and maybe not tomorrow,” he said, “but this is the end of civilization as we know it. The old Sioux woman has finally finished her quilt.”

“Huh?” Nathan said.

Raven started the engine and began driving down the hill. “There’s a Sioux story that tells of a place where the prairie meets the badlands—a place with a hidden cave.”

“You’re starting to sound a bit crazy, man.”

“Just listen,” Raven said. He paused and rolled his window down slightly. “Inside the cave lives a woman. She’s been there for thousands of years working on a blanket strip of her buffalo robe. Beside her sits Shunka Sapa, a massive black dog. He watches her while she flattens the porcupine quills with her teeth for the quilt. A large fire burns in a pit. This fire has been going for thousands of years inside this cave, and over the fire burns a pot of Wojapi, or berry soup.”

“Does this story have a point?” Nathan asked.

Raven steered around a vehicle and kept talking. “Every once in a while the woman gets up to stir the soup, and the big black dog pulls the quills from her blanket strip.”

“So what?”

Raven shook his head as they approached the Humvee on the bridge. “This is where that ambush happened,” he said.

White ash surrounded the deflated tires. Every window had broken, and the paint was burned away. An explosion had blown the top open like a turtle shell that had detonated from the inside.

“I have a feeling some of these skinhead bastards are also soldiers. Not just this General Fenix asshole that Dupree mentioned,” Nathan said. “Who else could get a drop on Dupree’s unit?”

Raven slowly drove over the bridge, a gray mist rising around the vehicle.

He'd had the same suspicions about their chases. From here on out, Raven had to keep an eye on every bluff to ensure they didn't end up like the lieutenant and his team.

Nathan had the same idea. He gripped his carbine in both hands.

"You going to finish your story or what?"

"Yeah, sorry," Raven said. "The Sioux legend says that when the woman finishes her blanket strip, the world will come to an end."

Raven scooped the porcupine quill off the dashboard. "I found this on the side of the road back there."

"It's just a coincidence."

"No," Raven said. "It's not."

He eased off the gas when he saw bodies on the road ahead. He brought the Jeep to a stop. The nearest corpse was so badly disfigured from the flames that Raven couldn't see the features. He stepped out onto the street and bent down to read the nametag on what was left of the man's uniform. Raven put his sleeve over his nose to keep out the scent of burned flesh.

"Looks like this guy was with the Colorado National Guard," Raven said. "Last name was S-something. Shit, I can't make it out."

"Let me see," Nathan said. He hustled around the Jeep to take a look.

"Doesn't make any sense," Nathan said. "Why would the Marine team have been ambushed with a Colorado National Guard unit?"

"You think the guard unit were in on it?"

Nathan was already moving back to the truck. "No idea, man, but we don't have time to sit around and investigate."

"We're just going to leave these bodies out here?" Raven called out after him. "You don't even want to drag them off the road?"

Raven already knew what Nathan's answer would be. They didn't have time to bury these soldiers like they had Dupree. He jumped back in the vehicle, feeling like he was betraying the ghost of every Marine that had ever died by leaving Dupree's men and the guard unit on the road. He didn't like to admit he was sentimental, but leaving a man behind, even a dead one, threatened to bring him to tears.

I will come back, Raven promised. He eyed the quill on the dashboard again, hoping Nathan was right about the Sioux story only being a coincidence.

— 12 —

“I have a plan,” Ty said quietly.

Micah sat up in the bed across the small room. Emma was next to him, sleeping.

“A plan for what?” Micah whispered.

“To get us out of here, but I need your help,” Ty replied.

Using his hands, he picked up his legs and moved them over the side of his bed. He paused to listen for footsteps in the hallway outside. Hearing none, he reached over for the handles of his wheelchair and positioned it in front of his bed. He was skinny, but his lean arm muscles and lots of experience allowed him to move into the chair with ease.

“Where are we going to go?” Micah asked.

“Anywhere but here. These men want to use us for something bad,” Ty said.

Emma stirred and rubbed her eyes. “I don’t feel good.” She scratched at a sore on her face.

Footfalls cut Micah off before he could reply. They rapped down the hall and stopped outside the door. There was a click, and then the metal door shrieked open.

Carson stepped into the room and pulled off his baseball cap to run a hand over his shiny scalp.

“Get up,” he said, snickering. “Those of you that can.”

Ty clenched his jaw. He really, really didn’t like Carson.

“I need to go to the potty,” Emma said shyly.

“Great, just my fucking luck,” Carson muttered. Body odor drifted into the room with him as he walked over to her bedside.

“Watch your language around the kids,” came a second voice.

Standing in the entrance was Dr. Rollins. Ty still didn't know how to feel about the doctor. Was he a good man? If so, why was he helping General Fenix? All Ty knew was that he had to get out of here before the General could use him.

"How are you feeling, Ty?" Dr. Rollins asked.

"I'm fine, but I have to go to the bathroom, too."

The doctor walked over to Ty's bed and crouched down in front of him. He reached into his vest pocket and pulled out a piece of licorice. "Go ahead," Dr. Rollins said, holding out his hand.

Ty narrowed his eyes at the candy. He was hungry, but he didn't want anything from these men. "Give it to Micah or Emma."

Emma licked her lips and held out her hand, but Dr. Rollins frowned, hesitating. He tossed the candy to the girl and turned back to Ty.

"General Fenix wants you healthy, and it's my job to make sure you stay that way," he said. "Come on, help me with them, Carson."

Dr. Rollins grabbed the handles of Ty's chair and wheeled him into the hallway.

"You stink, mister," Emma said.

Ty couldn't help but chuckle at her serious tone.

"Shut up," Carson replied.

Dr. Rollins pushed Ty around the corner into a hallway with crates of supplies. The other kids were being held in a room in this passage. He had already mentally mapped out where the rooms were in relation to the hospital, but he wasn't sure how to get back to the big storeroom where he'd first arrived. There had to be a way out from there, if only he could find it again.

Carson walked ahead and pushed open the door to the medical center. Inside, there were three beds, two of them occupied. Tommy, his arm in a sling, tried to sit up. He winced and then smiled when he saw Ty.

"How you doing, buddy?"

Ty waved but didn't say anything. He'd thought Tommy was nice, but now he wasn't even sure of that.

Dr. Rollins rolled the chair past the operating room. An elevated metal table was centered in the small room. Off to the side was a trashcan overflowing with bloody rags. They moved into a third room where there were open showers and several toilets partitioned off with wood walls. Carson and Dr. Rollins helped Ty out of his chair and onto the toilet seat. He

hated needing their help, but he was also used to relying on other people to get around and do certain things.

When Ty had finished, Dr. Rollins pushed him into the main room near Tommy's bed.

"I'll be right back," the doctor said.

"Hey," Tommy said quietly. He ran a hand over his shaved head and looked to see if anyone was listening. "You want to get out of here?"

Ty perked up. "Can you help me? Won't you get in trouble?"

"Not if we don't get caught. Don't tell anybody, okay? Gotta keep this a secret."

"Let's go, you little shits," Carson called out from the door of the bathroom.

Tommy winked at Ty. "I'll come for you later. You just wait."

Dr. Rollins returned with more pills and a bottle of water for Ty. Once he'd taken the medicine, the doctor wheeled his chair out of the med ward. Ty lifted a hand to wave goodbye to Tommy, but the young man shook his head subtly.

Right, Ty thought. *It's a secret.*

Ty wasn't sure why Tommy wanted to help him, but maybe it was because of what Ty had suspected earlier—that Tommy was a good guy caught up with some bad people, just like his mom told him could happen if Ty wasn't careful.

Instead of taking a right, Dr. Rollins took a left into the hallway while Carson herded Micah and Emma to the right toward their room and the room where the other kids were being held.

"Where are we going?" Ty asked, twisting in his chair.

"Remember what I told you earlier," Dr. Rollins whispered. "Just do as they say."

Ty gripped the armrests and peered around the next corner. They came upon a wider passage with thin metal train tracks on the floor. The doctor kept to the right of the rails.

Wood supply crates marked *Danger: Explosive* were stacked along the rocky walls. At the next junction, Dr. Rollins took a right into an even wider hallway. More of the wood boxes were stacked to the ceiling. Orange rain barrels and metal crates were positioned along the tracks. Overhead, Ty saw a ventilation shaft with boards blocking the entrance. Ty tried to keep all of it straight in his head in case he needed to come back this way again.

A chain of lights hung from the ceiling, several of the bulbs flickering. Ty couldn't see the other end. The ground sloped down as they made their way deeper into the shaft. Everything here was damp from the water running down the walls. They passed several small rooms with cots, some of them occupied by sleeping soldiers.

Finally, Dr. Rollins slowed and directed Ty's chair toward an open door. Four metal tables were set up inside, guns and beer cans littering their surfaces. Six men were studying the maps draped over the surface of the closest table. In the center of the group stood General Fenix. He looked up, a toothy grin spreading across his face.

"Little Mr. Montgomery," he said. "It's so great of you to join us."

Fenix nodded at Dr. Rollins and the doctor walked away, his footsteps echoing down the hallway. With him gone and Tommy in the medical ward, Ty was on his own. The other men took seats on a leather couch at the other end of the room. They turned away, seemingly uninterested in the meeting.

The General moved behind Ty and said, "Don't be scared, kid."

The wheelchair was moving a moment later. Fenix pushed Ty up to the nearest table and then walked over to a wooden cabinet that was stocked with beer, liquor bottles, and cans of pop. He grabbed a can of Sprite, popped the lid, and set it down in front of Ty.

"It's warm, but it's still good. Go ahead, take a drink. You know you want to."

Ty looked at the can. He was thirsty, but he shook his head.

"No?" Fenix said. He scooped the can up and slowly brought it to his lips, watching Ty. "Last chance."

Ty shook his head again. With a shrug, Fenix chugged the can down.

"Ahhhhh," he said, wiping off his mouth. "Refreshing. If you change your mind, I have more."

He tossed the can aside and then grabbed a laptop sitting on the table. He swiveled the screen to face Ty.

"Okay, let's get to it," Fenix said. He leaned over and hit one of the keys. Ty suddenly saw a face on screen—his own. He hardly recognized himself in the video feed. His dark hair was disheveled, and his green eyes were swollen from crying. He had lost some weight, too, and he'd already been skinny to begin with.

"I'd like you to do something very simple. I'd like you to say hi to your mom." Fenix sat at the table next to Ty.

Ty tore his gaze away from the video and looked at Fenix. “You’re trying to trick me.”

“Kid, I’m going to ask you this one more time before I’m apt to get cross. And I don’t think you want to make me mad, do you?”

Ty remembered what Dr. Rollins had told him. “No, sir,” he mumbled.

“Good,” Fenix said, satisfied. He leaned across the table, pushed a key on the laptop, and moved out of the way.

Ty stared at the screen for a moment, shivering in his chair. “Mom…?”

Fenix nodded several times and gestured for him to continue.

“Mom, it’s me. I miss you. Where are you? Why haven’t you come for me? I’m not hurt, but these men are holding me captive in a place called the Castle and—”

Fenix swiveled the laptop so it was facing him. His smile was gone now, replaced by an icy stare. “Madame Secretary,” he said in his smooth, deep voice. “My name is General Dan Fenix, and I’m the leader of the Sons of Liberty. We’ve taken it upon ourselves to restore order in these parts. Our mission is to take back our country from those that would have us enslaved.”

“That’s right!” one of the men on the couch called out.

“We have your son, Secretary Montgomery, and for the right price, you can have him back. I’ll need ten million in gold bars and a list of weapons to be delivered at a place of my choosing. This is not a negotiation. If you don’t deliver the gold and weapons within twenty-four hours, you’ll be getting your son back significantly more damaged than he is now. And if you fail to comply with my requests…well, let’s just say you won’t be getting him back at all.”

Fenix shut the laptop with a loud, definite click.

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Charlize Montgomery sat in the cockpit of her F-15 Strike Eagle. She knew she was dreaming, but like most of her dreams, she did not feel in control of her actions. She was just a spectator to an event that had occurred over a decade ago.

The fighter jet tore through the air, but the horizon remained unchanged, like she was hardly moving at all. The harder she fought to wake, the more powerful the grip of the dream became.

She curved west toward a highway snaking through the terrain. There wasn't a moving car in sight, but she could see a cluster of idle vehicles. At first she thought this was the highway in Florida clogged with the refugees fleeing Orlando, but the landscape was different. Instead of grass and wetlands, there was sand.

Smoke rose in the distance, thinning as it spread higher into the sky from the burning oil fields to the east. Charlize realized then she wasn't even in the United States. She was back in Iraq.

More plumes drifted away from a city. The sight wasn't unusual for the warzone. Often times the retreating army would set the fields ablaze to cover their escape or burn the resource to prevent it from falling into enemy hands.

The F-15 roared and dipped down to 3,200 feet AGL. She was low enough to see the charred vehicles on the road. The sight reminded her this wasn't a dream—it was a nightmare. The memory was from a reconnaissance mission that occurred over a decade ago in Iraq.

She dipped down to one thousand feet, just like she remembered it, close enough that she could see the cooked bodies in the vehicles, but also close enough that any enemy forces in the area would have a great opportunity to put her in the sand.

At least she wasn't alone. Five other F-15s were out there, combing the area for potential enemy combatants. Her mission now was to capture yet another human rights violation of the local population and pass it up the food chain to brass. The politicians and diplomats would cry about the war crimes, and she would return to drop bombs on the bastards responsible.

As she came in for another run, she saw more remains of the refugees in what was likely an attack by Al-Qaeda forces. The sight that day had invoked another memory of the images she had seen of the Highway of Death during the first Gulf War. Hundreds of Iraqi Regular Forces and their fleet of vehicles were bombed by American forces during the night while fleeing Kuwait.

The people in the dream weren't soldiers though—they were civilians. Men, women, children, and even the body of a dog caught in the crosshairs littered the road. Some of them remained in their vehicles; others had tried to flee the artillery shelling and machine gun fire.

She relayed the information to her wingman, voice catching when she described the scene. On her third pass, she swooped down to five hundred AGL to take photos with the pod cameras. The jet ripped over the graveyard,

snapping pictures of the massacre.

She pulled up, and the jet curved away for a fourth and final run. The engines screamed as she gave the bird some extra juice. Every warning sensor suddenly went off, chirping and flashing in the cockpit. A surface-to-air missile streaked toward her jet from one of the burned vehicles.

Even though she was dreaming the nerves in her body all tightened at once. Normally losing the missile would have been easy in the thirty-million-dollar aircraft, but she was so low to the ground that she only had a second to release flares and tear away from the projectile.

The g's lashed at her body as the F-15 jerked upward. The flares did their job, but the blast from the missile was so close it jolted the aircraft from behind, peppering the right wing with shrapnel. The nose of the jet continued tearing toward the clouds.

She was still in business.

Now she had some unfinished business of her own. Whoever had just taken the pot shot at her was about to get toasted.

Two dots raced across the skyline at two o' clock. The cavalry was on the way, but she ignored their warnings to retreat. This son of a bitch was all hers. She just had to get him before he could fire another missile.

As she circled, she prepared to fire a missile of her own. The target clicked on her display when she lined the sights up on the old pickup truck, but she decided to use her M61 Vulcan six-barrel mini-gun instead. There would be less damage to the site, which they needed to preserve for evidence of the war crimes.

At the last second, she saw the man she was about to kill. She pulled the trigger after a slight hesitation, realizing the man wasn't a man at all. There were two boys, trying to operate the missile launcher together. They vanished in the 20mm round spray, and Charlize's heart caught in her throat at what she had just done.

Warning sensors chirped in her cockpit as her jet ripped through the sky. The blue sky faded to white, and she felt the tug of reality pulling on her. The chirping and beeping continued, but they weren't the warning sensors from her cockpit. These were the sounds of a hospital.

Muffled voices echoed in the distance.

"Madame Secretary, can you hear me?"

She moved her lips, but she couldn't seem to summon her voice.

Cracking an eyelid open, she saw two thin figures hovering under a light.

The faces came into focus, an African American man and woman, both of them unfamiliar to her. The chirping of the machines faded to a steady beep.

"I'm Doctor Francis and this is Doctor Parish," the woman said. "Can you follow this pen for me?" She held up a pen and waved it in front of Charlize's face.

Charlize did as instructed and mumbled, "Where am I?"

"You're safe at Constellation, ma'am," replied Doctor Parish.

The bunker under the sea where President Diego had moved U.S. Northern Command, Charlize recalled, her brain slowly catching up with reality.

"How long have I been out?" she asked.

"A day, ma'am," Parish said.

"Have you heard anything about my son and brother?"

Francis and Parish exchanged a look.

"Ma'am, I think you should wait for—" Francis began to say.

"Tell me, and tell me right now," Charlize said firmly. Her head was pounding so hard it blinded her right eye. She reached up to grab her aching skull.

"Give me a second," Parish said. He stepped out of the room and into the hallway.

Doctor Francis remained at her side.

"Where's Albert?" Charlize asked. She tried to sit up, and Francis held up a hand.

"You need to relax, Secretary Montgomery. Albert is just outside."

Charlize rested her head back on the pillow.

A few minutes later the door opened and Parish stepped back into the room. Albert joined them and offered a brusque nod to Charlize.

"I'm sorry for not listening to you earlier, Big Al," she said.

His smile said he forgave her as he crossed over to stand by her bedside.

"General Thor is on his way," Parish said.

They waited another ten minutes for a knock on the door. General Thor walked inside with a man in a suit. Charlize sat up when she saw it was President Diego.

"Relax, Charlize," Diego said. "You're going to want to hear this sitting down."

"What? What's going on?" She pushed at the bed until she was sitting up straight with her back to the plastic headboard. Albert walked over to stand by her bedside.

“The USS *John Stennis* strike group was attacked by a North Korean submarine last night,” Diego said. “The aircraft carrier was destroyed, and Captain Dietz and Lieutenant Marco perished in the blast.”

“How?” Charlize asked. Her breath caught in her chest. “How did the submarine get through the ring of protection around the carrier?”

Thor shook his head. “They didn’t precisely ‘fire’ on the USS *John Stennis*, ma’am.”

Charlize exhaled the breath she was holding in. “Kamikazes?”

“Yes,” Thor said with a nod. “The North Korean submarine snuck past the defenses and self-detonated before Captain Dietz could detect the diesel sub. The North Koreans must have thought President Diego was still on board to pull a move like that.”

Charlize couldn’t believe it.

“There’s still one more submarine out there,” Thor added. “We’re working on finding it.”

Diego fiddled with his red tie and said, “There’s something else…we received a video of your son.”

— 13 —

“Chief, the Stanley’s on fire!” shouted Margaret.

Colton looked up from the map of Estes Park on the conference room table. He was in the middle of briefing everyone on the plan to place sentries at multiple places across the town. All around him, staff, officers, volunteers, and recruits turned toward the department’s dispatcher. Margaret stood a head shorter than everyone in the room, but she had a hell of a commanding voice.

“Did you hear me?” she yelled. “I said the Stanley is burning!”

Colton moved for the hallway and bolted toward the front doors. Footfalls pounded the floor as he was followed outside. He pushed open the doors and stumbled into the cool afternoon. In the distance, plumes of smoke rose toward the clouds.

This couldn’t be happening.

It took him ten precious seconds to snap out of his initial shock, and then he started barking orders.

“Officer Matthew, get the truck! Officer Hines, grab the gear. Margaret, get the word out to every officer and tell them to head to the Stanley!”

Colton pulled up his duty belt. It was looser around his waist. Had he already lost that much weight since the attack?

Two minutes later, the Chevy rattled up around the side of town hall. Colton took the passenger side, and Hines jumped into the back carrying several packs of gear and heavy turncoats. Several other volunteers climbed in with him. At Colton’s nod, Matthew peeled away from town hall.

The Chevy chugged up MacGregor Avenue, and Colton used the time to put on one of the heavy coats. Gray and brown hills rose in the distance, speckled with evergreens. The beauty was once again overshadowed by a

disaster as he slipped on a pair of gloves.

Matthew pulled right onto Wonderview Avenue, and Colton cursed when the small gold cap on top of the Stanley came into view. Flames licked the left section of the white neo-colonial hotel. They hadn't spread to the central or the right wing, but it was only a matter of time.

"Can't this thing go any faster?" Matthew asked, looking at the gauges.

Colton would have told him not to push it too hard—Jake had rebuilt the truck from old parts on the weekends, and he wasn't a hundred percent confident in his friend's skills as a mechanic—but he was too busy staring in horror at the burning building. Flames flickered out the windows and over the roof. At the bottom of the structure, a line of people were passing buckets of water.

It wasn't going to do a damn bit of good.

Storm clouds rolled across the horizon, but they were heading east, away from the park. Rain wasn't going to save the Stanley. Neither were a few buckets of well water. Without pressurized fire hoses, it was like spitting on a bonfire.

The last seconds of the drive seemed like an eternity. If they lost the Stanley, the stranded tourists and townsfolk sheltered there would be homeless.

Hundreds of people had gathered on the terrace out front. Smoke rolled across the scene, shifting in the afternoon wind and blowing into the white tents set up on the lawn behind the hedge maze, gardens and fountains. Colton had to get them away from the building.

"Get back!" he shouted out the window.

Jim Meyers, the manager of the hotel, was on his knees praying.

How about trying to put the fire out? Colton thought. He opened the door before Matthew brought the vehicle to a stop and jumped out.

Motion from the front entrance to the hotel caught his eye. An elderly couple staggered out of the front door, coughing. The man helped his wife across the front veranda, but fell as he reached the steps, barely catching himself on the railing. Four American flags hung over white pillars holding up the balcony above them. The symbols of freedom whipped in the smoky wind as the fires closed in.

"Hines, help those people!" Colton shouted. "Matthew, get the crowd back." He turned to look for Jim. He was standing now, running his hands through his thin hair.

“Jim, is anyone else inside?” Colton yelled.

“I… I don’t know.”

“Well, find out!” Colton looked back to the volunteers who’d joined him. A few were helping direct people away from the burning building, but too many were standing and staring, mouths agape.

“Somebody throw me a gas mask!” Colton shouted. Hines dug through a pack and tossed over a mask. Colton snatched it from the air and stuffed it into his pocket while running toward the left wing.

“Chief, you forgot your helmet!” Hines shouted.

Colton turned and caught the helmet like a football and then continued toward the building. There were at least twenty people in the bucket brigade, and at the front of the line stood Lindsey, the collar of her shirt pulled up over her nose. He approached with a hand shielding his face, the heat of the flames already tingling across his exposed skin.

A window shattered on the second floor, flames exploding outward.

“Watch out!” Colton shouted.

Dale Jackson was standing under the window wearing his volunteer firefighter turncoat, helmet, and gloves. The retired veteran had made good on his promise to change his ways after Colton had caught him waving a gun at Nathan and Sandra the night of the EMP attack, and since then he’d been one of the first to help out when anyone needed it. Dale jumped away, but the showering glass sliced through his coat and cut into his tattooed bicep.

“Ah, shit!” he shouted.

“Get back!” Colton yelled.

Colton worked his way up to Lindsey. Her face was filthy and flushed. The heat intensified as the fire spread over the building. It wouldn’t be long before the blaze would force the group to retreat.

“We need more water!” she yelled. “Where’s the fire department?”

“What fire department?” Colton shouted back.

Lindsey grabbed a bucket and threw the water on the building. She handed it back to Colton, and he passed it down the line.

“Where the hell is Don?” Colton asked.

Lindsey coughed from the smoke. “Don’t know.”

The fire had spread up to the third floor. Another window broke. Colton grabbed a bucket, tossed it on the side of the building, grabbed another, and kept going, hoping that maybe the rain clouds would change direction.

Over the commotion came a frantic shout. “Where’s my husband? I can’t

find my husband!”

Colton looked over his shoulder at an older woman with gray hair struggling toward the building. Hines was trying to hold her back, but she pulled from his grip.

“Colton!” Hines shouted.

Wood splintered overhead with a deafening crack. The roof began to cave in on the left wing, flames belching out into the sky. The blaze stung his exposed skin, and sweat beaded beneath the heavy coat he wore.

“Everyone back!” Colton shouted. He pulled Lindsey away as she went to grab another bucket.

“No!” she snapped. “We have to—”

Colton dragged her back just as a piece of burning wood hit the grass where she’d been standing. Sparks landed on her jeans. She fell on her knees, beating out the embers, but he quickly pulled her back to her feet.

“Come on!” he shouted. The other people working to save the Stanley dropped their buckets and ran. The heat of the flames hit Colton’s neck like a slap. They had moved just in the nick of time.

On the other side of the lawn, the tourists were huddled in a group; some of them crying, others looking upon their temporary home in a state of shock. A man with a WWII veteran hat bowed his head, gripping the armrests of his wheelchair with arthritic fingers. The woman who had lost her husband screamed, pulling on Hines to let her go.

“Get back!” Matthew shouted. Hands out wide, he corralled the crowd back across the lawn.

“Damn it, Dale,” Lindsey shouted. Colton turned to see Dale still standing in front of the flames, holding two buckets of water, veins bulging in his neck. He tossed both buckets and then scrambled for more. Colton started toward him, determined to drag the man away before he got himself killed, when a hand grabbed his sleeve.

“Chief,” said the gray-haired woman. “Please, my husband is still in there!”

“All right, ma’am,” Colton huffed. “Where did you last see him?”

She pointed to the second floor, just above the veranda. Flames danced behind the classic colonial windows.

“Shit,” Colton muttered.

Lindsey joined them, wiping soot from her forehead and then coughing into her sleeve. Dale finally retreated from the fire and jogged over, blood

drenching his arm.

“Someone still inside, Chief?” Dale asked. He coughed into his sleeve and then cupped his lacerated bicep with a glove.

“Her husband,” Colton said.

Dale jerked his chin at the building. “I’ll go find the old guy. I’ve been in worse than that back in Iraq. Once saved a kid—”

“No, it’s too dangerous, and you need to get your arm looked at,” Colton said. “I’ll go.”

“Like hell. Not without me.” This time it was Lindsey talking. She looked like she could barely stand, but there was a determined set to her jaw.

Colton didn’t have time to argue. He took off for the porch before they could protest. A figure wearing a cowboy hat came running through the smoke around the east wing. For a moment, Colton thought it was Jake’s ghost, but then saw it wasn’t his old friend—or a friend at all—it was Don.

“Where you going, Chief?” Don shouted.

Colton pointed at the balcony on the second floor. “Got a man trapped inside.”

“The building is a total loss. I’m sorry, but I can’t let you go in there, it’s far too dangerous.”

Don put his hand on Colton’s shoulder, pushing him back from the hotel.

“Get your hand off me, Sergeant,” Colton growled.

Someone rushed by Colton and Don. It was Dale, and before anyone could stop him, the veteran loped up the stairs and ran through the open doors into the lobby, spearing the smoke with his helmet.

Colton pulled out his gas mask and secured it over his face as he ran after Dale. The mask wouldn’t do much to protect him from the heat or carbon monoxide, but at least it would block the smoke particles as long as there was at least twenty percent oxygen. He had to make this quick. Without much thermal protection or an oxygen tank, he wouldn’t last long inside the building—and Dale didn’t have a mask at all.

Keeping low, Colton moved through the smoke-choked porch and stepped into the lobby. Visibility was shit, but at least this part of the building wasn’t on fire. He took in raspy breaths, struggling for air as he moved.

He hadn’t been inside the Stanley for a long time, not since he’d taken Kelly to the historic bar and restaurant for an anniversary celebration years ago. If he remembered correctly, the stairs were straight ahead.

Colton walked as low and as quickly as possible, hands waving in front of

him to stop from running into anything. The smoke was heavy here and he couldn’t see the staircase, but he could make out the reception desk to his left, and the golden elevator on his right. He crouched down and moved forward until he saw the bottom of the carpeted stairs.

A cracking sounded like the earth splitting in two. Colton stood and then jumped back just as the ceiling gave way, dumping burning wood, plaster, and furniture onto the floor in front of the stairs.

He shielded his face from the fire with an arm and looked up through the gaping hole to the second floor. A chair tumbled out of the opening, shattering at his feet. Colton frantically brushed off the sparks that stuck to his clothing.

“Dale!” he shouted, his voice muffled by the mask. He couldn’t see much of anything through the plastic, and he knew he didn’t have long before it started to melt. Even worse, he could hardly breathe.

Unable to stand it anymore, Colton tore off the gas mask and pulled his collar up over his nose. He coughed into the material and desperately searched for a way around the spreading flames to the stairs. His vision burned and blurred from the smoke and intense heat, but he managed to see a gap around the fire. Maybe if he could get around it…

“Over here!” someone shouted. He whirled to look for the voice, but the curtain of smoke was too thick. Even with the sunlight coming through the front doors, he couldn’t see much. The walkie-talkie crackled on his hip, but he was afraid of dropping it if he tried to answer now.

“Help me with him!” yelled the same strangled voice.

A large, misshapen figure emerged on the other side of the fire at the bottom of the staircase. Two men, Colton realized, one of them leaning on the other as a crutch.

Colton flattened his body and moved around the flames to help. Fire licked at his pant legs. He took a step back and then leapt over the burning floorboards.

“Help me carry him,” Dale said. He coughed violently and hoisted the man up with Colton’s help. The fire raged over the debris where the ceiling had caved in. Static crackled from the radio again, and then there was a voice that sounded like Margaret, but Colton couldn’t make out the words.

“Let’s make a run for it,” Dale choked. They barreled around the section of burning floor. Moving as one, they carried the moaning elderly man through the lobby, out the front doors, across the porch, and down the stairs.

As soon as they were outside, they dropped to the ground. Lindsey, Hines, and Matthew ran over with buckets of water. They tossed them onto Colton, Dale, and the unconscious man, dousing the embers that smoldered on their clothes.

“You’re a crazy son of a bitch, Dale,” Colton said. He pushed himself up, shivering from the combination of the cold water and the wind.

“Found this guy on the stairs,” Dale managed to say.

Lindsey was on her knees next to the unconscious man. Air wheezed from his lungs. His wife came running over and dropped down by his other side.

“Chief!” someone shouted.

Colton looked over his shoulder at Detective Tim Ryburn. He bent down to put his hands on his knees, gut hanging over his duty belt.

“Chief,” he said. “I… I ran here as fast as I could. Margaret’s been trying to get you on the radio.”

“I’ve been a little bit busy,” Colton said.

The flames had reached the right wing of the Stanley now. Another section of roof collapsed into the heart of the building, burying over a hundred years’ worth of memories, artwork, and history.

The walkie-talkie on Colton’s belt buzzed again just as Ryburn finally caught his breath. “Chief, there’s been a jailbreak.”

Colton coughed and shook his head. “What are you talking about? Who broke out?”

“That thug, Theo,” Ryburn said, wheezing. “A group of armed men took him from the jail. They showed up right after we got word the hotel was on fire.”

Colton looked at his other officers. He had ordered his entire department away from their posts, including the jail, in an effort to save the Stanley. He looked back at the inferno. This wasn’t some accident. This was arson—a distraction to get them away from their critical facilities. He felt the realization like a fist to the gut.

They’d been played.

He plucked the radio off his belt. “Margaret, do you copy?”

“I’m here, Chief,” she replied.

“Are you okay?”

“Yes, but…” Margaret said. “Those men didn’t just take Theo. They took all our supplies, too.”

— 14 —

The rain had subdued the forest fires along the highway, but the flames had done plenty of damage to the terrain, burning all the way up to the treeline around the jagged mountains to the south.

Nathan held up the Geiger counter to check for radiation. The reading came back minimal again. The rain had not only stopped the fires—it had also cleared a lot of the radiation. No one would be able to plant crops around here anytime soon, but at least the ground wasn't completely toxic.

He pulled out the analog radio from his bag, hoping that he would finally be able to reach his sister. He turned to the channel and said, "Major Sardetti calling Lieutenant Marco or Secretary Montgomery. Does anyone copy? Over."

No one answered.

After a few attempts, Nathan put the radio back in his rucksack. "Haven't been able to raise anyone for over nine hours. I don't understand."

"You sure you're on the right channel?" Raven asked.

Nathan shifted his rifle from one hand to the other. His broken arm was killing him, but he didn't want Raven to see it. "Yeah, I'm sure."

"This feels a lot like the night of attack, when we were completely cut off," Nathan said. "I'm worried something else has happened."

Raven kept his gaze on the road, eyes shifting left to right. The man was on constant alert. Four hours of driving on Interstate 70 and searching the side roads hadn't turned up anything but corpses. Nathan had lost count of the bodies. Most had died from radiation poisoning, but they'd found a few clusters of people who'd been shot. The Sons of Liberty must have moved through here, but it was impossible to say how long ago or even which direction they'd been heading in.

“We need a new plan,” Raven said. “Following the bodies isn’t working.”

“Maybe it’s time to let *me* come up with a plan,” Nathan said. “I say we set a trap and ambush these fuckers like they did the soldiers back on the bridge.”

Raven wagged his finger back and forth. “I think I figured you out, Major. You want me to die, so you can have Lindsey. But she’s mine, man. Feel free to date my sister when I’m gone, though. As long as you treat her right.”

Nathan wasn’t sure how to respond to that, so he forced a smile. He liked Sandra, but the last thing on his mind was dating.

“You break my sister’s heart and I’ll break your other arm,” Raven said.

Nathan laughed this time. “I’m not interested in anything besides finding my nephew and getting back to my sister, don’t worry.”

“Yeah, yeah,” he said, looking at the dash. “I better fill up the tank after this hill.”

Raven pulled off to the side of the road along a slope that descended to a lake. Thousands of fingers of smoke rose from the cooling timber all around them. The one good thing about everything being black was it was easy to spot any potential hostiles.

Nathan stepped out and raised his AR-15 to scope the road. Three burned-out cars covered in ash remained where they had died six days earlier. He zoomed in on a single body that was nothing but charred flesh and bones.

He stretched his aching muscles after finishing the scan. There wasn’t anyone out here. Not anyone alive, anyway. He returned to the Jeep, where Raven was preparing to funnel gas from a can into the fuel tank.

“Need some help?” Nathan asked.

“Nah, just watch our backs.”

Nathan limped back to the other side of the Jeep to check the area Raven had already cleared. A patch of terrain to the north had survived the fires, leaving an island of green in an ocean of black. He pushed the scope to his eye and magnified on a red tent under a massive ponderosa pine.

“You see that tent?” Nathan asked.

“Yeah, but no people. I’m guessing whoever pitched that is dead inside.”

He set the gas canister in the back of the truck, grabbed his rifle, and walked over to the edge of the road. Wind gusted across the two men, rustling their filthy clothing.

“Think we should have a look anyway?” Nathan said. “If someone’s alive up there, maybe they saw something and can tell us—”

The rattle of an engine cut him off. The sound rose over the wind, faded, and came again. Nathan and Raven darted for cover behind the Jeep.

“Where’s that sound coming from?” Nathan asked.

“South, I think.”

Raven and Nathan shouldered their rifles and crept around the Jeep. The cough of the engine grew louder, and a Humvee crested the road to the south, zooming over a hill and speeding down the open stretch.

“We have to hide,” Raven said. “Everything else on the road is covered in ash.”

Nathan followed Raven into the ditch. They scrambled down the rocky side and got down on their stomachs. From this vantage, Nathan couldn’t see the road, but he could hear the diesel engine approaching. It didn’t sound like it was slowing.

“Set a trap,” Nathan whispered. “Let’s see if my plan works.”

“We don’t know if these are the guys.”

“Yeah, but—”

Raven held up a finger to his lips as the vehicle slowed on the road. The Humvee slowed to a halt just above them. Doors opened, and multiple pairs of boots hit the pavement.

“Keep your eyes open,” said a man’s voice.

“I’ll check the back of the Jeep,” answered another.

Nathan slowly pushed his muzzle up, but all he could see was the top of the Jeep and the hazy sky. All he needed was a single thread of evidence that these were the assholes who had taken Ty. Then he was going to move in.

The top of a shaved head and two bushy eyebrows emerged overhead. Another shaved head appeared. This one had a Swastika tattoo on the left side.

Skinhead bastards.

“I don’t see anyone out here,” one of the men in the truck said. He moved out of sight. The other man remained, the top of his head in Nathan’s sights.

“There’s a tent over here!” someone shouted from the other side of the road. “We should check that shit out.”

“Hold up, Jimmy,” came a new voice. “You got to check out the supplies in this Jeep. We hit the jackpot! The General is going to be really happy.”

The man moved away from Nathan’s red dot sight, vanishing from view. He looked over at Raven. Despite their injuries, Nathan was confident they could take these Aryan assholes down right here.

But that wouldn’t help find his nephew.

Unless he left one of them alive.

Nathan heard another new voice on the road, bringing the total contacts to five.

“Check out this crossbow,” the man said. “That is freakin’ sweet.”

Raven’s eyes widened.

Five men was a lot to take down, even with surprise on his side, but Nathan couldn’t let them take their gear and the Jeep. Being stranded out here was as good as a death sentence.

“Engine is still hot, boss,” someone said above.

Nathan flashed a hand signal to Raven, directing him to take the two guys on the right. That left Nathan with the three on the left. They had to move fast, and they had move now!

Nathan felt the pre-battle jitters as he mentally prepared to take their lives. It was different than flying his jet into combat. He would be able to see the men he killed, look them in the eyes, something a pilot didn’t have to deal with when dropping bombs or launching missiles.

His heart had been beating calmly, but as soon as he jumped up with his rifle, it slammed against his ribcage. Two men in black fatigues were removing gear from the back of the Jeep. They looked in his direction, and the one on the right shouted the alarm.

Nathan fired two shots into the first man’s side, sending him staggering away. He trained the barrel on the second man, who was fumbling for a holstered pistol, and dropped him with a shot to the temple.

Gunfire came from Nathan’s right. Raven’s shots punched through a soldier’s neck, a geyser of blood spraying the windshield of the Jeep. He dropped to his knees and clutched the mortal wound.

A bearded soldier on the right scrambled for cover on the other side of the road and dove into the ditch. Nathan focused his gun on a thick man with an athletic build to his left who had taken off running. He aimed for a pair of wide, linebacker shoulders and fired a shot that tore through the back of his ribcage.

The muscular man crashed to the pavement with a thud, limp and dead. Nathan felt a tinge of satisfaction and roved his rifle to find the final target and finish the job. This time he was going to aim to maim and not kill.

“Eyes up!” Raven shouted.

In the turret of the Humvee, a sixth man emerged. He grabbed the M240

and aimed it at Nathan.

Raven dropped to a knee and fired two shots that pinged off the armor shield surrounding the big gun. It barked to life, sending 7.62 mm rounds in Raven's direction. He rolled out of the way and then jumped into the ditch they had been hiding in.

The gunner raked the machine gun back and forth, spraying rounds into the pavement. Then he moved the barrel toward Nathan, but Nathan already had his sights on the gunner's head.

"Eat this, you Nazi loving prick," Nathan muttered. His voice didn't sound like it belonged to him as he squeezed off a shot that hit the man in the center of his black baseball cap, sending his shaved skull jolting backward with such force it broke his neck.

Bullets peppered the Jeep to Nathan's left. He ducked down for cover as more rounds slammed the metal. Where the hell was the shooter?

"No!" Raven shouted. At first Nathan thought he was screaming about his precious Jeep, but then a flash of steel whizzed past Nathan and crunched into someone standing behind him.

He whirled to see a seventh man collapse to the ground, screaming in pain and holding onto the handle of the hatchet Raven had buried into his breast. Nathan snapped into action, on high alert as he moved to the other side of the Jeep to search for the final soldier, the one that had lunged into the opposite ditch. The man was on the run, already halfway to the island of trees with the tent.

Raven aimed his rifle, but Nathan held up a hand. "We need him alive. Shoot him in the leg."

A crack sounded, and the thin, short man hit the dirt about one hundred yards from the road. Nathan turned back to the guy who had snuck up on him. He squirmed in pain on his back, feet slapping the concrete.

"Where the hell did you come from?" Nathan muttered. He slung his rifle over his back and kicked the man's gun away. Then he leaned down next to him, getting right to the point. "Where the fuck are the kids?"

"Don't kill me," the guy pleaded. He looked up, his bearded face contorted in agony. "I didn't hurt nobody. I swear it."

Nathan grabbed the handle of the hatchet. "I asked you a question."

Lips trembling, the man still didn't answer. He closed his eyes and said something under his breath that Nathan couldn't make out. Might have been a curse or a prayer. It didn't matter. Nothing mattered but hunting down the

bastards who had kidnapped his nephew and ambushed Lieutenant Dupree and his men.

“Suit yourself,” Nathan said.

He twisted the blade a quarter of an inch. The man shrieked in agony. Nathan released his grip on the blade and waited for the skinhead to come back to reality, but his eyelids slowly drooped over his eyes as he slipped toward unconsciousness. A slap to his face pulled him back. He glared at Nathan, eyes burning with rage.

“Tell me where you took the kids,” Nathan said.

“Fuck you,” the man replied. He spat in Nathan’s face and let out a hoarse laugh. Maybe he knew he was going to die, or maybe he was just that big of an asshole. Either way, Nathan could tell he wasn’t getting any information from this one. He stood and considered leaving him there to die slowly in pain, but he didn’t want the liability when he turned his back.

“Join your friends in hell,” Nathan said. He plucked the hatchet from the man’s chest. Blood gushed out of the cavity. He let out a scream as Nathan brought the blade down square in the middle of his forehead. The sickening crack echoed like a gunshot.

Nathan thought he would feel something like satisfaction, but all he felt was more pain. He wiggled the hatchet free and stood.

Raven waved from across the road. He was kneeling next to the injured man. Nathan stopped to check the bullet holes in the Jeep. There were two in the hood and several in the windshield. Almost every window had been shattered.

“Shit,” he said. Nathan walked around the side of the Jeep when he saw his rucksack on the ground next to one of the corpses. The analog radio was right next to the pack. He bent down to examine the radio, cursing again at the sight of the shattered casing and protruding wires.

Nathan closed his eyes and snapped them back open again. Their one form of communication with the outside world was completely trashed. He stood and ran over to Raven.

“Radio and the Jeep are fucked,” Nathan said when he got there. He handed the bloody hatchet to Raven, who gave him a cockeyed look, flared his nostrils, and then looked back down at the injured man wriggling on the ground.

“You fuckers shot my baby,” he said in an incredulous high-pitched voice.

“I’m sorry,” the man cried. “I was just—”

“We’ll take their Humvee,” Nathan said. He studied the man lying at his feet. He was covered in tattoos of hate symbols.

“Nathan, this racist piece of shit is named Joe,” Raven said, patting the man’s shoulder. Joe grimaced in pain. “Joe here has agreed to take us to meet his racist piece of shit friends at a place called the Castle. In exchange, I’ve promised not to cut his nuts off.”

***

General Thor returned with another man Charlize didn’t recognize. They set up laptops on a table in front of her bed.

“Madame Secretary, this is Colonel Mark Raymond. He will be leading the briefing about your son. I may have to duck out early to deal with the situation off the coast of Palm Beach. We’re still running rescue missions to see if we can pull anyone from the water.”

Charlize nodded. She understood Thor had other things to worry about with a war going on. A hostage situation was probably low on his priority list.

“Good afternoon, ma’am,” Raymond said. He was a tall man with a bulbous nose and thick brown hair. “I’ve been unable to reach your brother on the channel you provided. We’re still not sure if he reached out to Lieutenant Marco, either. The comms are a mess.”

Charlize nodded again. She felt like a robot, but she didn’t want to interrupt.

Raymond placed his laptop computer on a table in front of her bed. “Normally this briefing would be conducted by the FBI or perhaps the DOJ, but since the country is under martial law, the military is handling the case.”

He typed a passcode into the computer and then angled it so she could see better. On screen, her sweet baby boy looked up with droopy eyes, his hair a mess. Her heart ached at the sight, but at least she had proof he was still alive. Raymond hit a button, and Ty’s high voice came from the speakers.

“Mom, it’s me. I miss you. Where are you? Why haven’t you come for me? I’m not hurt, but these men are holding me captive in a place called the Castle and—”

The camera panned to a bearded man wearing fatigues. Blue eyes, cold as ice, stared back at her.

“My name is General Dan Fenix, and I’m the leader of the Sons of Liberty. We’ve taken it upon ourselves to restore order in these parts. Our mission is to take back our country from those that would have us enslaved.”

Charlize ground her teeth as she watched the man fold his hands and smile at the camera.

“We have your son, Secretary Montgomery, and for the right price, you can have him back. I’ll need ten million in gold bars and a list of weapons to be delivered at a place of my choosing. This is not a negotiation. If you don’t deliver the gold and weapons within twenty-four hours, you’ll be getting your son back significantly more damaged than he is now. And if you fail to comply with my requests…well, let’s just say you won’t be getting him back at all.”

The feed shut off.

Charlize fought to keep her voice level as she asked, “Who the hell is General Dan Fenix?”

Raymond closed the laptop. “That’s a good question. At first we weren’t sure. I searched our databases to look up anyone by that rank and name but came up empty.”

“The reason for that is simple,” Thor said. “General Fenix was never a general. He was an Army captain who served two tours of duty in Iraq and one in Afghanistan. In 2005, he was dishonorably discharged after evidence surfaced he had ordered several civilians killed.”

Raymond took over. “There were conflicting reports about those deaths. Some of his men seemed to have covered up what really happened in Iraq, and the others were too afraid to speak up. Fenix returned to Colorado and vanished off the map for several years. He resurfaced in Denver. The Feds were watching him—apparently he started a group affiliated with the Aryan Brotherhood called the Sons of Liberty. Although they seem to be a different sect with their own beliefs.”

“The Sons of Liberty are basically white supremacists that hate the government and everyone who isn’t white,” Thor said. “Unlike the traditional skinhead, these guys are way more political. It’s disgusting their name plays homage to the Founding Fathers.”

“I was thinking the same thing,” Raymond said. He massaged his jaw nervously. “We believe Fenix has been building his own personal army since he returned home from the war.”

“The truth is that we don’t know how many men he’s been able to recruit

or what kind of weaponry he's managed to amass," Thor said gravely.

"And now they have my son," Charlize said. "We have to find him."

"That's going to be difficult," Thor said. "We have no idea where he is, and we're strained for resources as it is."

Charlize breathed deeply through her nose, reminding herself that Thor had never been a father. He didn't understand how callous his remarks sounded.

"What about the area where Lieutenant Dupree was ambushed?" she asked.

"We don't know if it was Fenix and his men who killed Dupree," Raymond said.

"Of course. I'm sure it was a different highly skilled and well-armed paramilitary group in the middle of Colorado that took out those Marines," Charlize said. Frustration was bringing out her sarcastic streak—a tendency that Clint had always reminded her to curb. But her right-hand man was dead now, and she would be damned if she sat around talking to these men a moment longer while her son was in danger. Charlize swung her legs over the side of the bed.

Thor and Raymond stood simultaneously, while Albert offered Charlize his hand.

"The doctor said you need your rest, Madame Secretary," Thor said.

"I rested. Now I'm getting up to speed on this Fenix son of a bitch." She smoothed out her loose-fitting sweat suit and swept her roughly chopped hair back from her forehead, trying to pretend that she still cut as commanding a figure as she once did on the Senate floor.

"We can't give him what he wants, ma'am, and you know that," Thor said. "Fenix is a terrorist, and the United States—"

"Does not negotiate with terrorists," Charlize said, finishing his sentence. "I know, and I agree."

Raymond looked at her quizzically. "Then what do you plan to do?"

She met his gaze steadily. "I'm going to hunt him down and kill him."

***

Sandra held her breath and pulled back the bandage covering Teddy's elbow. The flesh was mildly red, and there was no sign of a worsening infection, but that didn't mean he was out of the woods. The news of the Stanley and the

loss of the medical supplies and food had everyone in the hospital on edge. They needed the antibiotics to keep Teddy alive, and aside from what they had on hand at the medical center, they were all out.

She slowly rewrapped his arm.

There was a knock on the door to the small isolation room they had moved Teddy into. Doctor Duffy opened the door and gestured for Allie to come inside. She fiddled with the white mask covering her face. Creek trotted up to the doorway wearing a plastic suit Sandra had found for him.

“Sit,” Sandra instructed.

The dog obeyed and remained in the open doorway. He looked like an alien, but it was for Teddy’s protection. Any germs could threaten his already weakened immune system.

“Teddy, I’d like you to meet my daughter Allie and my brother’s dog, Creek,” Sandra said.

Teddy shined at the sight of his new friends. “Hi, Allie, and hi Creek.”

Creek sat on his hind legs in the doorway.

“He looks funny in that suit,” Teddy said with a chuckle.

“I know,” Sandra said. “Kind of like an alien doggy.”

Creek stood and let out an affectionate whine.

“I wish I could give him a treat,” Teddy said. He twisted to look at Sandra. “Can I later?”

“Uh, Nurse Spears, can I talk to you?” said Doctor Duffy. He stood behind Creek in the doorway and gestured for Sandra with a hand. She could tell by his tone and frown that he wasn’t happy.

“Allie, you watch Creek, but make sure he stays sitting right there, okay? I’ll be right back.”

Her daughter dipped her head and up down. “Okay, mom.”

Creek tried to follow, but Sandra snapped her fingers and the dog relaxed on the floor. He placed his head on his gloved paws as Allie kneeled next to him and stroked his plastic suit.

“Watch Teddy and Allie for me, boy,” Sandra said. She knew it broke protocol, but she had taken every precaution possible, and Teddy needed this. Morale was in some ways even more important than the antibiotics keeping him alive.

Creek let out another low whine as she left the room. He was really missing Raven, and so was Sandra. Not hearing from her brother for almost twenty-four hours had torn at her insides. She knew he could take care of

himself, but the roads were getting worse by the hour. Every time she heard a vehicle pull into the parking lot, she would peek out from the emergency room to see if it was Raven.

She followed Doctor Duffy down the hall, waiting for a lecture, but instead he stopped outside of Martha's room and bowed his head, sighing. "I need your help, Sandra. As you know, Colton wants to know what happened to Martha, and I can't get her to talk to me. Can you try?"

"Sure," Sandra said.

She went to open the door, but Duffy put a hand on her wrist. "Do you know what's happening out there? I mean, is it true? Was the fire at the Stanley intentional?"

The rumors had circled around the hospital, but Sandra didn't know what to believe. She had to focus on her job and leave the policing up to Chief Colton.

"I don't know," Sandra said. She opened the door and walked inside the dark room lit only by a solar lamp. She put it on the bedside table and sat down next to Martha.

"Hi, Dr. Kohler, it's Nurse Spears."

Martha blinked and slowly rolled her head to the side.

"How are you feeling? Are you thirsty?" Sandra asked.

Martha licked her dry lips and Sandra helped her take several sips from a straw. Then she used a cloth to wipe Martha's forehead dry.

"I'm here to talk to you about what you said earlier. About the kids."

Martha swallowed the last of the water in her mouth and looked at the ceiling, closing her eyes, and then snapping them open.

"The soldiers…" Her voice cracked and she tried to speak again. "The soldiers took the kids."

"What soldiers?"

Martha bowed her head, then looked back up to meet Sandra's eyes. "They weren't American soldiers. One of them had a Swastika tattoo."

Sandra nearly dropped the cloth in her hand. She had walked into the room with a dozen questions running through her mind, but now she just had one. Could these be the same men who took the supplies and set fire to the Stanley, and the same people who took Nathan's nephew?

"I found two kids on the road. I was going to take them to Denver with me, but I failed them…" Martha said. "I failed—"

"No, you did not. You did what you could." Sandra dabbed Martha's

forehead with the moist cloth. “You don’t have to tell me anything that’s too scary to remember. I’m just trying to figure out if these were the same men my brother and my friend Nathan went to look for. Nathan’s nephew was taken from the Easterseals camp south of here.”

Martha brushed the cloth away from her forehead. “I saw a boy in the back of that pickup in a wheelchair.”

Sandra hesitated. “A wheelchair?”

“Yes,” Martha said. She rested her head back on the pillow, but kept her eyes on Sandra.

“I hope your brother and this Nathan are skilled soldiers because the men that shot me won’t hesitate to kill them or anyone who gets in their way. They had evil in their eyes, Nurse Spears.”

— 15 —

Colton paced back and forth, trying to get a grip on the situation. Mayor Andrews, Tom Feagen, and a handful of other administrators were standing in the hallway outside the town offices. Everyone was arguing.

If Jake were here, he would have shouted in his booming voice, silencing them in a heartbeat. But Jake wasn't here, and Colton was on his own.

"Quiet!" shouted a woman. Lindsey was pushing through the crowd. "Let the Chief speak," she said.

The side conversations quieted down.

Colton nodded at Margaret. Despite her earlier insistence that she was fine, the dispatcher was shaking. He hated asking her to go through it again, but he wanted the mayor and her staff to hear it firsthand. She told them what she'd told Colton earlier—a dozen men in black ski masks had stormed the station, pointed a gun in her face, and demanded the keys to Theo's cell.

"Were these men soldiers?" Gail asked when Margaret had finished.

"No, I don't think so," Margaret said. "But they did have what looked like really old military trucks. The type I remember seeing transport soldiers in Vietnam. The backs of their trucks were filled with crates and canned food."

"So they hit our supply depots first," Don mused. "That would have taken planning and coordination."

"How did they get past our road blocks?" Feagen asked.

"We don't have the resources to guard every single road," Colton said.

"Did you see where they went?" Gail asked Margaret.

Detective Ryburn stepped forward. "I did. They were heading toward the park entrance."

Colton pivoted so he could look the detective in the eye. "Why the hell didn't you tell me that earlier?"

“The Stanley was burning,” he said. “I’m sorry, Chief, but there wasn’t anything I could do. Some of them even had automatic rifles.”

Don held up a hand. “Wait, back up. You said they were heading into the park?”

Ryburn nodded, his chin jiggling.

“That’s where we’re storing the meat,” Don said.

Colton drew in a long breath. “Jesus, these guys knew where we were hiding everything.”

“How?” Gail asked.

“Good question,” Tom Feagen said. “It was your job to make sure our facilities were protected, Colton. Now what are we going to do?”

“What will we do for food?” someone asked.

Gail scowled. “And medical supplies.”

“And where are we supposed to house the tourists?” asked Officer Hines.

The questions came in a flurry around Colton. He took a step backward. It was all too much—the questions, the pressure. He had lost control of the town in a single afternoon.

“We’ll find a way,” Lindsey said. “Right, Chief?”

She looked at him with the hopeful gaze that he would expect from a rookie soldier looking to a commander for reassurance before a battle. Colton didn’t have any to give.

“We have to get our supplies back.” He pulled out his Colt .45, flipped open the loading gate, thumbed the hammer, and spun the empty cylinder to inspect the chambers.

“Grab the pickup, Lindsey,” Colton said. “Don, you coordinate with our officers and volunteers to see if you can figure out what these guys took. Margaret, stay on the radio. I’m heading up Trail Ridge Road.”

“No,” came a firm voice.

Colton snapped his full cylinder closed and turned to Gail.

“I’ve talked it over with the others, and I’m putting Sergeant Aragon in charge of the police department and Estes Park militia,” she said.

He could only stare at her for a moment. “What the hell are you saying?”

“You’re not in charge anymore, Marcus,” she said. “We still want you on the force, but it’s time for a change in leadership.”

Don put his cowboy hat on and stepped next to the mayor, but Lindsey walked over and stood by Colton.

“You can’t do this, Mayor,” she said. “This isn’t Chief Colton’s fault.”

Officers Matthew and Officer Hines, along with Detective Ryburn, remained where they were standing—unwilling to take a side, or perhaps waiting to figure out which side to take.

"If Jake were here—" Colton started to say when Gail cut him off.

"He's not. I'm sorry, Marcus, but Jake is dead. And you haven't kept your promise to protect this town. It's time to let someone else try…before it's too late."

The words stung Colton deep, like a hot knife scraping his bones. A hundred things rushed through his mind, memories of better times and dreams for the future.

Hines and Matthew slowly moved over to Don's left side, but to his utter shock, Ryburn walked over to Colton. Lines had been drawn, three against three. But Don had the support of the town administration.

Colton balled his fists.

Don saw that and raised a brow as if to taunt him. Colton narrowed his eyes at the sergeant. God, he wanted to jack Don in the face and knock him on his ass, but that wasn't going to do anything but make Colton feel better. The true test of a man was doing the right thing even when clouded by anger. His father taught him that when he was just a boy. Too bad no one had taught Don what a real man was.

"Fine, Mayor," Colton said, relaxing his hands. Without Jake, Raven, and Nathan to stand by his side, he had no choice but to back down. In the end, the town came first. His family came first. He would not make things worse by resisting the decision of the majority.

Colton pulled off his chief of police badge and handed it to Gail.

"You can take mine, too," Lindsey said. She fumbled for her shield, but Colton put a hand on her arm.

"Don't," he said. "The force needs you."

She scowled, but stepped down. As Colton left, he heard Don giving the same damned orders he'd been delivering before Gail demoted him.

A few minutes later, Lindsey and Ryburn followed him outside.

"This is horseshit!" Lindsey said. She ran alongside, her face redder than her hair. "You can't let Don take charge. He's a jackass."

"A real jerk," Ryburn agreed.

"It's not my call," Colton said.

Lindsey looked at the ground. "I hate to do this, Chief, but I'm gonna need the keys to the truck back. Don is sending me up to the park to check on the

meat.”

Colton pulled the key from his pocket and held it out, even though giving up Jake’s truck felt like a betrayal. “Did he say you had to go alone?”

Lindsey grinned, looking more like her usual self. “Why don’t you drive? I’ll take shotgun.”

“Let’s go,” Colton said, closing his fist around the key.

Lindsey took the passenger side, and Ryburn jumped in the back. The drive out of town was met with silence, Lindsey looking out the window and Colton focusing on the road. They all knew the men who had taken their supplies were long gone now, but the threat lingered and Lindsey loaded her AR-15.

“I’m sorry, Chief,” she said.

“Better stop calling me that.”

She shook her head and turned back to the window.

Twenty minutes later, they were winding up the long road into Rocky Mountain National Park. Snow framed the sides, a foot at first, then an entire wall the height of a man. A chilly breeze rushed into the open windows.

Colton had plenty of time to think about everything that had happened, but his primary concern right now was that meat. They had at least two weeks’ worth, plus a week from the dozens of elk and other game they had killed to feed the town. That meant three weeks of survival without having any outside help. Without it, they were going to be scrambling to keep everyone fed, especially with their canned and dried food stolen.

At twelve thousand feet above sea level, the bitter breeze stung Colton’s lungs. He rolled up his window and parked the truck outside the Ranger station.

“Where the hell is Ranger Field?” Colton asked. He was supposed to be guarding this place, but the old Indian motorcycle that Field had been driving was gone.

Colton got out of the truck and un-holstered his Colt .45. He thumbed back the hammer and stepped onto the snow. Breathtaking views of the Rocky Mountains surrounded him on all sides, but he was focused on the open doors to the metal sheds next to the ranger station.

He crunched over the snow, already knowing the frozen goods and the meat were all gone, but needing to see it for himself.

“Ryburn, go check the station for Field,” Colton said, automatically taking command of the situation as he’d always done. “Lindsey, you check the other

sheds.”

Colton walked to the first building and stepped inside, breath coming out in an icy poof. Sunlight shone through the open door, illuminating a snow-covered floor still marked with the impressions of meat and the other goods they had stored here. In the center of the room, a single glass bottle of pickled herring protruded from the snow.

“The other sheds are all empty, sir,” Lindsey said.

Colton pulled the bottle out of the snow and found a piece of paper tied onto the side. He retreated back outside and held it into the sun.

“What’s that?” Lindsey asked. She wrinkled her nose. “Seriously? I hate pickled fish. Of all the things to leave…”

Colton untied the note and read the message.

You can blame Raven Spears for your missing loot. I wouldn’t have even known about Estes Park if it weren’t for him. Your first mistake was trusting that weasel, and your second mistake was putting my cousin Theo in jail. Estes Park is a nice place. I might have to come back for another visit soon.

Sincerely – Nile Redford

“What’s it say?” Lindsey asked.

Colton almost laughed. He shook his head, handed it over to her, and then turned to look at the view. Behind the ranger station, arms of smoke from the smoldering ruins of the Stanley rose into the sky. Below, the Estes Park valley stretched out like a bowl. The Fall River wound through the flat meadows, and a herd of elk, little more than a constellation of brown dots from this distance, moved along the banks at the water’s edge.

Ryburn rounded the station a moment later. “No sign of Fields in the station,” he reported.

Colton cursed and lit a cigarette he had bummed off Officer Hines. The situation had gone from bad to worse with Ranger Field missing. He feared the man was buried in the snow somewhere out here.

After taking a drag, Colton took a final look out over the valley. The only thing the town had left was clean water and the wild game in the park—and the game wouldn’t last forever. Two of his officers were dead, and he feared more would die in the violence that ensued from the starving citizens.

For a fleeting moment, he felt relieved that he was no longer in charge. The feeling passed in a heartbeat when he looked back at the place where he had

married his high school sweetheart and raised a daughter. He wasn't in charge anymore, but he was going to be damned if he let anything happen to Estes Park.

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The Humvee growled down the road. Raven had traded his Jeep in for the upgraded military vehicle, but he hated leaving his baby behind. He would be back for her soon. Just like he would be back for Creek. He was really missing his four-legged best friend. Nathan was a poor substitute.

He pushed down on the gas pedal and the Humvee rocketed up a hill. His eyes flitted over the canvas—a drab landscape, gray rocks, and grayer sky.

"Eyes up," Nathan said to Joe from the back seat. The racist little prick was groaning from the pain. Nathan slapped the kid every time he began to lose consciousness.

"You can't die yet," Nathan said. He continued the interrogation with a backhand to Joe's chin.

"How many of you are there?"

"I—I don't know," Joe said.

Nathan put his thumb into the bullet wound in Joe's leg, prompting a screech of agony.

"Please," he cried, whimpering like a child. "Please don't kill me."

Raven looked away from the rearview mirror. They were coming up on a canyon with high rock walls. Shadows crossed the road. Easing up on the gas, Raven ducked down to look at the outcroppings as they entered the gully. He was searching for a glint of metal or scrap of color that didn't belong in the gray rocks. The second he took his eyes off the road, the tires jolted over a rock.

He swerved just in time to miss a skirt of scree that had spilled onto the pavement. The trail of loose rocks spread until the road was completely blocked. Raven slammed on the brakes just in time to avoid a collision.

"Looks like a rockslide," he said.

"Is there a way around?" Nathan asked.

Raven backed up to find an alternate path, moving into the shadows. A crackling noise came from the back seat.

"Hey, is that a radio?"

Nathan pulled up a backpack from the floor behind the passenger seat. He rummaged through the contents and found a handheld radio.

“I thought you checked this bag, Raven.”

“I thought you checked it,” Raven replied.

Nathan turned the radio on and a voice came over the channel.

“Liberty 1, this is Snake Nest. Do you copy? Over.”

“Shit,” Nathan said.

“Liberty 1, Liberty 1. Snake Nest, do you copy?” repeated the voice.

Raven gestured for the radio. “Gimme.”

“What are you going to say?” Nathan asked.

“Just trust me.”

He grabbed the radio from Nathan and brought it to his lips.

“Copy you. Snake Nest, this is Liberty 1.”

“Where the hell have you been, Liberty 1? You missed your last check-in.”

Raven couldn’t help but grin, getting into the character. “We found some loot back on Interstate 70. We’ll be back in a few hours.”

There was a pause that felt like an eternity.

“Roger that, Liberty 1. The General looks forward to seeing what you brought him. Over.”

Raven turned off the handheld. “Who the fuck is the General?”

“Answer him,” Nathan said, squeezing Joe’s arm.

“General Fenix,” Joe mumbled. “He’s the leader of the Sons of Liberty.”

“That’s the guy Dupree was talking about, right?”

Nathan nodded and looked at Joe. “You’re with the Aryan Nation or what? How many of you fuckers are there?”

Joe didn’t answer. He shifted in the seat next to Nathan and brushed up against the door, moaning in pain.

“How many soldiers are there in your group?” Raven asked.

Nathan grabbed Joe and pulled him away from the door. His eyes had rolled into his head and his lips pursed. The wrap covering Joe’s leg was saturated with blood. It looked like he’d lost a lot—maybe too much. Raven didn’t feel so much as a flicker of remorse. Skinhead bastards got what was coming to them.

“I don’t think we’re getting much more out of our friend,” Raven said. “We have to stick to the original plan.”

Raven pulled around the debris pile, the tires jolting over the loose rocks. After powering through the last stretch, he continued through the windy

ravine at fifty miles an hour. Gray clouds rolled overhead, only a sliver of sun peeking through their belly. Raindrops pelted the windshield, seeping through a bullet hole and onto the dashboard.

“The first turn-off is about a mile ahead,” Nathan said.

“I know,” Raven replied. He had memorized the map Joe had sketched out for them. He claimed it was the back way to the Castle. Totally unguarded. Raven and Nathan were both skeptical, but they had no other choice than to check out the road. They would find a place to ditch the Humvee and move the rest of the way in on foot.

“Hand me that radio,” Nathan said. “I’m going to try and see if I can get ahold of my sister or someone who can reach her.”

Raven handed it back to Nathan.

“You ever hear of this General Fenix?” Nathan asked while he was fiddling with the channels.

“Nope,” Raven said. “But I know the type. If he’s part of the Aryan Nation, then he sure as hell isn’t going to like me.”

Nathan caught his gaze in the rearview mirror. “You’re sure you’re up for this?”

Raven took a moment to think before he answered. Running the gauntlet was one thing, but heading into a lion’s den to face the kind of men who would skin him alive was another. Sandra, Allie, Creek, and Colton needed Raven. But so did Nathan, and so did his nephew and the other kids being held hostage.

“I’m up for it, Major, but I need you to make me a promise. If something happens to me, I want you to look after my family. You have connections through your sister. Make sure that Estes Park gets supplies and help.”

“You have my word, Raven. I promised Colton the same thing.”

Raven held up a hand. “One more thing. If I die, you better tell Lindsey that I went down in a blaze of glory—especially if I didn’t.”

Nathan scanned through the channels, reaching out to anyone who might be listening. Raven sped through the ravine while they waited for a response that never came.

They drove in tense silence. Up ahead, Raven saw something hanging from a tree that made his blood run cold.

“I think we’re about to enter enemy territory,” Raven said, pointing. He pulled off onto the shoulder of the road and backed into the shadows of a bluff.

“Is that a…” Nathan’s voice trailed off.

Raven pulled the binoculars from his vest and narrowed in on the figure of a man stretched out in a T-shape, lashed to the branches of an oak. A vulture pecked a ribbon of flesh away from his neck.

“They crucified the poor son of a bitch,” Nathan said.

Joe groaned. “Liam didn’t see eye to eye with the General, so the General took his eyes.” He coughed and rested his head against the seat.

“Damn,” Raven breathed. These bastards were even worse than he’d imagined.

“Took his eyes,” Joe mumbled to himself. “He’ll take yours too, and do worse to the injun.”

Raven shook his head, thinking of the Sioux story about the end of the world.

It tells of a place where the prairie meets the badlands—a place with a hidden cave.

Well, there was a nice rolling meadow ahead, and behind them was a stretch of rocky, arid terrain and a network of caves in the mountains—if Joe was to be believed. All they needed was a black dog, and yet another of Raven’s childhood stories would come to life.

Nathan tightened the rope around Joe’s hands and then tied it to the door. He finished securing the prisoner with tape over his mouth. Nathan grabbed one of the six M4s they had taken from the dead Sons of Liberty, and climbed into the passenger seat.

“Keep moving,” he said.

Inside the cave lives a woman, Raven thought, repeating the story in his mind as he drove. *She’s been there for thousands of years working on a blanket strip of her buffalo robe. Beside her sits Shunka Sapa, a massive black dog.*

“I think I figured out who Shunka Sapa is,” Raven finally said.

“What?” Nathan looked over. “Oh, from the Cherokee story?”

“The Sioux story. Big difference, Major.”

Nathan plucked the map off the dashboard. “General Fenix is our Shunka Sapa, right?”

Raven nodded. “Yeah, I think so.”

“According to Joe, we’re almost there. Let’s put that black dog down.”

“Recon first, Major,” Raven said. “I don’t trust a thing this punk says.”

Nathan agreed with a nod. “I’m going to try the radio one more time.” He

ran through the channels while Raven checked his gear.

Crossbow and hatchet? Check. Glock? Check. MK11? Check. Hand grenades? Check. They had plenty of ammunition and weapons for the hunt. He caught himself. This wasn't a hunt—this was a battle.

Nathan cursed and tossed the radio aside. "Still nothing. I've got a bad feeling about this."

Raven didn't know what to say, so he merely put the Humvee in gear and rolled on. They were coming up on the man on the tree. His shaved head was bowed, his chin tucked against his naked chest. His hands and feet were nailed into the bark. It was hard to tell how long he had been strung up, but his flesh was already decomposing.

He gunned the engine and sped down the road that cut through the meadow. A fence of foothills lined with pine trees provided a natural barrier at the end of the valley. The road twisted up into the mountains beyond.

"You see the turn-off?" Raven asked.

Nathan was already scoping the jagged cliffs that towered over the road. There were plenty of perches for a sniper, but they hoped the Humvee and the radio would allow them to sneak behind enemy lines.

Still, Raven didn't like it. This was starting to bring back memories of the raid in North Korea eighteen months ago. Even for a trained soldier, heading into enemy territory never got any easier. Without intel, and with only a two-man team who were both injured and exhausted, it was going to be almost impossible.

Letting out a discreet sigh, Raven focused on the plan. Recon and scouting came first. They would also try one last time to reach Nathan's sister or someone else who could call in support. If that failed again, they would do a risk assessment.

On the right side of the road was a lake with a mirrored surface, and to the left, a lush forest of pines. Raven slowed on the approach, looking for the entrance to the frontage road that would take them to the so-called Castle. Instead of the path, he saw another body strung up on the base of a ponderosa pine on the left side of the road.

"Christ," Nathan said. "More of them?"

He was looking to the right side of the road. Raven turned to see another corpse crucified to a tree there. He stopped the Humvee in the middle of the shadowed road, engine humming.

These bodies weren't Sons of Liberty soldiers. The dead people—a man on

the left side and a woman on the right—appeared to be in their mid-twenties and were dressed in civilian clothing. They looked like campers.

Nathan pointed at a National Park Service sign about a quarter mile down the road. “That’s the turn-off.”

“And this is a warning,” Raven said, nodding at the dead.

It reminded him of what the Apaches did to their prisoners—and the stories of what the American Army did to the American Indians. Both sides had butchered each other, scalping, slaughtering, and stringing up the dead.

But this wasn’t the fucking Oregon Trail. This was the twenty-first century. This type of brutality wasn’t supposed to exist in the American West anymore. The Aryan Brotherhood displayed a level of brutality Raven had never seen in his lifetime.

“Stay frosty,” he said to himself.

Nathan kept his rifle shouldered, looking for targets as Raven pulled down the frontage road and entered a tunnel of trees. The canopy overhead nearly blocked out the mountain peaks in the distance. Darkness shrouded them as they drove slowly down the road. There wasn’t a single sound of nature inside the forest. No chirping birds or bugs—no sign of deer or rabbits.

“This place gives me the creeps,” Nathan said.

“I hear that, brother,” Raven agreed.

The dirt road snaked through the forest and began to rise over another hill. As they neared the top, Nathan suddenly lowered his rifle and said, “Back, back, back!”

Raven saw the stone lookout tower at the same time. He could only see the top of the structure, but it was enough to send him peeling back in reverse.

“Joe wasn’t kidding. They’ve got a castle,” Nathan said. “Pull off behind those trees.”

Raven steered the Humvee off the road and parked beneath the trees. It wasn’t full cover, but they would camouflage the truck. They both got out, and Raven hefted the MK11 they had found in the vehicle over his shoulder. He had trained to use the semi-automatic sniper rifle back in the Marines. It was equipped with a swivel-based bipod, sound suppressor, mil-dot riflescope, and back-up iron sights. He could pin a tail on a donkey with the gun at fifteen hundred yards.

“Joe’s unconscious,” Nathan said.

“I say we leave him here. Come on, help me cover the Humvee.”

After covering up the truck with fallen branches, they set off into the

forest. Five minutes into the hike, Raven spotted the brown, rocky embankments framing the edge of the woods. A fence of Douglas firs grew out of the steep inclines. The slope descended a hundred feet to the pasture below and was covered in mossy boulders; plenty of places to hide.

They ducked behind one of the rocks and scoped the valley below. Raven checked the road and then moved the crosshairs back to the tower. It was more of a silo, made of stone with a lookout at the top. He put it at about twelve hundred yards out. Two men stood in the lookout at the top with their rifles angled out over the valley. A camp consisting of four buildings stood to the east.

“Two contacts,” Raven reported. “But we’re clear up here. This is the perfect vantage.”

Nathan held up a pair of binoculars. He did a thorough scan of the valley while Raven checked their six.

“Looks like some sort of camp,” he whispered. “That’s got to be where they’re keeping the kids. I see a couple of contacts patrolling, but that’s it.”

Raven took another look. A stone building and several log cabins were nestled under the ridgeline to the east. It was the same type of architecture Raven had seen in other national parks, built during the New Deal when President Roosevelt created the Civilian Conservation Corps to put America back to work after the Great Depression. Several men patrolled the camp with automatic rifles. Raven counted three of them and only one clunker pickup truck.

“My guess is these fuckers hightailed it up here to seek refuge after the attack last week,” he said. “They don’t appear to be that organized.”

“We can’t underestimate them,” Nathan said.

Raven nodded grimly. He had underestimated Brown Feather, and he wouldn’t make that mistake again.

“Try and get ahold of your sister again,” Raven said. “If you can’t, then we attack at dark.”

— 16 —

Rows of torches burned in Bond Park. Tonight, Cindy and Milo Todd were to be executed for killing Officer Rick Nelson.

Colton stood next to Lindsey, stoically watching the scene. He'd told Kelly and Risa to stay home—he couldn't stand the thought of them witnessing this. All Colton could think of was a Ku Klux Klan lynching.

"This feels wrong," Lindsey said.

"People need to know the law still exists," said a voice.

Don approached, carrying a shotgun in one hand. A new gold star was pinned on his breast. "When the men who burned down the Stanley and took our supplies hear about this, they'll think twice about coming back to Estes Park."

"I don't think Mr. Redford's crew will be worried," Colton said.

"Justice will be served to those that break the law, including this Mr. Redford," Don said. He spat a wad of tobacco onto the ground when Colton didn't reply.

"Don, don't you have anything better to do right now?" Lindsey asked.

"Look, I'm sorry about how things went down in the Mayor's office today, but you don't have what it takes to get us out of this mess, and I think you know it," Don said, never taking his eyes off Colton.

Colton balled his right hand into a fist and pivoted like he was about to throw a punch. Don flinched and took a step back.

"Congratulations on the new job, Chief Aragon," Colton said. "I hope to God you're as tough as you think you are."

He walked away, leaving Don to prepare the nooses and contemplate what came next.

Lindsey followed Colton toward the knot of curious residents that had

formed in the parking lot beside the park. Several folks stood along the railing on the deck outside Claire's Restaurant, and there were more standing on the balcony of La Cabana Mexican Grill.

In the flicker of torchlight, he recognized most of the faces. Many of them he had known his entire life. His job—his duty——his duty had been to keep them safe, and he had let them all down.

"Are they really going to hang those people?" someone asked.

"Sure are," another person said. "They deserve it."

"I'd shoot them myself," said another man. "Rick was my neighbor. He was a good man."

June Roberts, a retired woman who worked at the Safeway part-time bagging groceries, interjected. Her voice was soft but firm. "We can't just kill them. That makes us no better than they are."

Colton bowed his head, trying to hold off the anger by counting in his head. Every time he tried, he kept coming back to the pointlessness of each death that had occurred over the past week. He scanned the crowd for his wife, just to make sure she hadn't come. He was glad he didn't see Sandra or Allie in the crowd, either, but he did spot Rex and Lilly Stone. Both of them watched Colton, their faces blank.

One person he couldn't find who should have been here was Mayor Gail Andrews.

A commotion came from the back of the crowd. Colton followed its source to see Milo and Cindy being led from the station by Officer Matthew and Officer Hines. The prisoners shuffled, hands cuffed and feet shackled together by a connecting chain.

"Where's Gail?" he asked Lindsey.

She shrugged. "No idea."

She better be here.

Father Frank Nolte emerged from the crowd. He was dressed in a black shirt with a white collar. Colton had known Frank for thirty years. He'd married Colton and Kelly, baptized Risa, and most recently presided over Melissa Stone's private funeral. Before the attack, he'd been gearing down to retire, but Colton had a feeling he was about to become a very busy man.

Frank loosened his clerical collar and said, "You're sure there's no other way, Marcus?"

"Not my call, Father," Colton said. "Don's in charge now."

A woman shouted over the din of the crowd. "You can't hang us!"

It was Cindy, and she was pulling on her chains, yanking her brother away from the gazebo. The crowd, now several hundred strong, would be unstoppable if they decided to protest.

"You can't do this!" Cindy shouted. "Please, please!"

"It was Eric! Eric killed that cop!" Milo yelled.

Don pumped his shotgun and angled it at them. "Both of you, be quiet. You will have your time to speak in a few minutes."

"I wish they'd get on with it," someone said behind him. Colton turned and saw Gail, her eyes fixed on the makeshift gallows.

Apparently the mayor had decided to show up after all.

"We're really going to do this?" Colton asked.

"We've already discussed this, Marcus. We *have* to do this."

Colton faced her. "You're wrong."

"I wish I was," she sighed. "This isn't going to be the last time we have to do something like this."

"No! Please!" Cindy shouted again.

Hines pulled Milo and Cindy toward a long wooden footstool that had been set up under the nooses. Don pointed the shotgun at them. "Up," he ordered.

"Please, please don't do this!" Milo begged. "It was Eric. He's the one that hit that cop in the head with the rock!"

"Yeah, it was Eric!" Cindy shouted. "You already killed him. This ain't right!"

Don angled the gun at Cindy, and she finally stood on the stool. Once she and Milo were both under the nooses, Father Frank performed the sign of the cross.

There were a few shouts from the crowd, but most citizens simply waited in silence. Colton suspected a good portion of them didn't expect them to follow through with the execution.

"Stop!" Cindy shouted. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry! I swear to God, this wasn't my fault."

She locked eyes with Colton. There was something in her gaze besides anger, but it wasn't regret. It was fear. He guessed Cindy would say anything right now to save her own skin.

Don cleared his throat and then announced, "Cindy and Milo Todd, you have been found guilty by a jury of your peers in the murder of Officer Rick Nelson, the kidnapping of Detective Lindsey Plymouth, and the attempted

murder of several police officers. Estes Park, Colorado, and the United States of America is under martial law, and the punishment for your crimes is death."

"We never even had a trial!" Milo shouted.

Cindy lowered her head, sobbing uncontrollably, snot flowing freely from her nose.

"The Estes Park administration reviewed the case and found you guilty of the crimes I just stated," Don said. "That's the law now."

"Do it!" someone shouted. Colton turned to see Kyle, the thirteen-year-old son of their neighbors, punching the air with his fist. "Hang them!"

Don raised a hand, and the crowd quieted.

"We all know the country is at war," he said, his voice booming over the park. "A war that we will only survive if we deal swiftly and violently with our enemies. There will be many tough decisions from here on out. Some of them won't be popular. Others will be questioned. But Cindy and Milo made their decision, and they will receive their justice."

"Please," Cindy begged.

"Father Nolte will now say a prayer," Don said.

Colton saw Frank's lips moving, but he only heard bits and pieces of the prayer. The crowd continued to watch in silence. A mother in the front covered her son's eyes, and several people walked away.

Cindy continued to beg for her life, but Milo just stared ahead, his gaze vacant and withdrawn. Sweat dripped down his forehead, and a wet spot had blossomed around his crotch.

In Afghanistan, Colton had once towered over a Taliban soldier that was on his back, leg busted and torso full of bullet holes. The man was going to die, and he had known it. The body did some awful things when that happened.

Frank finished his prayer and looked to Don.

"Do you have any final words?" Don asked.

"I'm sorry," Cindy cried. "I'm sorry."

Milo sneered, suddenly snapping out of his stupor. "You're all going to burn in hell for this."

Don looked at Gail, and she nodded. "Proceed, Officer Hines," he said.

Colton couldn't believe it—Don didn't even have the guts to do this himself. He had asked the younger officer to do it instead.

Officer Hines climbed the ladder behind the makeshift gallows and slipped

bags over their heads. Frank made the sign of a cross again, held up his Bible, and recited the Lord's Prayer in a trembling voice.

Hines looked back at Don, who nodded. After a moment of hesitation, Hines kicked the stools away one at a time. Cindy and Milo dropped, the ropes tightening around their necks. Legs still shackled, they squirmed and jerked like frogs.

Somewhere in the crowd, a baby starting crying. Colton turned to see Rick Nelson's wife in the front row. She was holding her crying daughter in her arms, staring at the two hanging bodies with complete hatred.

Colton forced his gaze away and left before the Todds stopped kicking.

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Charlize and Albert approached the double doors to U.S. Northern Command side by side. It was just after nine o'clock at night, but she felt wide-awake.

According to the doctors, she had been taken down by a combination of things: an infection, low blood sugar, and fatigue. She'd needed a few days of rest—and her body had made the call to shut down. The new antibiotics were helping, and despite the constant headache, she was starting to feel better already. Once he'd been convinced that Charlize was going to be okay, Albert had given her another frank chat about not listening to him when he'd tried to take her to the medical ward.

Two Marines came to attention as Charlize approached the double doors. The man on the left pushed them open to the two-level room beyond, which was currently buzzing with activity. It was the same basic setup she had seen in the PEOC and on the *USS John Stennis*. Monitors fed images of hotspots around the United States. On the right wall was the feed from a video camera inside a Humvee rolling down a highway.

Two more monitors displayed aerial footage from helicopters, and a third showed checkered farmland somewhere in the Midwest, all of it burning. There were a dozen other monitors showing views of highways clogged with vehicles, refugees, and destruction.

So this is what's been happening while I was asleep.

President Diego stood at the central table next to General Thor. He drank coffee from a mug with the presidential seal on it while Thor briefed him.

Colonel Raymond, Thor's second in command, jogged up the steps while

Charlize observed the room. He stopped at the top of the stairs. “Please follow me, Secretary Montgomery.”

“Colonel, have you gotten any closer to finding out where Fenix is holding Ty?” she asked.

“No, ma’am, but it’s a large area and we only have one bird in the area right now. Most everything that was at Buckley AFB was killed in the EMP blast, but we’re moving some working aircraft there.” He paused on the step below her and looked up. “From one parent to another, we will find your son. I’ve got my best team working on this.”

“Thank you, Colonel,” she said.

The reassurance was exactly what she needed to prepare for her first briefing since leaving the USS *John Stennis*. President Diego held up a hand when he saw her, but he didn’t smile. He stepped away from the table and met her at the bottom of the ramp.

“Good to see you back on your feet, Charlize. A lot has happened since you were out,” Diego said. “Follow me.”

“I’ll be right here, ma’am,” Albert said. He smiled. “Always.”

Charlize smiled back at him. He had done so much for her over the past week, especially after losing Clint. She owed him her life. When the time was right, she was going to get him to open up—and maybe even get him to start calling her by her first name—but not until he was ready.

Thor walked with them to a conference room tucked back in a corner of the room. Inside, a long table furnished the narrow room. A dozen military officers and civilians glanced up from the folders in front of them. Charlize only recognized a few of the faces.

“I’d like to introduce you all to the Secretary of Defense, Charlize Montgomery,” Diego said.

“Hello,” Charlize said, raising a burned hand. She took a seat next to Diego and he passed her a folder marked *Confidential*. She cracked the seal as Thor began speaking.

“Good evening, everyone. We have a lot of ground to cover. I’ll start with an update on the North Korean threat. As you all know, the USS *John Stennis* was attacked and destroyed. We lost some good men and women, but the enemy sub was also destroyed. The bad news is we think there is another one out there. Colonel Raymond will explain what we’re dealing with in a few minutes but first, let’s talk about the recovery efforts here in the United States.”

Thor turned to a wall-mounted monitor and waited for it to come on. A map of North America appeared on screen.

"This is the EMP blast umbrella. As you can see, it extends to the borders with Canada and Mexico, in locations marked in red."

Charlize had seen a similar map four or five days ago, but she was shocked to see that the red EMP umbrella extended well into both neighboring countries.

Thor switched to another map, this time of just the United States. "This is the radiation zone," he continued. "We predicted twenty-five percent of the population would perish in the first two weeks. Those numbers were low. Reports coming from the Midwest are higher than originally projected. Add to that the chaos in our major cities, and we're looking at thirty percent. We've also had difficulty setting up the Survivor Centers for logistical reasons."

"Recovery is my main focus," Diego cut in. "We're receiving lots of support from our allies across the pond, but we can't count on much assistance from Mexico or Canada, due to their own situations. I've readjusted our military assets to protect the convoys moving the generators to the radiation-free zones in the States. Our goal is to protect those populations and get the power back on in places we can still save." He glanced at Charlize. "Now that you're back on your feet, I'd like you to help with this effort."

"Sir, all due respect, but our main focus should be destroying the North Korean submarines and any forces they may still have lurking out there," Charlize said. "That's why I gave the order to deploy HSM squadrons before I left the USS *John Stennis.* Can someone tell me what we have deployed right now as counter measures on top of my request?"

"Yes, ma'am," Raymond said.

Several people shot what might have been judgmental glares at her. She didn't exactly blame them. An entire team of Marines and a valuable helicopter had been sent to find her son, and here she was talking about re-prioritizing the main focus of the government.

"My point is that we can't afford to be attacked again," Charlize clarified. "The recovery efforts depend on our ability to prevent another attack."

Raymond finished thumbing through a folder and pulled out a sheet of paper. "We've added four P-8 Poseidons and three squadrons of F-18 Super Hornets to the hunt. We're casting a wide net and will find the remaining sub

eventually."

"Eventually?" President Diego said, frustration rising in his voice. "Charlize is right. We can't afford to be attacked again. I don't understand how some archaic old junker submarines are slipping through our net of detection."

"It makes me wonder if they are having help," Charlize added. "The sub will have to surface to refuel and charge their batteries."

"Yes, ma'am, that's true, but it's possible they refueled without detection, or that they refueled before getting close to U.S. waters. Our best chance will be catching it with radar on the surface, or seeing its snorkel," Thor replied.

Charlize felt like a hypocrite for her next order, but it was the only way to protect the United States. "Mr. President, I would highly encourage you to consider reallocating some of our remaining aircraft, specifically F-18s, just like you are readjusting military assets to protect the convoys. We need as many aircraft involved in the hunt for this final sub as possible. There's no telling what the North Koreans still plan to do after the kamikaze stunt they pulled with the USS *John Stennis*."

Diego thought for a moment. She half-expected him to ask her if ending the air search for her son was part of that order, but he simply nodded and said, "Make it happen, Charlize. If there is anything else you need, just say the word."

"Thank you, sir," she replied.

"What's next?" Diego asked.

Thor gestured toward a thin man in a white lab coat with a red goatee and short-cropped hair to match. "This is Doctor Peter Lundy. He's our leading scientist, with a PhD in electrical engineering and a second PhD in physics. Secretary Montgomery, you will be working with him closely."

"Hi, everyone, and welcome, Secretary Montgomery," Lundy said. "As many of you know, I'm the manager of this facility. Constellation was designed to protect the United States from a catastrophic event. Using new technologies, we're laying out an ambitious plan to get the grid back up in the following locations over the next twelve months."

The radiation zones on the main screen vanished, and circular areas marked with SCs bloomed across the screen.

"We're focusing on two Survival Centers in each state while we work on getting the grid up nationwide," Lundy continued. "Each SC will be designed to support populations of one hundred thousand people. That's—"

“Two hundred thousand people per state?” Charlize interrupted. “What about everyone else?”

“You’ve missed a lot while you’ve been out,” Diego said again. “The situation out there is dire. This should put it in perspective for you. Go ahead, General.”

Thor typed at the laptop in front of him and then pivoted his chair to face the main screen. On the screen, a team of soldiers was running down a highway clogged with vehicles under a bright sun.

“This is a team of Navy SEALs at a checkpoint on Highway 75 outside of Miami,” Thor said.

The feed wobbled and then leveled out as the SEAL with the mounted cam stopped and climbed onto the hood of a sedan. Standing there, he roved his helmet from left to right, providing a wide view of the road. Humvees with soldiers in turrets were pointing their guns at the thousands of refugees slogging toward the barricade.

A gunshot rang out, and the SEAL jumped back to the pavement, sending the feed swooping toward the sky and then back to the Humvees. When he was back on his feet, he flashed a hand signal to his team, and Charlize caught a glimpse of their fatigued faces. She recognized them as the same team that had escorted her to Constellation.

Charlize tilted her head. “I thought these men were holding the line south of Orlando?”

“They were, ma’am. That line has fallen. They’re trying to keep refugees from overwhelming Miami now. This video was taken a few hours ago by Senior Chief Petty Officer Fernandez’s helmet cam.”

He fast-forwarded the feed. Fernandez ran along the shoulder of the road with his team. He shot a glance over his shoulder at the convoy of Humvees blocking off the highway. The soldiers in the turrets had fired into the crowd, knocking men and women down like bowling pins. A group of civilians poured around the vehicles anyway, and the Humvees reversed, the gunners still firing.

Fernandez suddenly dropped to the ground, and one of his teammates reached down and grabbed him under the arm. The chief was gripping his chest with one hand, blood already seeping between his fingers.

The Humvees reversed, and one of them stopped next to Fernandez and his men. The team helped their leader into the truck, and the feed shut off.

“All across the country, similar scenes of chaos and violence are erupting,”

Thor said. “Gangs and hate groups are terrorizing cities and roadways. Even ordinary citizens like those you just saw have done terrible things in their panic and desperation.”

“Simply put,” Diego said, looking at each member of his Cabinet in turn, “I’m afraid the America we knew is a thing of the past. When I said my main focus is on recovery, I meant we should focus on salvaging what we can from the ashes and preventing the total destruction of our country.”

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Ty grabbed onto a stone ledge inside the observation tower. They were somewhere in the mountains, but he didn’t recognize any landmarks. He breathed in the fresh air, which carried a pine scent like the candles his mom would burn in the winter. After being cooped up inside the Castle, he wasn’t complaining about being brought up here, even though it was General Fenix who had accompanied him up the dark elevator shaft.

The wooden box they had ridden to the top of the tower creaked and groaned behind them. Carson stood at the open metal gate and manually lowered the elevator back down using a rope and pulley system.

“Send that back up with our friend!” he shouted.

Fenix placed his elbows on the ledge next to Ty and folded his hands together. He took in a long breath, exhaled, and said, “It’s nice up here, isn’t it, kid?”

Ty didn’t say anything, and kept his eyes on the view. Rays of ghostly moonlight spilled from the guts of clouds drifting across the sky. The light cast a carpet of white over the sea of trees. A waterfall slid down the rocks to the right of the tower, dumping into a stream that wound through the valley below.

“You don’t talk much, do you?” Fenix said. “I don’t blame you. I’m sure you’re scared and probably want to go home, but I’m going to tell you a secret. The world as you knew it is over. That means no more Happy Meals or trips to the toy store.”

“I don’t eat fast food,” Ty said. He kept his gaze on the rocky ledge under the waterfall. Something was out there, moving around in the shadows.

“Whatever, kid. Point is, you’re not going home even if your mom pays up. There’s nothing left out there. You’re going to have to toughen up,”

Fenix said. “I’m here to help you with that.”

Carson walked over and raised an archaic looking hand-held video camera. “Don’t mind me,” he said. “I just like home movies.”

Fenix snapped his fingers to get Ty’s attention. “You do know what happened the other night, right, kiddo?”

“My name is Ty, not *kiddo*, and my mom is going to make you wish you were dead.”

Fenix laughed, but it wasn’t a nice laugh. “You’re a snippy little bastard, aren’t you? Well, let me tell you something, *Ty*. Your mom is late, so I think we’re going to have to send her another video.”

The cart in the shaft creaked, and Fenix walked over to the gate. Tommy, his arm in a sling, stepped out. He smiled when he saw Ty.

“Hi, General, the doc said you wanted me to come up here,” Tommy said.

“Yup, I have a mission for you, young man,” Fenix said. “It has to do with our friend here, Ty.”

Tommy hesitated before walking out onto the platform. Carson set the video camera down on the ledge.

“Little Mr. Montgomery doesn’t like to talk, and I thought someone younger might have better luck,” Fenix said.

Tommy’s gaze flitted to Ty and then back to the General. “Sure, sir,” Tommy said. “Whatever you say.”

Fenix turned toward Ty. “Would you be willing to talk to Tommy?”

“Um, okay,” Ty said uncertainly.

“What do you want me to talk to him about?” Tommy asked.

“Well, I thought you might explain to Ty about your plan to escape,” Fenix said.

Tommy tried to raise his injured arm to protect himself, but Carson was too fast. He shoved Tommy over the ledge with ease. Tommy let out a cry that echoed through the valley. Three beats later, he hit the rocks below, his scream silenced by the shattering of bones.

“You’re next, kid,” Carson said.

Fenix dragged him out of the chair. Since he couldn’t kick, Ty couldn’t do much but squirm his upper body. He hit Fenix around the head and shoulders, anyplace he could reach, but the man didn’t even flinch.

“You’re going to make this worse,” Fenix said with a grunt. “Grab his legs, Carson.”

Carson set the camera on the ledge so it faced them. Fenix and Carson

swung Ty over the side, and the world turned topsy-turvy. He was now dangling over the edge of the tower, staring straight down at Tommy's ruined body in the shape of a pretzel on the rocks below.

"No!" Ty screamed. "Please, put me down!"

A light shone on the side of his face. He craned his neck to see Carson directing a flashlight and the video camera. Fenix held Ty by his feet and ankles, smiling down at him. The men were recording this entire thing. Once again Ty was a spectacle, and the only man who could help him was dead below.

Ty clamped his jaws shut. He didn't want his mom to hear him screaming.

"Charlize Montgomery, this is General Fenix again. I don't think you took my last message very seriously."

Fenix let him drop a few inches. Ty couldn't help screaming this time. He flailed, fingernails scraping the smooth stone surface of the tower. There wasn't anything to grab onto.

Carson moved the camera over the ledge to look at Ty's face and then directed it at Tommy.

"If you don't meet my demands, your son will end up like his friend down there. That's what happens to people who defy me."

Ty looked away from Tommy's broken body to the waterfall to the right of the tower. Motion flickered across the ledge. A mountain goat strode out onto the rocks, hooves clicking on the rocks. It watched Ty in the moonlight.

"You have forty-eight hours or your son dies," Fenix said.

An instant later, the ground fell away as Fenix and Carson pulled Ty to safety. He kept his gaze on the goat, which remained frozen as if it thought they couldn't see it as long as it didn't move.

"Sorry, kid," Fenix said with a wide, toothy grin as they set him back in the wheelchair. "This is just business."

He looked over at Carson. "Get that video uploaded and fired off via satellite, asap. Hopefully Ty's mother takes the Sons of Liberty a bit more seriously now."

"Will do, sir," Carson replied. "You sure were smart to build a faraday cage and stockpile all this old technology."

"I told you it would come in handy." Fenix took in another long breath of air and looked over the ledge, shaking his head. "Man, I really liked Tommy. Shame he was such an idiot."

"He wasn't much good to us with his injured arm anyway," Carson said.

He grabbed onto the back of Ty’s chair and pushed him back to the elevator shaft. The radio on his hip crackled as he pushed him to the gate, a message relaying from the speakers.

“Snake Nest, this is Liberty 1, we’re on our way back with some goods. I think you’re really going to like what we found on the highway.”

— 17 —

Nathan tucked the radio back on his hip. “They bought it. Time to move to the next stage.”

“You’re sure about this?” Raven asked.

“I hope that’s a rhetorical question. We have to do this. There’s no one else to help.”

“Yeah, but there’s only two of us.” Raven swiped a strand of hair that had stuck to the camouflage paint on his face. “I faced worse odds in North Korea, but there were more of us to face them together.”

“I thought that’s why you decided to pull our plan from the textbook on guerilla warfare. Make it look like there are more of us than there are, right?”

“Yeah,” Raven said again. His tone lacked confidence.

Nathan looked down at the map of the camp they had drawn with a stick in the dirt after their recon. He shone his flashlight on each crudely sketched structure as he recapped the plan. “We’ve got two hostiles in the tower, two more guarding the building here, and two more here. A patrol of three more men are covering this area.”

He pointed at one of the buildings. “I believe this is where they are holding the kids.” He traced a finger over the dirt. “This path heads into the mountains to the north. You said you didn’t see anything back there, right?”

“You saw the map Joe had on him. The only thing back there are some abandoned mines that are probably all caved in. I scoped the area before dark and didn’t see anyone coming or going, which leads me to believe these guys are it.”

Nathan unwrapped his last granola bar and bit off a chunk. He swallowed and then pointed at the entrance to the camp.

“I’ll drive the Humvee here and wait for you to open fire. As soon as you

start shooting, I'll bail and find the kids. Your job is to draw these guys away from the buildings…and to avoid hitting me."

Raven wrapped his ponytail and tucked the end into the collar of his camouflaged fatigues. They'd been lucky to get clothes, weapons, and nutrition, courtesy of the dead skinheads. Both men had dressed for war tonight.

Raven wiped another streak of paint across his forehead and let out a long sigh. "What if things go south?"

"Then you hightail it out of here. I don't want you trying to rescue me, okay? Go back to Estes Park and get help. One of us has to make it back."

After a moment of hesitation, Raven nodded again. "Don't worry, I got your back, Major."

"I know," Nathan said. He knew how crazy the plan sounded. He had a broken arm, a sprained ankle, and his entire body hurt. Raven was in better shape, but not by much.

But they had the element of surprise, automatic weapons, a Humvee, and something the skinheads didn't have—heart.

Nathan reached out with his bandaged fist, and Raven bumped it back.

"Shit, that kind of hurt," Raven said when he pulled his hand back, chuckling. "I guess that's not a good sign."

"You're a tough son of a bitch, brother. You'll be fine."

Raven shrugged a shoulder. He turned away, but Nathan tapped his sleeve.

"Thank you, Raven," Nathan said. "I'm grateful to have you with me."

"You saved my sister and niece. Least I can do is get myself shot up for your nephew."

Raven flipped the night vision goggles over his camouflaged features.

"Happy hunting," Nathan said.

They parted ways, both of them knowing that the odds were good that they wouldn't make it out of the Castle alive. Raven slipped out of the forest and down the slope of the hill to the outcroppings of rocks. He carried his MK11, but he had access to plenty of extra firepower. They had placed five M4s in strategic nooks along the bluff under the cover of darkness. As soon as Nathan drove into position, Raven would run from nest to nest and open fire to make it look like there was a small army up here. Then he would pick off each target with the MK11. Or maybe he would start with the MK11. Either way, Nathan trusted Raven to get it done.

On the way back to the Humvee, Nathan managed his thoughts just like he

always did before climbing into the cockpit of his F-16. He couldn't let the desire for revenge get the best of him now. They had come too far for that. He had to be smart about this.

Nathan checked on Joe when he returned to the truck. The plan was to keep him tied up, but that plan changed when he saw Joe wasn't breathing. Nathan placed two fingers to his neck, checking for a pulse that wasn't there.

It was hard as hell to feel anything for these men. They had made their decision to join with the wrong side, and they would pay with their lives.

Working quickly, he untied Joe and pulled him from the truck. Then he moved the body to the passenger seat, propping him up in what he hoped looked like a natural pose. He turned on the truck, headlights splashing across the road. The high beams cut through a light curtain of fog drifting across the road below. He rolled the window down to let in fresh air. This was it.

Unlike the forest they had passed through to get here, the night was alive with sounds. Bugs chirped, and a bird cawed in the distance, the calming music of nature filling the truck. In a way, it felt almost like this was just a leisurely drive through a park. But then the headlights captured the tower and the two soldiers outside—including their shaved heads and high-powered rifles.

Nathan gritted his teeth and continued down the road at thirty miles an hour. He could see the roofs of the cabins now, and the three men patrolling outside. Another soldier stood warming his hands next to the fire pit in the courtyard.

Taking one hand off the steering wheel, Nathan grabbed his M9 and kept it near the door. The two men stepped away from the guard tower and strode to the road in a relaxed manner. One of them held up a gloved hand.

Nathan hadn't planned for that and eased off the gas. He'd thought he would be able to drive right into the camp. Instead, he came to a stop about two hundred yards from the entrance, hoping these men couldn't see his face in the moonlight—or the fact that Joe was dead.

The guard on the left walked toward the Humvee, while the one on the right remained in the road. Nathan aimed his M9 at the driver's door as the man approached.

"Come on, Raven," Nathan whispered. The only reply was the pounding of his heart. He could hear it beating like a riveter in his chest. He raised his foot, prepared to stomp the gas, when a streak of red whizzed by the truck like a meteorite.

Nathan didn't hear the gunshot, but he saw the bullet hit the dirt. Raven's first shot had missed. The skinhead stumbled backward and Nathan pointed his M9 out the open window.

Pop, pop!

Nathan dropped the guy with shots to the eye and nose. The second guard took a 7.62 mm round to the chest, blood gushing from the wound and coating the ground. Raven had come through. From over a thousand yards out, it was a hell of a shot.

There was a fleeting moment of silence in the valley as the other guards realized what was happening. Then the real gunfire started. Muzzle fire from one of Raven's nooks illuminated the rocky bluff behind the Humvee. Return fire flashed across the camp from every direction.

Nathan punched the pedal and sped toward the entrance. The skinheads outside the buildings ran for cover, leaving their posts just like Nathan had hoped. A heavyset man lumbered into the road with a rifle aimed at Raven's position. Nathan pointed his M9 out the window and got off two shots that sent the man diving for cover.

The radio Nathan had forgotten about suddenly barked to life.

"Snake Nest, this is Tower 1. We're under attack, I repeat—" The voice was silenced, and a body plummeted from the top of the tower in the rearview mirror as Nathan raced toward the camp.

Four down. Not bad, Raven.

Nathan swerved off the road and saw the fat skinhead running away from the gunfire. The headlights captured his thick, tattooed arms and the back of his shaved skull. He glanced over his shoulder, his face a mask of terror as Nathan plowed into him.

The crack of metal on bone drowned out the gunfire as the man was knocked down and crushed under the weight of the Humvee. He put the vehicle into reverse and ran the guy over again for good measure. There was a muffled screech and then silence as Nathan steered back toward the camp. As soon as he turned back onto the road, gunfire lanced into the windshield. He ducked down as rounds bit into the seats. Two of the bullets tore through Joe's corpse.

"Shit," Nathan muttered. He slammed on the brakes, put the vehicle in park, and grabbed his M4. Another flurry of shots hit the front of the vehicle, punching through metal. He bailed out, losing the radio in the process. Keeping low, he bolted for the cover of the nearest tree. His ankle screamed

at him, but adrenaline kept him moving.

Rounds speared the Humvee, shattering windows and pinging off the armored turret. Safely behind the tree, he counted the sound of the rifles. There were at least three or four, maybe more.

Nathan risked a glance around the right side of the tree. A skinhead half-hidden behind a barrel outside the first cabin saw him and squeezed off a burst. The bullets hit the tree, peppering Nathan with bark.

Holding in a breath, Nathan moved around the left side of the tree and fired a three-round burst that hit the barrel. Return fire cut into the tree before he could raise the red dot sight.

He placed his back against the trunk and waited.

There was a brief lull in the gunfire. Exhaling, Nathan bolted from around the tree and took up position behind a boulder. He popped up and fired a shot that hit the guy behind the barrel in the neck.

Nathan was up and moving before the body hit the dirt.

Two more muzzle flashes came from the camp, but neither of them were focused on him. He centered his rifle on the last flash and then pulled the trigger. A shout, then silence.

Nathan stopped behind another tree to catch his breath and change his magazine. A stick crunched somewhere to his right, and he glanced over to see a tall man with an athletic build looking down the iron sights of his rifle.

“Got you, you piece of shit,” the man snarled.

The top of his shaved skull suddenly flew up like a white toupee caught in a fierce wind. Nathan didn’t stick around to check if he was dead. He moved fast with his rifle roving for targets, his broken arm throbbing with pain. He raked the muzzle back and forth.

Nothing moved across his field of vision.

Had they done it? Were all the skinheads down?

“I’m coming, Ty,” Nathan whispered. He ran to the nearest building and grabbed the handle, but it clicked, locked. He took a step back and kicked the door open with his good foot to reveal a room filled with crates.

Nathan cursed and ran for the second cabin. He opened the unlocked door, but found only more supplies.

Where the hell were the kids?

A bullet hit the dirt when he moved back outside. He looked up at the cliff. Was that a warning?

Hold the fuck on, Raven.

Nathan got to the third cabin when he heard the rattle and cough of engines.

He froze.

Not just a few engines. Dozens of them. Some of them sounded like the whine and splutter of old motorcycles and dirt bikes. Others were the deep roar of diesel engines, possibly military vehicles. The enemy's cavalry was en route. He had to get moving.

Nathan ran for the third and final cabin.

"Come on Ty, please be here," he said.

He opened the door. A man hiding inside raised a pistol and fired. The shot hit the frame of the door just above Nathan's head. He answered with a three-round burst into the man's chest and then stumbled back outside.

The kids weren't here.

Ty wasn't here.

This wasn't the Castle. It was just the forward operating base.

Nathan's mind raced. Either Joe had lied, or maybe he hadn't known as much as he pretended. Either way, Nathan was fucked if he didn't get moving.

He ran for the Humvee, his ankle hurting so badly it felt like he was ripping the muscle. If he could reach the truck, maybe he could get back to Raven and find a way out of here. They'd have to regroup, scout the area again. Joe had mentioned tunnels in the mountains, but searching those would require more time.

Headlights swept over him. Nathan jumped into the Humvee just as the bikes came into view. Behind them, pickup trucks full of soldiers and two Humvees drove down the road feeding into the back of the camp.

Heart kicking, Nathan slammed the door. The engine was still on, but it was making a rattling sound. When he shifted into reverse, the truck jolted and then stalled. He tried it again, but got only another grinding noise.

"Come on! Come on!" he shouted, trying again.

Nathan decided to abandon the truck. He grabbed his rifle and moved back outside just as one of the motorcycles zipped down the road. Several more circled around him, cutting off his escape.

"Drop your rifle!" someone shouted.

"Hands on your head, asshole!" yelled another voice.

Nathan hesitated, calculating the odds. He finally lowered the gun and dropped it to the dirt. He raised his hands above his head and slowly got to

his knees.

Nathan looked up at the hill, silently sending a message over and over again.

Run, Raven.

Nathan had failed, but Raven was still out there. He knew in his heart that Raven would come through on his promise to save Ty, just as he would have watched over Sandra and Allie if their positions were reversed.

Over the angry shouts and curses came a surprisingly polite voice. “Well hello,” the voice said. “We weren’t expecting company.”

Nathan looked up at a man with thick hair and a well-groomed beard shot through with gray. He raised a fist with brass knuckles, arched both brows, and said, “Welcome to the Castle. I really don’t think you’re going to enjoy your stay.”

***

Sandra opened the front door for Allie. Colton had given them a lift to Raven’s house, and now he was lingering on the porch, looking like a man with something on his mind.

He let out a sigh. “I really wish you would stay in town, Sandra. I told Raven I would look after you while he’s gone. The man who took our supplies and broke Theo out of jail is the same man your brother owes a lot of money to. Name of Nile Redford.”

“Mr. Redford… That snake.” Sandra remembered that name all too well. She looked at the shotgun propped next to the front door and then sat on the porch swing.

“You sure you won’t come stay with us?” Colton asked.

“Yes, I’m sure. I’ve got this gun and Creek to look after us. I feel safer up here, anyways.”

“You know you’re welcome at my house. Kelly loves company, and I bet the girls would like a sleepover.”

“Don’t worry about me, Chief. I can look after myself.”

Colton sighed a second time. “I’m not the chief anymore, Sandra.”

“What?” Sandra planted her feet on the porch, stopping the porch swing. “Why the hell not?”

“Long story. I still haven’t told my wife yet.”

“Who’s in charge?” Sandra asked.

“Don Aragon.”

Sandra sniffed. “That guy is a piece of work.”

“It was his idea to execute the Todds,” Colton said. “Well, him and Mayor Gail.”

“That’s one thing we agree on, then. Now people will know what happens when you mess with Estes Park.”

“You sound just like them,” Colton said with a shake of his head. He put one hand on his duty belt and the other on the grip of his pistol, and turned to look at the sky.

“I’m sorry, but I’m sick of people like the Todds, Mr. Redford, and Brown Feather thinking they can just take whatever they want.”

Colton nodded like he understood.

“We’ll be fine,” she continued. “Go home and spend some time with your family.”

“I’ll stop by the medical center tomorrow and check on everything there,” Colton said. “Goodnight.”

“Goodnight,” Sandra replied. Using her toes, she pushed the swing. It rocked back and forth. Creek watched Colton from the dirt at the bottom of the porch, ears perked. Allie came back outside and sat down beside Sandra. She chewed on a half of a peanut butter sandwich.

“When is Uncle Raven going to come home?” Allie asked.

“Soon, baby. Soon.” Sandra stroked her daughter’s hair and studied the dazzling stars in the black bowl overhead. She loved it out here. Estes Park had been a haven from her past, a place where she could start over and raise Allie among good people.

At least, it had been a haven. Things were different now. The violence and fear had stripped away her peace of mind.

Her eyes flitted from the stars to the shotgun propped up against the siding. She doubted Mr. Redford would come back, but she was prepared if he did. She wasn’t scared of him, especially after being kidnapped by Brown Feather. Nothing could be worse than that.

A falling star caught her eye. It streaked over the jagged teeth of the mountains to the east.

“Wow, did you see that?” Allie asked, sitting up.

Another meteorite broke through the atmosphere and tore through the sky, leaving behind a trail of fire.

“Is that the Raven Mocker, Mama?” Allie asked.

Sandra pulled her hand from around her daughter’s back. “What? Who told you about the Raven Mocker?”

“Um… Uncle Raven did?”

“Of course he did,” Sandra said with a frown.

Allie looked at the sky with curious eyes. “Does that mean someone is dying out there?”

Sandra shook her head. “It’s just a story. It’s not real.”

“Will you tell it to me?”

“No, it’s too scary.”

Sandra relaxed against the cushion. She used her feet to push off again, the swing creaking back and forth.

“I promise I won’t get scared,” Allie said.

Creek lifted his head to look at them as though he wanted to hear the story too.

“Please?” Allie begged.

“Fine,” Sandra said. She pulled Allie close, using her arm as a wing.

“The Raven Mocker is a witch from an old Cherokee tale. It was used to explain meteorites and falling stars, which is what we’re seeing now.”

“A witch? Like in *The Wizard of Oz*?”

“This is a male witch—a man who takes the form of fire when he sails through the sky, leaving behind sparks and making a sound like a high wind.”

“I don’t hear any wind,” Allie said.

“That’s because those are just shooting stars and not the Raven Mocker. The story says he appears at night when someone is dying.”

“Do you think Uncle Raven is dying?”

Sandra reared back at the question. “Allie, no! Why would you say that?”

Creek let out another low whine and moved up the steps to sit next to the swing.

“It’s okay, boy,” Sandra said. She reached down to pat his head. “I know you miss Raven. I miss him, too.”

Sandra looked back to the sky just as another falling star streaked over the mountains. This time she heard the rushing of the wind.

— 18 —

Raven zoomed in on the Humvees and the pickup trucks that surrounded Nathan on all sides. Soldiers fanned out across the camp with their weapons at the ready, some of them yelling orders. For skinhead pricks, these guys seemed way more organized than Raven had expected. Where the hell had they gotten all of these old vehicles and bikes? It was like they were prepared for the EMP attack…

Or hoping for the attack, Raven mused.

He centered the crosshairs of the MK11 on the man closest to Nathan. The pilot was sprawled on the ground, having been hit several times with brass knuckles. There wasn't anything Raven could do from here but watch. If he opened fire now, he was liable to hit Nathan.

Rounds suddenly lanced away from the camp, kicking up dirt and pinging off the boulders all around Raven. He lunged for cover and flattened his body just as another volley of bullets slammed into the other side of the rock.

He was really in trouble now. He cursed as he wiggled across the ground like a damn worm. If he did somehow manage to make it out of this one, he was going to reconsider his choice of career. Tracking had not been working out lately—all he ever seemed to find these days was trouble.

Rounds whizzed overhead. Dirt and chunks of rock rained down on his body. He pulled himself behind another boulder and looked up. He wasn't far from the ledge he'd shimmied down earlier. He could climb up and make a run for it through the woods, but where the hell was he going to go after that?

Headlights streaked across the road below. Now motorcycles and dirt bikes were heading his way. He counted four of them and then ducked back down as a bullet speared the air six inches above his head.

Rounds cut into the hillside. The bark of an M240 joined the chorus of

war. They really wanted him dead if they were wasting that much ammo. He mastered his breathing and prepared to move.

You got this, Raven. You got this. Because if you don't got this, you're dead.

He scrabbled up the dirt slope. Then he jumped onto the ledge and rolled to relative safety. Rounds hit the hillside he had just abandoned, and cut through the trees overhead.

He changed the magazine in the MK11 while he was on his stomach and then pushed himself up to run through the dense forest. The chug of old motorcycles filled the air as they made their way up the road and through the valley. An idea seeded in his mind, and instead of running away from the road, he ran toward it.

Raven's crossbow and backpack were right where he'd left them next to a tree. If he was going to make his plan work, he was going to have to do this fast. He pulled a rope from his pack, unspooled it, and tied one end around the base of a ponderosa pine.

The gunfire continued on the other side of the hill to his right, and several rounds splintered through the trees. Headlights hit the top of the road ahead. He was running out of time.

Raven darted across with the rope in hand. When he reached the other side, he wrapped it around the thickest tree he could find.

The first dirt bike zoomed over the hill.

Raven waited for the next two bikes to appear. They were both motorcycles, a Harley and a Honda. He raised the rope and pulled it taut, careful not to get his hand caught. The drivers hit the rope at full speed, and they went flying head first over the handlebars. The fourth driver pulled over the hill and laid his bike down to avoid the wreckage. His body skidded over the pavement, but he kept his head up like a trained biker would have done.

Dropping the rope, Raven grabbed his crossbow and walked out onto the road. The first biker slowed and turned in a circle, tires skidding across the pavement, to look at his fallen comrades. His helmet homed in on Raven just as he let a bolt fly. The arrow crunched through his visor.

Raven tossed the crossbow on the ground, unsheathed his hatchet, and uppercut the fourth biker as he was trying to stand. The blade cracked through his jaw and shattered his bottom teeth. He let out a guttural screech that sounded more animalistic than human.

He left the blade in the man's chin, pulled his Glock, and finished him off

with two shots to the back. Then he aimed at the drivers of bikes two and three. Both men were squirming across the ground, moaning and dragging broken legs.

Raven put a bullet into each of their skulls and then decided to double tap the trigger just to make sure they were dead since they were wearing helmets. The gunshots echoed away and silence fell over the road. He holstered the pistol and retrieved his hatchet. It took a good yank to pluck it from the man's chin. Several more teeth popped out in the process, splattering his pants with blood. He grabbed his backpack and MK11 from the shoulder of the road and paused to listen for more bikes.

The gunfire from the camp had ceased, and he couldn't hear any engines.

The crackle of a single radio broke the silence. He followed the noise to the fourth bike, a Harley with saddlebags. Inside one was a walkie-talkie. Raven tucked it into his vest. Then he hoisted the bike up, jumped on, and drove to the top of the hill. He unslung his MK11 and zoomed in on the camp.

It took him a moment to find Nathan. He was lying in the back of a truck, and he wasn't moving. Three other trucks pulled away, while a small army of foot soldiers fanned out across the meadows and road below. Raven lowered his gun and threw the strap over his backpack.

"Don't worry, brother. I'll be back with help," he whispered. He pulled a grenade from his pack, plucked off the pin, and tossed it over his shoulder at the other wrecked bikes. Gunning the engine of the Harley, tires screaming, he peeled away.

***

"How are we coming on the hunt for the other sub?" Charlize asked.

"We've got four HSM squadrons checking several potential zones as we speak," Thor said. "It's just a matter of time before we find the other sub."

"Good. It's time to go on the offensive, General. I don't care if we cross into sovereign waters. Our goal right now is to wipe the final North Korean threats off the map so we can focus on saving what's left of our country."

She looked back down at her laptop. Her eyes were grainy as she tried to focus them on yet another briefing. She had been sitting in this cold conference room with General Thor, Dr. Lundy, and Colonel Raymond for

hours while she waited for news about her family. In the meantime, they had brought her up to speed on everything from military assets to the aid packages coming from abroad. America's allies were coming through with food, medical supplies, and other necessities, but distributing them was a problem. Their closest neighbors were also having problems with American refugees spilling across the Mexican and Canadian borders.

She finished reading a report about the status of the highway system in the Southeast and shut her laptop to look at her team. "Listen up, everyone. Aside from taking out the North Korean threats, we have to focus on clearing the roads and stopping the gangs and raiders from taking over. The Aryan group that has my son are not the only domestic terrorists out there that were waiting for something like this to happen."

"Agreed," Thor said. "But how do we clear thousands of miles with the resources we currently have?"

"Put together a special task force," Charlize replied. "Equip our semis and convoys with bulldozer blades, and send out troops to guard each shipment. We did that in Afghanistan, and we can do it here."

Raymond drew in a weary breath. "The problem with that is the fleeing refugees. You've seen the video. It's easy clearing a road full of vehicles, but people are a different story."

"We risk civilian casualties by expediting the movement of supplies," Thor said, direct and unsympathetic as always. "One way or the other, we lose American lives."

Charlize paused to think. Commanding troops was more difficult than flying a fighter jet solo. The last thing she wanted was to put more civilians in harm's way, but it was starting to feel like there were no good solutions.

"May I offer a more subtle approach?" Lundy asked, speaking up for the first time.

"Certainly," Charlize said.

He took off his glasses, polished them on a small cloth, and put them back on again. He was methodical about everything, and he spoke in a precise, clipped tone. "We could place radiation warnings in areas we're trying to clear. There's nothing like a biohazard symbol to keep people out."

"That's not a bad idea," Thor said before Charlize could reply. His eyes flitted to her for approval.

"I like it," she said. "Now let's—"

A rap on the door interrupted her. Albert stepped into the room without

waiting for a response. Typically he kept a straight face, but now he was frowning, his eyes huge and worried.

"What's wrong?" she choked out.

"I've been told we have another video from General Fenix." Albert walked over and stood next to her. "The video should be on your computer, ma'am."

Charlize had thrown up after the last video. The image of Ty dangling over the side of that tower wouldn't leave her mind. Thor and Raymond stood and walked over as she typed in her credentials. The email was waiting in her new inbox. Swallowing, she moved the cursor over and clicked on the message.

The video was not of Ty. It showed a battered man on the concrete floor of a small prison cell. He was curled up in a fetal position, broken arm in a cast covering his face.

The camera panned up to a smiling General Fenix. "I thought I was very clear about what I wanted. At first I thought the assholes that attacked us were just two idiots, but then I realized one of those idiots was your brother."

The feed moved back to the man on the floor. He tilted his head up to reveal a bruised face she hardly recognized. Raising a hand, the man shielded his swollen eyes from the light.

"Nathan," she whispered.

Fenix moved back into the frame and kicked Nathan in the gut, lifting his body slightly off the ground. Her brother spat blood onto the concrete and then looked back up at the camera.

"Don't give 'em anything, Sis," he said, his voice thick.

"The clock is ticking, and things are not looking good for the Montgomery family," Fenix said. He raised his boot again. The video cut out just before it connected with Nathan's jaw.

***

Ty sat on his bed, listening to the screams coming from the hallway outside the room. The sound was scary, but maybe it was a good thing. If so many people were hurt all at once, it must mean there was fighting nearby. And if the Castle was under attack, then maybe someone had come to rescue him. Maybe his mom had finally found them!

A voice shouted over the screaming.

“They caught one of them,” the voice said.

Footfalls approached the door to the cell. Ty put a finger to his lips, and Micah cupped his hand over Emma’s mouth.

“Come on, we need to round up every available man just in case they come back,” called a frantic voice.

“I heard we lost six of our boys,” said another man.

“They brought a fucking army, man. Got snipers all along the ridge. We have to find them before they can report our location.”

A high-pitched screech of agony sounded. “Stop, no, stop, stoppppp!”

Ty put his hands over his ears and watched the other kids do the same. By the time he pulled them away, the voices and the footfalls were gone, leaving only the sporadic wailing from the hospital down the hallway.

The minutes ticked away as Ty watched the door and waited for his mom to come rescue him. An hour passed, maybe more. The screaming stopped, and then the only sound was the plop of water in the bucket by the metal door. The shock of everything that had happened slowly wore off, and fatigue wrapped Ty up like a blanket. His eyelids felt heavy and droopy, but he forced them to stay open so he could watch the door.

She’s coming. She’ll be here any minute.

Ty looked down at his shaking hands and laced his fingers together. He wasn’t sure what time it was exactly, but it felt like early morning. How long had he been awake? He couldn’t remember the last time he’d slept.

You have to stay awake. You have to be ready to go.

Micah and Emma had fallen asleep in the bed across from him. They were curled up next to one another. Seeing them made Ty even more tired.

Maybe he could close his eyes for just a second.

As soon as he did, sleep took him.

Ty wasn’t sure how long he slept. A voice woke him up, and he groggily blinked and looked around.

“Ty, wake up. Someone’s coming,” Micah said from the other side of the room. “Is it the good guys?”

The rap of military boots sounded in the hallway.

“Which room is it?” someone asked.

This voice didn’t sound familiar to Ty. He used his hands to move his legs closer to the edge of the bed. His wheelchair was out of reach, but he wanted to be ready.

Another sound like something being dragged across the ground joined the

rap of boots outside. The footfalls stopped just outside the door.

The hatch unlocked, and General Fenix stood in the shadowed entry, partially blocking the view of a battered man on the ground in the hallway. Ty moved slightly for a better view, but couldn't see past Fenix or the soldier that had the injured guy by the boots.

"I brought you a visitor, little Mr. Montgomery." Fenix helped the other soldier drag the bleeding man inside the room.

"Go ahead, have a look," Fenix said. "He came a long way to see you."

It took Ty a second to recognize his uncle, due to all of the cuts and bruises on his face.

"Uncle Nathan!" Ty yelled.

Nathan looked up at Ty, one eye so swollen he probably couldn't even see. He tried to talk, but all that came out was a groan. Fenix kicked him in the ribs.

"No!" Ty shouted. "Don't touch him, you bastard!"

Uncle Nathan looked up again, determined.

"I love you, Ty, and so does your mom." He coughed and spat something dark onto the floor. "Everything is going to be okay."

***

A pounding woke Colton at one in the morning. He fumbled for the Colt .45 resting on the bed stand.

"Who is that?" Kelly mumbled. Risa's head popped up on her other side, eyes wide and frightened.

"Daddy, I'm scared," she said.

"Shhh, baby," Colton whispered. He walked over to the window and peeled back the curtain to see a man standing on the front step. He was draped in shadow, but a familiar old Chevy pickup was parked in the driveway. Colton had been sleeping so hard he hadn't heard the clunker drive up.

The person on the step knocked again and yelled, "Colton!"

Not a man, after all. The voice belonged to Lindsey.

He stepped away from the window and lowered his gun.

"Everything's okay," Colton reassured them. "It's just Detective Plymouth."

“At this time? It’s the middle of the night,” Kelly said.

“Stay here,” Colton said. He knew whatever Lindsey had to say wasn’t going to be good. He rushed down the stairs, bracing himself for the bad news, and opened the door before she could start pounding on it again.

Her face was waxy in the moonlight, her freckles standing out against her pale skin like flecks of blood.

“What’s wrong?”

“Too much to tell,” she said. “Come hear for yourself.”

He followed her to the pickup truck. Instead of getting behind the wheel, Lindsey pulled out the digital radio that Leroy Travis had donated. Colton grabbed it and brought it to his lips. “This is Colton. Go ahead, over.”

Raven’s frantic voice sounded over the channel.

“Chief, shit, Chief. I screwed up bad.” A chopping noise roared in the background, so loud he could hardly hear Raven. Was that a helicopter?

“Need men…guns,” Raven said, his voice breaking up. “A fucking tank if you got one.”

“Slow down, Raven,” Colton said. “I can’t hear you. What the hell was that noise?”

The background noise abruptly cut off.

“Sorry,” Raven said. “That better?”

“Are you on a chopper?”

Raven laughed, a manic edge to his voice. “In a manner of speaking. That was a Harley.”

“Start at the beginning, Raven.”

There was a long pause followed by another rustling sound. A minute later, Raven came back online.

“Sorry, Chief, thought I heard bikes.” There was another pause. “Nathan and I ambushed a gang of skinheads on the road, led by a guy named General Dan Fenix. Bunch of jumped-up Aryan assholes calling themselves the Sons of Liberty. We tracked them to a location called the Castle last night and went in to find Ty.”

“What? Why the hell didn’t you wait for backup?” Colton asked.

“Because our radio was shot. This is one of theirs,” Raven said. “I know. I fucked up. We thought we found the kids, but they weren’t at the skinheads’ camp. Fenix has an army, and they captured Nathan. We have to get them out before they kill him and the kids, Chief. We need men. Lots of men and lots of guns.”

Colton shook his head. He didn't even know where to start, so he simply said, "Where are you?"

"South of Estes Park. I don't know…pretty far. Maybe forty miles. I've been driving for a while. There are still fires out here, and I need help. I can't do this on my own."

Colton could hardly believe he'd just heard those words from Raven Spears. A voice came from the porch before he could answer.

"Is everything okay, Marcus?"

Kelly was standing in the doorway. Risa came down the stairs and sat on the bottom step, gripping her stuffed animal in her arms. They both looked scared. He knew in that moment he couldn't leave them. Not even to save Nathan and his nephew, or bail Raven out of whatever scrape he'd gotten into. At some point, he had to put the safety of his family before everything else. He had already failed his town—he wouldn't fail Kelly and Risa.

"It's okay," Colton told his wife. "Take Risa and go back to bed. I'll be up in a minute."

The radio crackled. "Chief, you there?"

Colton held the receiver up. His next words hadn't gotten any easier to say. "I'm not chief anymore."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"I'm not in charge. Don is running the show now. We lost everything, Raven. Your old buddy Mr. Redford came to Estes Park while you were away. He took everything. Our meat, our supplies, our medicine. He burned the Stanley to the ground. Do you understand what I'm saying? Even if I was still chief, nobody else here would be willing to help you after what happened."

There was silence on the other line for several hard moments.

"Is my family okay?"

"They're fine, I checked on them last night. Sandra and Allie are staying at your place," Colton said. He turned to look at Kelly again. She was sitting on the step next to Risa, her long, rope-like braid falling over one shoulder. She met his eyes, and there was a question there: *Them or us*?

Colton raised the receiver again. "Where did these men take Nathan?"

"The Castle. It's an old camp a few miles north of Interstate 70. About sixty miles from Estes Park, or so. I'm not exactly sure. There are mines in the mountain behind the camp though. I figure that's where they're hiding out. They have a fucking army, Colton."

“Which is why you need to get your ass back here and make sure you aren’t followed. There’s only one thing we can do for Nathan now. We have to get a message to his sister and let the military handle this.”

“No,” Raven replied. “By the time they arrive, he *will* be dead. I made him a promise. He helped save my family, now I have to help save his.” There was a pause, and then Raven spoke again, his voice rough. “So tell my sister and niece I love them, okay? And tell Creek he’s a good boy. And…and hell, Marcus. Just don’t let anything happen to them because of what I did, okay? Don’t let my mistakes ruin their lives too. I’m sorry as I can be about Redford. But if I make it back, I’ll take care of that asshole.”

“I will look after your family,” Colton said heavily. Static broke over the channel, the connection severed.

Colton turned to Lindsey. “Detective, I need you to do me a favor.”

She nodded. “Anything. Name it.”

“I need you to get a message through to Secretary Montgomery before Raven gets himself killed.”

— 19 —

Raven couldn’t tell if the blood covering his fatigues was from the men he killed or if it was his own. It was probably a mixture of both.

An hour earlier, not long after he had spoken with Colton and learned of Mr. Redford robbing Estes Park blind, Raven had ditched the Harley and covered it with fallen limbs. Then he had slipped into the woods along the frontage road leading to the Castle. Since then, he’d been making his way through the forest, being slapped in the face with branches while the underbrush tore at his legs.

He was using the radio to monitor the movement of the skinheads in the area, staying just out of reach. Through the gaps in the trees, he noted a clearing that opened into a meadow. His trained eye caught motion in the knee-high grass. A baseball cap, and then a shiny bald skull bobbing up and down in the glow of the moonlight.

Gotcha.

Raven ran at a hunch, eyes flitting over the two-dimensional canvas for any surprises. Clusters of chokecherries scraped against his arms, but he ignored them. He barely felt the pain, and his fatigue had been replaced with the rush of adrenaline. He should have been going insane with worry, but instead he felt in tune with his surroundings. There would be time to deal with Mr. Redford later. As long as Sandra and Allie were safe, Raven could zone everything else out.

He listened to the whistle of the breeze and the cry of a raccoon somewhere in the hills. Chirping bugs, crickets, and the croak of a bullfrog joined the din. Over all the sounds of nature came the faint voice of a man he was about to kill.

He reached the clearing and took up a position behind a ponderosa pine

with a trunk wide enough to cover his body. This hill overlooked an open space with patches of late-summer wildflowers that seemed to glow in the moonlight.

Moving through the sea of knee-high grass, about halfway across the clearing, were the three men. They were headed for the base of a mountain on the other side of the field. The bluffs towered thousands of feet overhead, peaks tipped with snow.

Raven pushed the night vision goggles up and centered the scope of his rifle on the patrol. Two were carrying M16s, while the third had a shotgun.

He planned to take them down and then move in for the close-up work. Raven picked his first target, but just as he was about to pull the trigger, the silhouettes of more soldiers moved out of the forest below.

The three newcomers quickly overtook the patrol. They lifted a downed tree at the edge of the woods and moved it to the side, revealing a narrow dirt path that led up into the mountain. Raven could take three of them with his rifle from here, but six? That was too many to take alone, and he didn't want to draw reinforcements. He needed to wait until the two patrols separated.

While he sat there, he looked to the sky. The cloud cover had dissipated, leaving only fragments floating across the stars. He easily located the two pointer stars of the Big Dipper, Dubhe and Merak. Using those, he visualized an imaginary clock. Using basic math—the only kind he was good at, as Sandra would point out—he made calendric calculations to determine it was almost four in the morning. He had just under three hours of darkness before dawn.

At last, the first patrol headed west toward a stream. The other three stood guard at the open entrance to the dirt path. They were around fifteen hundred yards out by Raven's estimates. Killing all three would be near impossible, even with the Leupold Mark 6 riflescope.

He had to get closer, and he preferred to deal with the patrol heading back out first so he didn't get boxed in later when he went to infiltrate the Castle.

Raven melted back into the forest and stalked the three soldiers from a distance. Hugging the trunks of the trees around him, he watched them like a prowling wolverine. The vicious animals were known for ambushing larger prey at close range. That's exactly what he was going to do.

As he neared the patrol, he slung the rifle over his back and took off running. The trio was about to cross the creek at the western edge of the clearing. They moved in a straight line, more of a march than a patrol, which

allowed him to move faster without fear of being sighted.

He darted through the woods and slid down a slope where a ravine divided the forest. At the bottom, he stopped at the muddy crossing. He stepped a few paces back, then ran and hopped over the three-foot-wide rift. Using the momentum from his leap, he climbed up the hill and back into the forest.

This time he moved more cautiously, careful not to slip on the beds of pine needles. He had lost sight of the men in the green hue of the night vision goggles, but he could hear them moving through the woods.

A Douglas fir provided a temporary refuge. Raven crouched next to its base and caught his breath. When his breathing had slowed, he pulled out his hatchet and knife, then peered around the tree. The three men were trudging through the forest with their rifles lowered. They didn't speak, but they moved without care, snapping twigs and crunching leaves like mindless beasts. Raven was going to enjoy gutting them.

Focus, Sam. Focus. Let go of your fear and anger.

He bent down to pick up a rock in the same hand that he held his knife. Listening to the footfalls, he could tell the man approaching to his left was the heaviest. Raven would deal with him last.

When the crunch of their boots sounded about ten feet away, Raven tossed the rock at a tree to his left. The crunch of footsteps abruptly ceased.

"Did you hear that?" one of the men said.

Without a moment of hesitation, Raven flung his hatchet at a muscular soldier holding an M16, burying the blade into his skull with a crack that scared two birds from a nest in the canopy overhead.

Raven darted behind another tree and raised his knife. Two seconds had passed since he'd thrown his hatchet. It took two more seconds to move around the side of the tree and flank the other two men. He came up behind a soldier carrying an M16.

He traced the blade across the man's thick neck from ear to ear. The blade cut clean and deep, blood shot out like a fountain. He relieved the dying man of his rifle as he fell and laid him down gently on the grass.

"Guys?" the heavyset soldier said. "Guys, where the hell did you go? This shit ain't funny!" He pumped his shotgun and turned in the darkness, looking for his dead friends.

Raven prowled quietly in the shadows, enjoying the fear from his final chase. Ten seconds after he had flung his hatchet, he snuck up behind the overweight man and whistled from three feet behind his head.

The guy turned with his shotgun muzzle lowered to the ground.

Amateur wannabe soldier, Raven thought.

He lunged with his blade before the man could fire a shot. The tip sliced through a layer of fat under his ribcage and Raven twisted it deep, watching the white eyes of his enemy widen in the moonlight.

The man let out a guttural cry and dropped his shotgun. Raven withdrew the blade and stuck his prey in the side of the neck with a meaty thump. Blood gushed out, and the skinhead reached up in a futile effort to stop the flow. He grabbed Raven with his other hand.

Raven yanked from his grip, darted around to stab the kidneys with a series of short jabs that made the man screech like a pig being slaughtered, and then watched with grim satisfaction as the soldier clawed at the blood-soaked ground.

He retrieved his hatchet from the first kill, plucking it from the skull, and kicked the body of the second skinhead just to make sure he was dead. Then he checked on the third man. Somehow, he was still squirming. His legs kicked the dirt slowly, like a cricket with a cracked shell.

Raven got down next to him so he could meet his gaze. He snapped his fingers to draw the man's attention, but the spark of life was already draining from his eyes.

He didn't feel bad about killing this man. If anything, he was proud. His niece would grow up in a world with three less white supremacist assholes in it.

"Help," the skinhead wheezed.

"What's the magic word?"

The man managed to croak out, "Please…please…"

Raven laughed in his face.

The caw of a bird sounded, mimicking his laughter, and a flash of light speared through the sky. A meteorite, he realized.

The Raven Mocker.

Tonight, it was Raven's turn to bring a Cherokee legend to life.

***

If Charlize had to read one more report about bandits in Iowa or roadblocks in South Carolina, she was going to scream. She'd been trying to keep herself

busy with work ever since the call had come from Estes Park. A detective from the police force there had relayed enough information to put together an operation to rescue her family. Teams from Buckley AFB were preparing to move on the Castle. There was nothing for her to do now but work—and wait.

Albert opened the door to the conference room holding two cups of coffee. She smiled when he set one of the cups in front of her and took a seat.

“Ma’am, do you have a moment to talk?” he asked.

Charlize closed her laptop. “Of course, Al, what’s on your mind?”

He slowly sat down and massaged the outside of the coffee cup with his index finger, looking at it like he wasn’t sure if he wanted to take a drink.

Charlize summoned the soothing voice that she used on Ty when he was upset. “It’s okay, Big Al, you can talk to me.”

“It’s about my family,” he finally said. “I know Jane and my girls are probably…” He paused and swallowed, choking a bit. “I know they are gone, ma’am, but I have a sister in Charlotte.”

“Why didn’t you say so before?”

He looked down at the table, then met her gaze. “You’ve been so sick, and so focused on your own family. I don’t blame you for that. I’m just—”

“I totally understand. I’ve been selfish, and I apologize. I can’t begin to know how badly you’re hurting inside. I will do what I can to find your sister, I promise.”

“Thank you, ma’am.”

“What’s her name?”

“Jacqueline,” Albert said. “She’s my twin sister.”

Charlize raised a scorched eyebrow. “You never told me you have a twin.”

“Sorry,” Albert said, shrugging a large shoulder. “We’re not identical, if you were wonderin’.”

Charlize smiled. “I also didn’t know you had a sense of humor.”

He smiled back at her and then turned as the door opened, letting in a flurry of voices. Colonel Raymond stood outside. “An HSM team picked up a possible hit on the radar, ma’am.”

“Show me,” Charlize replied. She tugged on the sleeves of her new uniform, which included a white button-down shirt that almost covered her burns. Then she grabbed the Air Force baseball cap and put it over her cropped hair.

They moved into the circular command room, where General Thor stood

rubbing his forehead. On the wall-mounted monitor, three MH-60R Seahawks armed with anti-submarine torpedoes and hellfire missiles glided through the skies.

A dozen other staffers were staring into the glow of laptops set up on the long table in the center of the room. The clock overhead showed 0600 hours. Charlize hadn't slept—her mind was racing too much to shut off. Everyone around her looked exhausted. This was the reality of war. Sleep, showers, and food were a luxury.

She crossed the room and stood next to General Thor and Colonel Raymond.

"Morning, Secretary Montgomery," Thor said. "We've had a radar hit about twenty-five miles east of New York City. There's a fleet of ten aid ships coming from Great Britain. The anomaly appears to be moving with the convoy."

Charlize cursed. "Those slick bastards are using the cover of the ships as disguise."

Raymond agreed with a nod. "I had the same thought."

"Did the Royal Navy send any protection for those aid ships?" Charlize asked.

"Yes, we have already contacted them," Raymond said.

"Good," Charlize replied. "How far out is our HSM squadron?"

"Five minutes," Thor said. "We have a strike group one hundred miles south of this location, but I've re-rerouted the USS *Michigan* and the USS *Georgia* to intercept. If this is the other North Korean submarine, they won't escape our tentacles."

Charlize took a seat at the table next to Raymond. She wanted to stand, to appear strong, but she needed to conserve her energy. Albert handed her the coffee she had left in the conference room.

"You're a saint, Big Al," she said, looking up at him. "Why don't you go get some rest?"

Albert opened his mouth, closed it again, and then said so quietly that only she could hear him, "I need to stay busy. Besides, I'd like to stay here with you until they find your brother and son."

"Have a seat, then," she said, tapping the chair to her left.

Charlize blew on the coffee and then took a sip. The minutes slowly ticked by as the choppers on screen tore over the waves in the early morning sun. If this really was the final North Korean submarine and they managed to sink it,

then Charlize could focus entirely on the recovery efforts without fear of another attack.

And on the raid of the Castle, she thought. Charlize was trying her best to focus on her duties as Secretary of Defense, but worries about Ty and Nathan kept interrupting her concentration.

A crowd formed as the Seahawks closed in on the location. Several of the Royal Navy aircraft also moved into position.

President Diego and several other members of his Cabinet filed into the room. On screen, the container ships appeared. Charlize and Albert left the table and walked over for a better view.

There were six of the ships moving in a single-file line through the water. Thousands of metal shipping containers were stacked on the decks. Their contents would save countless lives—but only if the supplies made it ashore.

“They’re about twenty-three miles from port,” Thor reported. He remained standing with one hand cupping his jaw.

“That’s close to New York,” Raymond said. “What if they’re planning another attack?”

Charlize nearly dropped her coffee on her lap when the middle ship of the small fleet exploded on the monitor. Shipping containers shot into the air like firecrackers and then plummeted back to the sea.

“Someone get me a SITREP!” Thor shouted.

“It’s definitely a North Korean sub,” Raymond said. “Just got a report from Eagle 1. He saw the torpedo trail. They’re moving in for the kill.”

“They better hurry before that sub dives,” Charlize said.

The choppers on screen passed over the other container ships, providing a view of the decks and the supplies there. Then the view rolled east, away from the ships and after the sub.

“Eagle 1 and 2 are preparing to fire,” Raymond said. “Stand by.”

The lead Seahawk swooped lower, so close that Charlize could see through the clear water. The rotor drafts rippled the water in all directions like a boulder had been tossed into a pond. Several MK-54 torpedoes streaked away from the chopper and slammed into the waves, spearing down and down, the trails bubbling. A geyser of water shot up into the sky a moment later.

The other Seahawks moved into position and unloaded their payloads into the ocean. More geysers burst into the sky. There was a pause just long enough for Charlize to think that they’d somehow missed. And then a massive red explosion blossomed out of the ocean like a flower on fire.

“Stand by,” Raymond said again.

Charlize clenched her burned hands until they ached, waiting in anticipation for the report.

“Eagle 1 just reported in. Target destroyed,” Raymond said with a relieved smile as the room erupted into cheers and applause.

A hand gripped Charlize’s shoulder. She turned, thinking it was Albert, but this time it was President Diego.

“Congratulations, Madame Secretary,” he said. “Now let’s go see what we can do about rescuing your son and brother. Those strike teams from Buckley are in the air.”

— 20 —

Raven stopped when he heard a distant chopping noise. He flipped his night vision goggles into place and scanned the terrain, wishing he had Creek's hearing. Seeing nothing, he fell into a run with his rifle at the ready. As he hopped over a fallen log, it became clear the sound wasn't from a motorcycle. It wasn't even coming from the road—it was coming from the sky.

Black Hawks.

Now that he'd recognized it, the sound was unmistakable. It was the sweetest song he'd ever heard.

At the edge of the forest, he crouched and dropped to his stomach. From there, he scoped the sky, still not seeing the birds. He lowered the sights to the back entrance to the Castle. The three men who'd been guarding the road were moving frantically. They carried a log away from the dirt path and dumped it into the grass. He zoomed in on dust rising through the trees. The rattle and clutter of engines sounded.

Raven was about to have company. He chambered a round and looked up just as the Black Hawks zoomed into view. Four of the birds buzzed in from the south, moving in combat intervals over the valley. Colton had gotten the call for help through to Charlize after all, but the cavalry was on the wrong side of the damn mountain!

The Sons of Liberty were escaping out the back door. Across the meadow, several trucks raced out of the forest. Raven scrambled for a better sniping position. He had to stop them before they got away.

He pulled out extra magazines from his vest and lined them up in the dirt. Then he set up the rifle and secured the bipod.

The first of the pickup trucks tore out of the clearing, kicking up a curtain of dust. The driver jerked east onto a road Raven hadn't seen from his

vantage earlier. A Humvee followed the lead vehicle. Three more pickups and a second Humvee sped out of the woods.

Dirt bikes and several motorcycles raced alongside, tearing up the grassy shoulder of the road. There was no way he could stop them all, especially when they were moving in the opposite direction, but he could slow their escape and provide the military time to catch up to them.

Raven aimed for the lead biker. He pulled the trigger with the sights lined up on the wheel. The round hit the tire, sending the bike to the ground and the driver cartwheeling into a tree at the side of the road. The other bikes fanned out, but the trucks halted, bottlenecked on the road behind the crashed bike. Two men got out to move the bike.

A squeeze of the trigger dropped the first man, but the second dove for cover.

Answering gunfire cracked in the next valley, followed by an explosion that echoed through the night.

The battle had started.

Raven focused his fire on the first Humvee before the gunner in the turret could find him. The first two shots pinged off the armor, but the third hit the man in the cheek. He slumped back into the vehicle without firing a single shot from the M240.

All at once the doors opened and men jumped out into the road, opening up with automatic rifles on his position. He ducked down, rounds whistling over his head. Then he rolled to the side behind the largest boulder and waited.

He couldn’t wait forever. He could hear the rest of the convoy moving again.

The fleeing Sons of Liberty continued the assault, pinning Raven down with rounds that licked the dirt to either side, cracked off the rocks protecting his back, and slammed into the trees towering overhead.

When this was over, Raven promised himself to get a job where nobody would ever shoot at him again. Maybe Gail Andrews would hire him to work in her art gallery.

He exhaled and then dared to look through a gap between the boulders. The lead truck was moving again. In the back of the pickup behind the Humvee, he spotted a knot of small figures. The children were all piled into the bed, holding onto each other.

He had to stop that truck.

Raven ran for the woods. Rounds splintered the bark around him,

sprinkling him with shrapnel. A jagged piece stuck him in the neck, stinging like a massive wasp. He ducked behind a tree and pulled the splinter from his flesh.

"Goddamn," he grumbled.

The shots peppered the trees to his left and he darted to the right where he took a knee behind a gangly juniper tree. The entire convoy was moving again and the sky was still void of choppers.

He had to get closer.

This is not a good idea…

Raven slid down the slope and took off in a sprint across the meadow, keeping as low as he could in the high grass. He tried to keep to the shadows, but the moon was bright tonight. Even with the camouflage paint on his exposed skin and his military fatigues, it was only a matter of time before he was spotted.

He checked the convoy. There was a thousand feet between him and the nearest vehicle, but they were moving at a fast clip. He was never going to make it across in time.

Raven opened his mouth to gulp the air as he ran, his lungs greedily accepting the oxygen as he pushed himself to the limits. He ran like a madman, focused on the bobbing heads of the children in the bed of the pickup. He spotted another prisoner, much taller than the others, slumped with his back against the cab.

Nathan was still alive!

Gunfire zipped by Raven. He had finally been spotted. Instead of diving for cover, he took a knee and aimed at the tires of the pickup carrying the hostages. A round whizzed by his face as he fired a burst at the truck. One of his shots punched into the bumper, but the second and third shredded the rear tire. The truck swerved off the road, nearly tipping over into the meadow.

The bark of the M240 pushed Raven to the dirt. He rolled on his side to escape the high caliber rounds that pummeled the ground where he had been a moment earlier. There wasn't a much more viscerally terrifying sound than the big gun. Raven greatly preferred being the guy firing the gun instead of the guy crawling away on his belly and praying not to get shot.

Not quite five hundred yards away, men were piling out of the second Humvee, which had reversed to help the disabled pickup. Three of the men ran to the truck, while the other three strode in his direction, weapons shouldered but holding their fire. These were trained soldiers, unlike the

grunts Raven had taken down in the forest. He hoped Fenix was one of them so he could send the evil son of a bitch back to his Maker.

Your time is up, Shunka Sapa.

Rounds whizzed all around Raven as he dug his elbows into the ground. A bullet stung his trap muscle, taking off a layer of skin and forcing him lower. It was just a flesh wound, but that didn't mean it was painless.

He had trained for this exact thing, moving his body like a snake under barbwire while rounds cut the air above his helmet. Only this time he didn't have a helmet. And he was alone, facing an army of zealots who'd just as soon spit on his brown-skinned corpse.

Raven pushed his face against the dirt, tasting the cold earth. He was in battle mode, his senses on full alert, aware of every noise and movement. The gunfire moved to his left, giving him a window to fire off suppressed shots.

He reached forward and snapped the bipod into place. Then he pushed the butt of the rifle in the pocket of his shoulder. A bullet hit the dirt in front of him as he searched for someone to kill.

He centered the sights where he'd seen the flash from a muzzle. In the fading glow, Raven spotted the gunman and squeezed a round into his gut. Then he roved the muzzle to the left, where he shot another soldier making a run for the Humvee. The others all crouched for cover.

Two dirt bikes buzzed down the road, returning to provide covering fire, but Raven kept his attention on the turret of the Humvee, where the gunner was roaming back and forth for a target. He held a breath in his chest and fired a shot that took off the man's baseball cap. The surprised gunner had just reached up to touch his shaved head when Raven planted a bullet between his eyes.

The soldiers who had run to the pickup were unloading the children now. One of them had a child flung over his shoulders. Raven put a bullet in the man's kneecap, blowing bone and gristle onto the road. The soldier dropped the kid on the ground as he screamed in agony, clutching his mangled leg.

Both dirt bikes jolted onto the field in his direction. Raven took the first driver out with a shot to the arm, knocking him off the bike. The second biker lowered his helmet and raced for Raven as if he were going to plow him over.

Big mistake, bucko.

Raven fired two shots that both missed, but the driver had to put the bike down to avoid the third. Raven shot the man as he skidded through the grass.

Two minutes had passed since Raven had blown the tire on the pickup. It

was amazing how much damage and chaos he had already inflicted. Screams, gunfire, and confused voices rang out from the road where the two vehicles remained. In the chaos, Raven spotted two men dragging Nathan toward the Humvee.

As much as he wanted to take them down, Raven couldn't get a clear shot and searched for another target. The final two men who had fired on him earlier were moving back to the truck. One of them turned and unloaded a burst in his direction.

Rolling to his right, Raven crawled to find a new position. He had to keep moving or he was going to lose Nathan, Ty, and the other kids.

Over the gunfire came the chop of helicopters—a sound that made his heart fire like one of the automatic rifles trying to kill him.

He popped back up to look for the birds but instead saw a man standing in front of him, tattooed right arm covered in blood where Raven had shot him. The biker bared his teeth and raised a knife the size of a machete.

One of the children screamed for help, and Raven's blood boiled over.

I don't have time for this shit.

Raven smacked the biker in the face with the butt of his MK11. He landed on his back, and Raven finished him off with a blow that caved his nose into his skull.

A big black bird suddenly emerged over the mountain and then swooped down over the forest. The door gunner in the troop hold fired on the escaping convoy with green tracer rounds.

"Hell yes!" Raven shouted. He kept low and advanced across the final section of the meadow. The Black Hawk drew the fire of the soldiers on the road, giving Raven an opening.

He fired a shot into the back of a soldier who was aiming at the helicopter. The next shot never came, the twenty-round box magazine empty. Raven pulled his side arm and sprinted through the grass. Warm blood ran down his chest from the flesh wound. He ignored it and focused on the road.

The second half of the convoy had escaped, but one of the pickups had returned to help load up the hostages. Raven counted four more of the men still trying to move the kids into the Humvee. Some of the children were fighting back, kicking, screaming, and biting. Nathan lay in the dirt, reaching out for one of the children who was dragging limp legs across the dirt.

For a split-second, Raven thought the kid had been shot. Then he realized who it must be.

“Hold on, Nathan. I’m coming!” Raven shouted. He raised his handgun and bolted toward the little boy whose life he had promised to save.

***

Nathan extended his broken arm. He could only see Ty out of his right eye, but what he could see made him damn proud. Ty was determinedly dragging his paralyzed legs toward Nathan, keeping his head low during the gun battle as the world erupted into chaos around them.

He had Sardetti blood in him—that was for certain.

“Stay where you are!” Nathan shouted. “I’m coming for you.”

All around them, gunfire cracked and bullets flew, some of them at the sky, others at the meadow. The Black Hawk circled overhead, the door gunner picking targets carefully. It wasn’t the 7.62 mm rounds that had Nathan worried, though. Most of the SOL soldiers—if you could call them that—were lousy shots.

He caught a glimpse of return fire from the meadow and finally saw the figure that had ambushed the convoy. A slender man wearing camouflage paint ran across the field at a breakneck pace, a ponytail bouncing up and down.

“Raven, you crazy son of a bitch,” Nathan mumbled. He felt a smile form across his broken jaw. Grinning hurt like hell, but he couldn’t hold it back.

“Uncle Nathan!” Ty shouted.

“It’s okay, buddy, just stay down!”

Shouts rang out from all directions. Digging his elbows into the ground, Nathan moved toward Ty. The Sons of Liberty were falling apart, shouting and firing wildly.

Fenix’s voice rose above the din. “Take down that fucking chopper!”

Boots squelched into the mud near Nathan’s head. “Going somewhere, Major?”

Rolling to his side, Nathan looked up at the General. His features were stone, and his eyes were cold and calculating. Nathan had no doubt Fenix was going to kill him now.

“I love you, Ty,” Nathan said, his voice coming out in a croak. “Don’t look, buddy. Okay? Just look away.”

A flash of motion came from his peripheral vision. Raven was firing madly

with his pistol. He took down a soldier to Nathan's right. The body hit the dirt between Nathan and Ty. It was the smallest possible mercy, blocking the boy's view of whatever happened next.

Fenix was raising his M4 at Raven. Using every ounce of strength he had left, Nathan kicked Fenix in the back of the knee, throwing off his aim. The rounds whistled through the air less than a foot from Raven's side.

The General let out a grunt and stumbled. He collapsed to one knee in the dirt but quickly pushed himself up and grabbed his rifle. Raven used the stolen moment to grab Ty and pull him behind a truck. Two skinheads grabbed Fenix, trying to haul him back to the Humvee.

"We have to go!" one of them shouted.

The Black Hawk whined overhead, smoke hissing from the engine where a shot had penetrated the armor. Fenix laughed and yanked out of their grips.

"Get off me, you cowards." He fired his rifle at the disabled chopper. The rounds lanced into the bird and the pilots pulled away.

"I guess if I can't sell you Montgomerys, I got to kill ya instead," Fenix said. He redirected his rifle at Nathan's head.

"You can try and escape, but my sister will hunt you down and finish this. She will kill you," Nathan sputtered with confidence. He looked up at the smoking muzzle, trying his best to be strong in the last seconds of his life.

"No!" shouted a voice.

Nathan flinched at a crack. There was only a second of pain as the round splintered through his head and buried into his brain. Somehow, he was still aware—aware that the crack wasn't the gunshot, but rather his shattering skull—aware that this wasn't something he could survive. The fear rose to an apex when he thought of his sister and nephew, but then vanished with the sweet release of darkness that flooded over his mind. Charlize was safe. Raven would rescue Ty. There was nothing left for Nathan to do now but let go.

***

Charlize had chewed one of her fingernails bloody. Surrounded by President Diego, General Thor, Colonel Raymond, and Albert, she had watched the choppy feed of a mounted cam on one of the Black Hawks from Buckley AFB. The men stared in silence, all of them with arms folded across their

chests. All except Albert, who was praying under his breath as he paced back and forth.

The hastily planned mission had gone smoothly at first. The four fire-teams of Army Rangers easily eliminated the defenses in the camp the Sons of Liberty used as their forward operating base. From there, the teams infiltrated the actual Castle through mineshafts, killing dozens of the escaping SOL soldiers. Unfortunately, Fenix had taken a different route with the main force of his personal army. He blew those shafts in his retreat, killing four Army Rangers in the blast.

The Black Hawk that had gone to search for the escaping soldiers had found half a convoy instead. The chopper had taken fire, and the video feed was cutting in and out. She watched in horror as the majority of the vehicles sped down a dirt road that led through a dense forest. The remaining vehicles were scattering. A Humvee tore through the meadow, and a pickup truck followed close behind.

“The pilots are putting down, Madame Secretary,” said Colonel Raymond. “But they assure me that the enemy left the hostages behind on the road. Apparently a sniper ambushed the convoy before they could all escape.”

Charlize looked around sharply. “One of ours?”

“No, ma’am. Frankly, we have no idea who he is or where he came from.”

President Diego flung an uneasy glance at Charlize, but she focused on the screen. There was a sickening lurch in the video as the Black Hawk landed in the field, disgorging Army Rangers into the grass. The feed transferred to the helmet-mounted display from the leader of the fire-team. He motioned his men toward the pickup and dirt bikes still on the road. A figure near the truck was waving at them, both hands raised.

“Don’t shoot, don’t shoot! You got a friendly here,” he shouted.

“That must be the sniper,” Raymond said.

Charlize stepped closer to the screen, studying the pixels for any sign of Ty and Nathan. If they weren’t there, or if the worst had happened and they were both dead, she wasn’t sure she would be able to keep it together in front of these men.

At this point she really didn’t care. If she lost her family, nothing else would matter.

“The other choppers are back in the air and pursuing the convoy, ma’am,” Raymond announced. “We’ll get those bastards, don’t worry.”

As the Rangers closed in on the road, a large hand closed over hers.

“It’s going to be okay, Charlize,” Albert said.

It was the first time she could remember him calling her by her name for a while. She realized then that Albert was her family, too. Maybe the only family either of them had left now. A sob tried to climb out of her throat, but she shoved it back down and straightened her back.

Onscreen, the Rangers strode out on the road, weapons flitting over the terrain. Bodies were sprawled in all directions. The sniper had killed at least a dozen of the enemy combatants. It was hard to believe one man had done that much damage.

A shot cracked as one of the Rangers finished off the SOL soldier trying to escape into the forest. The team-lead then trained his rifle on the man standing in front of the pickup truck.

“Hands on your head!” he shouted.

It was obvious this man wasn’t one of the Aryan soldiers. For one thing, he had shoulder-length black hair. He put his hands on his head and got to his knees, still shouting that he was a friendly. Several kids sat in the dirt behind him, crying and holding onto each other.

Charlize searched their faces, but she didn’t see Ty.

The lead Ranger lowered his gun and walked over to the kids while two of the other Rangers spoke to the long-haired man. Charlize couldn’t hear what any of them were saying. She gripped Albert’s hand until her bones creaked and her burned skin threatened to split open over the knuckles.

“They have your son,” Raymond announced. He cupped his earpiece again, and his smile slowly vanished.

“What is it?” she asked, barely recognizing the shrill voice as her own. “What’s wrong?”

Raymond met her gaze. “They’ve also located your brother, ma’am,” he said.

Charlize wanted to scream. If Albert hadn’t been holding her steady, she might have run at the colonel and snatched the earpiece to listen for herself. “Is he alive? What’s happening?”

“I’m so very sorry, Madame Secretary, but it seems that your brother has been killed.”

— 21 —

Three days after Raven had returned from rescuing Ty Montgomery, Estes Park finally found the time to honor the dead properly. Rays of light from the setting sun speared through the clouds, illuminating the mounds of fresh dirt covering those lost in the aftermath of the North Korean attack.

Captain Jake Englewood. Officer Rick Nelson. Melissa Stone and the other victims of the Water Cannibals. There were almost a dozen graves in total. Major Nathan Sardetti wouldn't be buried here, but Colton said a prayer for him anyway.

An hour earlier, he'd given his condolences to both Jake's family and Rick's family without tearing up, but the tears had welled around his eyes after leaving the cemetery. He gripped the hands of his wife and daughter, holding on as if they were the only things keeping him anchored.

His heart was heavy, and his mind was filled with worry.

There'd be a lot more fresh graves soon. He'd done the math. Without food and medicine, they would lose seventy-five percent of the residents over the winter, maybe more.

He looked at Raven as they walked away from the cemetery. Creek, Sandra and Allie strolled next to him. The dog's tail had been wagging ever since Raven returned from the Castle, but most of the other townsfolk weren't happy about Raven's return after finding out about his connection to Nile Redford. Colton had no doubt Don had spread the information, but there was nothing to be done about it now.

Colton studied Raven from afar. Something had happened to him out there—something that had changed Raven. His jokes and smiles were absent, and he hadn't said a word about what he had done and seen.

Colton wasn't asking questions. Raven would talk when he was ready.

The Spears family joined them on the path back to town, the girls shyly waving at each other while Kelly and Sandra hugged. All of them had been through hell in the past week, but they were alive and Colton was going to do everything he could to keep it that way. He didn't need to ask if Raven felt the same way.

Lindsey jogged over to them through the departing crowd of citizens. She jerked her chin at Colton. "Need a word," she said. "You too, Spears."

The three of them walked a few paces away to the side of the dirt road.

"What's going on, Detective?" Raven asked. If Colton needed any more proof that Raven was troubled, it was that he didn't bother to look at Lindsey's figure or make even a half-hearted attempt at flirting. Sam Spears had grown up sometime in the last week, and Colton wasn't sure anymore if that was a good thing.

Lindsey spoke in a low voice. "Don is rounding up the new militia this afternoon. Just got wind of it. He plans on kicking out anyone who wasn't a citizen of Estes Park before the day of the attack."

"Son of a bitch," Colton said. "I hope to God some of these new deputies don't follow the orders."

"I wouldn't bet on that," Lindsey said. "We got enough elk and salvaged supplies to last a few weeks if we purge the town of tourists. I doubt those men will say no if it means saving their families."

Raven looked down at the ground. "This is my fault, isn't it? If Mr. Redford hadn't taken the supplies, then we wouldn't need to kick anyone out."

"Don wanted this long before Mr. Redford showed up," Colton said. "Trust me, Raven, this isn't your fault."

Raven lowered his voice. "I'm going out there to look for Mr. Redford. I'll bring back everything he stole." He looked down at his dog, petting the Akita's soft fur. "Don't worry, boy. I'll bring you with me this time."

Creek wagged his tail and barked. Sandra glared at Raven and stalked over. Kelly did the same thing. Both women wore the same disapproving looks.

"I know that look, Sam Spears," Sandra said. "You're planning something, aren't you?"

"Come on, you might as well hear it," Colton said, waving them over. They deserved to know what was going on after all they had been through. He explained, as briefly as possible, what had happened and Don's plans to

run the tourists out of town.

“I have an idea,” he said after he had finished. “Hopefully, it’ll prevent Don from starting civil war in town.”

“Let’s hear it,” Kelly said.

“I’m all ears,” Lindsey said.

“I’ll make Don an offer he can’t refuse,” Colton said. “Thing is, even if we kick the tourists out, we’re only buying ourselves a few weeks of survival. By the time those supplies run out, we’ll be too weak to fight. We need to go after Redford while we still can, using our militia.”

Lindsey smiled. “I agree, sir.”

Raven nodded his approval. “That sounds like a great plan. I was just gonna shoot him.”

“My patients aren’t going to survive without antibiotics. We need medicine,” Sandra said. “I’ll do anything I can to help.”

Kelly hesitated at first, but then nodded. “I’m not sure what use I’ll be, but if this is what you think is right, I’ll support you, Marcus.”

“All right, it’s settled then,” Colton said. “I’ll bring it up at—”

The distant rumble of a jet cut him off. Every face on the road turned to the western mountains just as a squadron of F-22 Raptors tore through the clouds. As the roar of the engines faded, Colton heard the shouts and cheers of the townsfolk. Over the cacophony came another sound Colton hadn’t heard since the floods of 2013.

“Choppers, too,” Lindsey said, pointing.

A long black silhouette emerged in the western sky. The Chinook was flanked by four smaller birds, all Black Hawks. Hanging from ropes attached to the belly of the Chinook was a blue shipping container.

The birds flew across the purple sky toward the heart of Estes Park. Everyone around Colton took off running to meet them. He remained frozen in place, still not believing his eyes.

“Come on, Marcus,” Kelly said, taking his hand. With a wide smile, he ran with his wife and daughter toward Bond Park.

By the time they reached town hall, the Black Hawks had already touched down in the parking lot and street. Soldiers were unloading boxes and stacking them in the grass.

Colton led his family to the front of town hall, where Mayor Gail stood with Don.

“I’ll be damned,” Don said, taking off his cowboy hat to mop his forehead.

The Chinook circled overhead and finally set the blue crate down in the middle of Bond Park before rising back into the sky.

“Nathan came through on his promise about helping Estes Park!” Raven shouted. He clapped his hands together and grinned, his first real display of emotion since he had returned. Creek barked and stood on his hind legs as Raven jerked his arms and legs. It took Colton a moment to realize that Raven was trying to dance The Robot.

“Boom! What do you think of them apples, Chief Aragon?” Raven said, chuckling. “I guess my mission to rescue Ty Montgomery paid off after all. I got friends in high places, man.”

Don shrugged, clearly not amused. “You don’t know this is because of you.”

“Raven, you are the worst dancer I’ve ever seen in my life,” Lindsey said with a laugh.

Colton chuckled, but not for long. He grew serious and approached Don.

“Well, *Chief*,” Colton said. “Thanks to Raven, it looks like we got the help we need to get us through the winter, so I guess you won’t be needing to kick anyone out of town after all.”

Don looked at Gail. She took a moment to think on it, and then nodded. “Marcus is right. We have a lot to be thankful for today. You can tell the militia to stand down, Don. The tourists can stay for now.”

“You got to be kidding me, Mayor,” Don protested.

Creek bared his teeth at Don, who took a step back. Raven had stopped dancing and stood next to Colton.

“The mayor told you to call off the militia,” Lindsey said.

Don hesitated another moment, glared at Colton, and then turned to his motley force of mercenaries and volunteer deputies, who had been standing around watching the real soldiers do all the work.

“Help them unload the supplies,” Don ordered.

A detail of Marines and a large African-American man wearing the filthiest Air Jordan sneakers Colton had ever seen approached across the green space. They walked in formation around a woman wearing an Air Force baseball hat.

“Who’s in charge here?” she asked.

Gail started to raise her hand, but then looked at Colton. After a pause, she turned toward the entourage of military officials with a politician’s smile.

“I’m Mayor Andrews,” Gail said.

Colton held out his hand as the woman in the Air Force hat approached. When she reached out to shake it, he noticed she had sharp green eyes that matched Nathan's.

"I'm Marcus Colton, ma'am, and I have a feeling you're Secretary Charlize Montgomery."

"You'd be right," Charlize said.

"I knew your brother only for a short while, but he was a great man," Colton said. "He did a lot to help our town."

"One of the best men I've ever met," Raven said, stepping up to join them. "I was privileged to fight by his side."

A moment of realization passed over Charlize's stern features. She lifted a brow and said, "You're Raven Spears, aren't you?"

"Yes, ma'am, I am," Raven said with a ghost of his usual cocky grin.

"You're the reason I came here," she said, loud enough that the people milling around could hear her. "I wanted to meet the man who saved my son. Ty wanted to be here to thank you personally, but he's still recovering."

"I hope he's doing okay," Raven said.

"He's been through a lot. But thanks to you, I have him home."

Charlize continued down the line, nodding at Kelly and smiling at Risa. She shook several more hands as her security detail stood guard behind her. Colton wouldn't want to tangle with her bodyguard, who looked like he could bench press an elk.

"My brother made a promise to get your town help before he died," Charlize announced when she had finished shaking hands. "I'm honoring that promise today. He sure thought a lot of Estes Park."

She paused to look around with her hands on her hips. "My brother was right. You have a beautiful home up here. I hope these supplies will help get you through the winter. President Diego's goal is to try and have part of the nation's grid back up and running by this time next year. Until then, stay safe and know your government is still working for you. We *will* get through this, and we *will* rebuild."

"Thank you, Madame Secretary," Gail said, clapping. A few people in the crowd joined in.

Secretary Montgomery nodded. "I wish I could stay longer, but I have a lot of work to do."

"What about Fenix?" Raven asked. "Have you caught that bastard yet?"

"I've got ten gold bars for any man or woman who finds him," she said

without a flicker of emotion. “Dead or alive.”

Colton watched the security detail close in around Charlize like a Roman phalanx as they crossed the park and loaded into one of the Black Hawks.

The choppers rose into the sky, the whoosh of the rotors slamming into the citizens below. Colton followed them across the sky, gripping Kelly’s hand and holding Risa close. He hoped there wasn’t anyone out there watching the birds, but he had a feeling they had attracted plenty of attention. Men like Mr. Redford, General Fenix, and other enemies would be watching and waiting for a chance to strike. Estes Park was still at risk—even more so now that they had something worth stealing again.

It would take everyone in Estes Park—locals and tourists—working together to fight off the coming storm.

—End of Book 2—

Turn the page to continue the adventure with
Trackers 3: The Storm

TRACKERS 3
~
THE STORM

TRACKERS 3

THE STORM

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

NICHOLAS SANSBURY SMITH

For my grandfather Angelo 'Jake' Angaran, my grandfather Marvin Smith, and all the other veterans of World War II that risked their lives to fight the Nazis. We will never forget your bravery and sacrifice.

“The supreme art of war is to subdue the enemy without fighting.”

—Sun Tzu

— Prologue —

Secretary of Defense Charlize Montgomery marched with an entourage of heavily armed soldiers down a well-lit concrete hallway. Both Charlize and Albert Randall, her security agent and closest ally, carried a military-issued M4 and wore a ballistic vest. The snug armor seemed to compress her pounding heart. Each step she took, it got tighter.

“Execute,” one of the soldiers said.

Two men slung their rifles over their backs, punched in codes on the security panel, and then stepped away from the door. The hydraulics clicked, the sound echoing in the narrow passage.

Albert moved in front of Charlize and raised his M4. Taking a step to her left, Charlize strained to see if the helicopter had already landed on the island. Albert matched every step she took. He was no longer her shadow; he now walked by her side wherever she went. The soldiers gave an all clear, and Albert motioned for Charlize to follow him out onto the grass.

A dark bowl dotted with stars hung over Cape Canaveral. She searched the darkness for any sign of the Sikorsky SH-60 Seahawk. The mid-September breeze, still humid, whipped the palm trees back and forth on the berms disguising the island. There was no sign of civilization in the distance, making it easy to spot a single red flashing dot on the horizon.

Charlize stepped forward to see if it was the Seahawk. Although she was surrounded by a dozen soldiers, she still felt uneasy. Just miles away, American citizens were killing one another for cans of SpaghettiOs. Reports were also trickling in of civilians taking potshots at military choppers across the country.

“Echo 1, incoming,” announced a muscular sergeant named Collins.

Charlize watched the outline of the Seahawk approach with a breath held in her chest. The breeze rustled her short-cropped hair and stung her burned

skin, but her eyes were clear. For the past twenty-four hours she'd sobbed and sobbed until she couldn't cry anymore. It had been so long since she'd held her son, Ty, but in a few more minutes, he'd be here.

Her joy was shadowed by guilt. This reunion had come at a staggering cost. Dozens of soldiers had died to save her son, including her own brother.

"Make way!" shouted Collins. He waved the other men back. The island, barely the size of two football fields, had no permanent tarmac. A few days earlier, Charlize had arrived by boat with a team of Navy SEALs from mainland Florida, but it was too dangerous to travel that route now. Anyone that saw the bird might follow them to the island and compromise the location of Constellation. It was imperative the new location for the recovery efforts in the United States and home of Central Command remain top-secret.

The Navy pilots touched down on the grass. Several Marines hopped out and turned with their hands extended. Flashlights flickered on from the soldiers surrounding Charlize, and the beams flitted toward the troop hold.

Charlize choked down a sob at the sight of Ty. He looked so small, so fragile.

"Go, go, go!" shouted Collins. His team ran to support the newcomers. Charlize stepped forward, but Albert held her back.

"Just hold on, ma'am," he said calmly. "They'll bring him to you."

A large Marine hopped onto the grass with Ty in his arms. Another Marine followed with Ty's wheelchair.

"Ty!" Charlize shouted. This time Albert didn't try to hold her back. She limped forward, into the gusting rotor drafts.

"Mom!" Ty yelled.

Despite the pain of her injuries, she ran to meet her son. The Marine carrying Ty held him while the other unfolded the wheelchair. Charlize almost tripped, but Albert steadied her.

Ty reached out for Charlize as the two Marines placed him gently in his chair. She bent down and hugged her son, gripping him as tightly as she dared.

"Mom," he said into her ear. "I didn't think I was ever going to see you again."

She pulled away and crouched in front of him, scanning his body for injuries in the glow of the flashlights.

"I'm fine," Ty said, his voice steady and strong. His eyes widened as he scanned Charlize. "You cut your hair and…you're hurt."

“I’m okay, and the hair will grow back.” Charlize smiled warmly to reassure her son. Over Ty’s head, she saw the Marines removing something else from the troop hold. It was a casket, wrapped with an American flag. Ty looked over his shoulder as the Marines carried it across the grass.

“I miss Uncle Nathan,” he said. He sniffed loudly and wiped his eyes with his sleeve.

Charlize couldn’t imagine what her boy had seen back in Colorado. The man calling himself General Dan Fenix had executed her brother right in front of Ty. The thought filled her with a mixture of rage and despair that almost made her knees buckle.

Albert had been hanging back with the soldiers, giving Charlize a moment with Ty, but he approached now.

“Hi, Mr. Albert,” Ty said.

“Hey there, little man,” Albert said with a quick flash of his white teeth. He reached for the back of Ty’s wheelchair, but Charlize took his place.

“I’ve got him,” she said. Her friend and bodyguard nodded, patted Ty on the shoulder with one massive hand, and then fell into step beside them.

“Let’s move out!” Collins shouted.

The Seahawk lifted back into the sky, and the soldiers jogged back toward the blast doors. While Charlize wheeled Ty across the lawn, four Marines carried the casket containing her brother’s remains.

I’m going to kill that Nazi-loving son of a bitch Fenix, Charlize thought. *No mercy, no quarters. Every single one of the Sons of Liberty soldiers will die.*

***

Ever since Secretary of Defense Charlize Montgomery left Estes Park, all Sam “Raven” Spears had been able to think about was ten million dollars in gold bars and revenge. It was one hell of a reward for catching General Dan Fenix, and Raven was planning on collecting the money as soon as he fixed his Jeep Cherokee and fulfilled his promise to Lieutenant Jeff Dupree and the other dead Marines Fenix had ambushed on the road.

Days earlier, Raven had been forced to leave his most prized possession on Highway 7 about fifty miles south of town. He was heading there now, blazing down the highway on a 1970 Harley Davidson FLH.

Estes Park Police Chief Marcus Colton had tried to stop him. Raiders had been hitting the survivors hard, striking in broad daylight east of the mountains. But Raven was determined to get his Jeep back. Ultimately, it was the promise of adding the Jeep to the police department's fleet that had swayed Colton. There weren't many working vehicles around, and the current department vehicles consisted of a ragtag fleet of rusty dirt bikes, a 1952 Chevy pickup truck, and a VW van.

If Raven ran into trouble, help was just a few minutes away. Mechanic Nelson Purdue, who had quickly become one of the most valuable residents of the town, and Detective Lindsey Plymouth, the feisty redhead who somehow seemed immune to Raven's charms, were just two miles behind. Creek, his four-legged best friend, was riding in the van with them, no doubt with his head hanging out of the window to catch the breeze.

He twisted the throttle to give the engine some extra juice. The speedometer ticked up a few miles per hour, but at forty-five miles an hour, the bike was pretty much topped out. The fifty-year-old Harley struggled up the next hill, the engine rattling and the exhaust pipes coughing.

At the crest of the hill, he spotted his Jeep in the dead center of the highway. It was right where he left it—and so were the bodies of the Sons of Liberty soldiers. Dark blotches marked the road where the soldiers had taken their final breaths. Raven was responsible for several of the bodies, but he didn't feel any regret. The only thing he regretted from his encounters with the SOL was not being able to save Major Nathan Sardetti's life.

He twisted the throttle hard as he recalled General Dan Fenix firing a bullet point blank into the pilot's skull. He gritted his teeth and gave the engine more gas. The bike vibrated violently, but he didn't let up. Nathan wasn't the first soldier Raven hadn't been able to save. In North Korea, during the ill-fated raid that had been the catalyst for this whole mess, he had watched his friend Billy Franks torn apart by enemy fire.

He kept his eyes closed, adrenaline soaking his muscle fibers as he pushed the bike harder. Raven knew how reckless this was. Driving blind down a highway littered with abandoned cars wasn't much different than drinking himself stupid and playing Russian roulette.

For months, Raven had tried so hard to bury the past, to be a better man. But no matter what he did, he always ended up making things worse. If he'd been a little faster, maybe he could have saved Nathan. And if he'd been a little smarter, he wouldn't have made a deal with that snake, Mr. Redford, in

the first place. Nile Redford's goons had raided Estes Park's supplies and burned down the Stanley, leaving hundreds of people homeless and hungry. Secretary Montgomery had replaced the supplies, but nothing would bring back the historic hotel.

I'm going to make it right, he promised. *No more stupid mistakes. No more wasting my chances. And no more driving blind, either.*

Raven snapped his eyes open just as the front tire was about to veer onto the shoulder. He eased off the throttle and moved the handlebars back toward the center lane, careful not to overcorrect and tip the bike. His heart slowed with the speed of the motorcycle, but he could still feel the blood pulsing in his neck.

He parked the bike on the shoulder of the road and secured the kickstand. A black sea of burned forests surrounded him in all directions, save for the single green island where a red tent was pitched, flaps whipping in the wind.

Raven pulled off his helmet and flipped his long hair over his shoulders. Then he unhooked his Bushmaster AR-15 from the bike. He brought up the scope for a quick scan. Charcoaled vehicles lined the highway to the south, and he saw no signs of activity since he'd abandoned the Jeep.

There was only a flicker of motion in the sky where a bald eagle circled over the skeletal black trees. It was the first living thing he had seen since crossing into the dead zone outside of Estes Park. The air detonation had caused fires that had burned through much of the area, leaving behind a wide path of destruction.

The eagle swooped down to pluck something out of the graveyard of pine trees. Raven stopped to watch it soar away with a snake in its talons. As the raptor climbed, the reptile writhed and wiggled, fighting for survival. After a few seconds, it dropped the snake and flew east to search for a less difficult meal.

Raven always tried to find the meaning in Mother Nature, and this time the story seemed crystal clear. The eagle was Redford, and Raven was the snake. He would bite back when the time came.

Just stay frosty for now, Sam.

He stalked toward his Jeep. Most of the windows were shattered, and bullet holes peppered the panels on the passenger side and hood. He replayed the attack in his mind as he approached. Unlike many men who couldn't seem to remember what happened after bullets started flying, Raven remembered combat as vividly as if he were watching a movie.

Raven had climbed out of the ditch after one of the Sons of Liberty soldiers had taken his crossbow. Nathan had gone berserk as soon as they were in the open and had almost gotten both of them killed. Raven had saved Nathan's life by burying one of his hatchets in the chest of a soldier who was about to fire on the pilot. He could still hear the crunch of metal in bone. That blade was now sheathed across Raven's back, but his other hatchet was still lodged in Brown Feather's skull on Prospect Mountain. There hadn't been enough time between disasters to retrieve it.

He shouldered his rifle as he approached the side of the Jeep. Nothing stirred behind the shattered windows, but that didn't mean there wasn't someone or something hiding inside. Raven walked by the passenger side first, peeking in at the ruined leather seat. He had put those in himself, damn it. Most of his gear was gone, lost in the Humvee that Nathan had abandoned at the Sons of Liberty's compound.

But he didn't care about a few bags of gear. He was here for his Jeep. Raven needed a reliable vehicle to track down Redford and then Fenix, and his Jeep was the only ride he trusted.

Raven pulled out his walkie-talkie. "All clear," he reported.

"On our way," Lindsey replied. It was hard to tell over the channel, but her voice seemed anxious. "Hold your position, Spears."

The putter of an engine sounded in the distance as Raven continued to prowl the area. He stepped over the corpse of a soldier lying on his back; something had already pecked the eyeballs out.

Raven continued to the front of the Jeep, where three bullets had punched into the hood and another two through the windshield. At least that was still intact. He opened the hood to check the damage, even though he already knew the radiator was hit.

The VW van emerged on the hill to the north. The local cops called it The Swag Wagon, and Raven didn't want to think about how many times it had lived up to its name over the years. Olive green and decked out with shag carpet and tie-dye curtains, the van looked like it had dropped out of time warp into modern-day Colorado. The cough of the ancient engine was worse than the old Harley's. Any raiders would have heard it coming from ten miles away. He scanned the southern road to make sure no one had snuck up on them. The way appeared clear, and he went back to checking under the hood of his Jeep.

The faster they got his baby fixed, the quicker he could get on with things.

Plus, he'd promised Sandra and Allie he would be back for dinner.

Lindsey parked the van behind the Jeep and hopped out with a shotgun in hand. A short man with a gray mustache emerged from the passenger side. Nelson Purdue rolled up the sleeves of his coveralls, showing off the Navy tattoos on his burly forearms.

Raven let Creek out of the back of the van. The dog licked his hand and barked, his way of scolding Raven for leaving him behind. Then he trotted over and pissed on the side of the road.

"What the hell? You didn't say there were going to be dead guys out here," Nelson said in a stunned voice. He stared at the corpse to the left of the Jeep. Creek joined them and sniffed the body.

"Back," Raven ordered. The dog walked over to him and sat on his hind legs.

Nelson shifted his gaze from Raven to Lindsey. "Is it safe out here?"

"Just focus on the Jeep," Lindsey said. "Let us worry about security."

He spat on the ground. "I ain't no coward. I served in Korea, and I don't want to get my ass shot up again."

Raven smiled at Lindsey as she pumped a shell into her shotgun.

"No one's going to be shooting you," she said.

Nelson avoided looking at any more of the corpses as he grabbed his tool bag from the van. Death was new to most of the residents of Estes Park. Most of them had lived a quiet and peaceful life, sheltered from the world. Even veterans like Nelson were shaken by the aftermath of the North Korean attacks.

"You said it's the radiator?" Nelson asked.

"Yeah, take a look for yourself," Raven said. He stepped away from the propped hood and joined Lindsey on the side of the road. Creek, ears perked and alert, sniffed the air and then nudged up against Raven.

"Can't believe Colton sent me out here to babysit you," Lindsey muttered.

"Did you have something better to do?"

She twisted her lips to the side. "Only about a hundred things. And getting a drink with you isn't included in the list, if you were wondering."

"Is that the hundred and first thing on the list? Because that's not too bad. I can wait."

She pulled a water bottle from her cargo pocket, took a swig, and then offered it to Raven. "This is the only drink you will ever get with me."

"I promise not to tease you too much about being wrong," he said with a

smirk.

“You don’t give up, do you, Sam?”

“Never.”

Lindsey rolled her eyes, but he could see she was trying not to smile. He wondered if she had anyone out there. She never spoke of her family or friends. She just did her job and kept to herself. Maybe she would open up to him eventually, but it wasn’t going to be anytime soon. Raven liked the challenge, and there would be plenty of time to work her down until she finally accepted his offer.

For now, they guarded Nelson in silence, no more jokes or half-assed attempts at flirting. Raven and Lindsey both knew how dangerous it was out on the open road.

“Looks like you’re right, Raven. The radiator was dinged and the serpentine belt is toast,” Nelson reported as he looked up from the engine. “Can’t fix it out here. We need a tow truck.”

“Well, we don’t have one, so do what you can and hurry up,” Lindsey said. “I don’t want to be out here all day.”

She cradled her shotgun and walked away, leaving Raven and Nelson looking at one another.

“She always like that?” Nelson whispered.

Raven chuckled. “Sometimes she’s worse.”

Nelson walked back to the van to get supplies and Raven followed Lindsey to the shoulder of the road, where she stood looking at the red tent.

“Nathan and I saw that too. Gotta wonder who was camping out there and what happened to ’em.”

“They’re dead, like everyone else,” she said coldly.

Raven didn’t reply, but she was probably right. He slung his AR-15 over his back and crouched in front of Creek. “Stay here, buddy. I’ll be right back.”

Lindsey looked over her shoulder, brows arched. “Where you going?”

“To get my bike.”

“You shouldn’t have parked it so far away in the first place.”

Raven shook his head again. *Damn.* He was used to attitude, but Lindsey was really in a bad mood today.

He burned some energy in the short jog to his bike. The bruises and cuts were finally starting to heal, but he ached like an old man. Still, things could be worse. If it weren’t for his sister, the wounds would have probably become

infected. She had made a point of cleaning them every day and pulled some strings at the hospital to ensure he had plenty of antibiotic ointment and clean bandages.

Creek's bark stopped Raven mid-stride a few feet from his motorcycle. He turned and brought his hand to shield his eyes from the sun. Lindsey was pointing her shotgun at two figures walking down the highway from the south.

Raven hopped on the bike and started the engine. These were the first people he'd seen out here in days, and his gut told him right away they were dangerous. Lindsey must have had the same thought. She directed Nelson to stay behind the Jeep. Creek stood his ground, snarling.

"Stay back!" Raven shouted as he zipped toward the newcomers.

"Raven, be careful!" Lindsey shouted after him.

He held back a grin—maybe she did care after all. He focused on the two figures that were making their way down the highway, a man and a woman from what he could tell, neither of them armed that he could see. That didn't mean they weren't hiding weapons in their coats. One hundred yards away, he eased off the gas and came to a stop.

"Stay where you are!" he shouted again, unslinging his rifle.

The people held up their hands and did as ordered. He dismounted his bike and put up the kickstand, and then slowly made his way toward the couple. They appeared to be in their mid-forties, although it was hard to tell with the dirt smeared across their faces. Both of them carried large backpacks over filthy coats and brown tactical pants with cargo pockets.

"Who are you, and where are you headed?" Raven demanded.

The man remained where he was and didn't lower his hands. Raven got the sense they had both had guns pointed at them before.

"Estes Park," the man said. "We heard they have food and medicine from an air drop a few days ago. My wife needs insulin."

Raven scrutinized them from his position. The man had a thick beard, cracked lips, and dirt smeared over his wrinkled forehead. His brown eyes were kind, though. Not the hardened eyes of a killer.

"How did you hear about the drop?" Raven asked.

The woman exchanged a glance with her husband. He nodded and she said, "Someone reported it over a radio channel. Is it true?"

Raven bit back the urge to curse. If what she said was correct—and he had no reason to believe it wasn't—then Estes Park was going to see an influx of

refugees very soon. He had to get back to town.

“Will you please let us pass?” the man asked.

Raven heaved a sigh. “I’m from Estes Park. If you have a useful skill, like anything with medicine or engineering, they might let you past the barriers.”

“I’m an electrical engineer,” the man said. He took a step forward, and Raven took a step back. What the hell were the odds the guy would be an engineer?

There was fear in the man’s eyes now, and something else—desperation, maybe. Both were equally dangerous.

“What about you, ma’am?” Raven asked.

“I’m a…a nurse.”

Raven heard footsteps behind him, but didn’t take his eyes off the couple. Lindsey stepped up with her shotgun leveled to stand beside him. Creek was right behind her. He trotted over, not meeting Raven’s eyes, knowing damn well he’d broken a command.

“*Sit*,” Raven hissed. The dog sat on his haunches.

“Where are you folks from?” Lindsey asked.

“Laramie,” the man replied.

Raven chuckled wryly. “Yeah, right. You’re from Wyoming?”

“Yes,” the man said, his eyes narrowed. “We left Laramie a few days after the bombs went off.”

Raven wiped the grin off his face. It made no sense; Wyoming was to the north. “Why are you coming from the south then?”

“We took 34 first but had to backtrack due to the raiders,” the man replied.

His wife nodded along as he spoke and then picked up the story. “We didn’t think we were going to make it. We’re the only ones left. The others…”

Raven directed his gaze at her. “Others?”

“They were killed yesterday in an ambush. We lost our dog and my cousin.”

“I’m really sorry,” Raven said, instinctively reaching down to pat Creek. “We’ve lost a lot of friends since the bombs, too.”

The woman pointed at the road. “What happened to those men?”

“They were part of an Aryan Nation gang called the Sons of Liberty.” Raven watched both the man and woman for a reaction, but the name didn’t seem to resonate with either of them. He glanced over at Lindsey. “How long until Nelson’s finished?”

“He’s not sure.”

Raven looked at the Jeep, then at Lindsey. “Take these people back to town, Detective, and tell Colton about the broadcast they heard. He needs to know we should expect company.”

“Thank you, by God, thank you both!” the man said. The woman beamed and hugged her husband.

“Chief’s not going to be happy,” Lindsey said.

Raven put on his helmet and jumped back on his bike. Creek ran over, but Raven held up a hand and ignored the Akita’s whining.

“I’ll be an hour or so behind you, Lindsey,” Raven said. “Take care of Creek for me. I’ve got some unfinished business.”

“What? Where the hell are you going?” Lindsey called after him.

Raven put the bike in gear. He didn’t have the patience to deal with Lindsey right now and she wouldn’t understand where he was going anyway. He had another mission to complete—a promise he’d made Lieutenant Jeff Dupree and his men, who had perished in the ambush by the SOL soldiers. The Marines were all going to get a proper burial even if it took Raven back into harm’s way.

— 1 —

Three weeks had passed since the North Korean attack, and winter was drawing close. Snowflakes fluttered down from the heavy clouds overhead. Police Chief Marcus Colton pulled on the reins of his stallion, Obsidian, directing him to the right as they rode up a windy road to the top of Prospect Mountain.

Colton caught a flake on his glove and watched it melt. It was mid-October, late for the first real snow, but he wasn't complaining. The warm fall weather helped keep the morale up among the residents of the quaint tourist town.

Since the North Korean attack, they had lost over one hundred people. Most had died from illness but a few from violence, including two of Colton's police officers. He still couldn't quite believe his best friend, Captain Jake Englewood, was gone. The days after the North Korean attack had been one disaster after another, and the supplies from Secretary Montgomery were already running out.

"Looks like we might get a few inches," said Raven. He was riding a beautiful ivory-colored mare named Willow with a mane the color of sand. Her hooves crunched over the snowy trail. Creek trotted between the two horses, looking up at his handler, then at Colton, and then back again to Raven.

"Good boy," Raven said. He patted the mare's neck and said, "And you're a good girl, Willow Lady."

Colton looked up the winding trail. At the top of the mountain, newly-minted Estes Park police officer Dale Jackson stood watching over the town from the Crow's Nest. Raven was relieving him today, and Colton was along partly to make sure the two men didn't get in another fight. But that wasn't

the only reason the police chief was making this journey.

“Keep your cool up here, Raven. I don’t need any more problems today,” Colton said.

“You don’t trust me?” Raven frowned and glanced over his shoulder. “Dale’s a classless asshole, but I got bigger fish to fry these days.”

Colton grinned and looked up at the Crow’s Nest. The metal fence surrounding the aerial tramway was just overhead. Dale stood behind the barrier with a Bushmaster AR-15. They had someone posted here at all times to watch for refugees and raiders trying to sneak into the town. One flare shot from the Crow’s Nest meant trouble, and two flares meant to prepare for a skirmish, or worse—war.

The scent of death filled Colton’s nostrils as they approached the rocky outcroppings where Mike Tankala, also known as Brown Feather, had been left to rot.

“Easy, girl,” Raven said. He dismounted from his saddle and held up a hand to Colton. “I’ll be right back, Chief. Need to grab something.”

Raven navigated the rocks and trees underneath the tramway. The red carts still dangled high above, and Colton recalled all too clearly the battle to save Raven’s sister and niece from the deranged kidnapper. That fight had cost Jake his life.

“Screw it.” Colton swung his leg over the horse to dismount. His boots crunched into the compact snow. It was coming down in sheets now, the powder sluicing like rain off his warm waterproof coat. He followed Raven through the maze of rocks, cautious not to slip. The corpse of the demon that had terrorized Estes Park was still where it had plummeted from the top of the tramway.

“Maybe we should have buried him after all,” Raven said. He perched on a rock next to Brown Feather and reached for the hatchet still wedged in the man’s skull.

Colton pulled his scarf up over his nose. The stench was awful. Raven was right—they should have buried or burned the body. Raven wiggled the hatchet from Brown Feather’s skull. It snapped free, opening the gaping hole wide enough that Colton could see the maggots feeding on what was left of the dead man’s brain.

“The ground’s too hard now. I’d burn the bastard if it weren’t snowing,” Colton said.

Raven wiped the hatchet in the snowy grass. He sheathed the blade over

his back and started back to the horses. They walked through the rock field in silence, nothing but the sounds of birds calling out in the distance and the snort of the horses in the chilly wind.

They moved quickly up the final stretch of the trail, winding around to the back of the Crow's Nest. Dale waited for them on the concrete landing, his back resting against the ledge.

"How's it going up here today?" Colton asked.

"Pretty quiet, Chief," Dale replied. He took off his cowboy hat and looked at Raven, but didn't say a word. Raven kept his mouth shut too—probably for the first time in his life, Colton thought.

"Let's hope it stays that way," Colton said. "I was worried that radio broadcast would have refugees lined up outside Estes Park, but maybe the news didn't spread very far."

"Or maybe there just aren't that many people listening," Dale said with a shrug.

Raven gave a mirthless grin. "You guys should be more paranoid, like me."

Colton waited for Raven to speak his mind, but the tracker, back to his usual tricks, was waiting for someone to ask him about his theory. The man loved to have an audience.

"You got a problem, Sam?" Dale asked. He was a big man, with a beer belly and fat covering old muscle on his arms and chest. Stubble shadowed a jaw that was slowly losing the fight against gravity.

Raven stepped up to the railing. "The raiders out there know we're here. Once they finish hitting the cities to the east, they will come for us. First, they will test our defenses. Probably several times, to see which route into the town is the easiest. We need to add more lookouts and send out scouts to watch all the roads."

Colton followed Raven's gaze out over the Rocky Mountains. The jagged peaks stretched across the horizon like the maw of a shark. It was a natural barrier, but they needed more security.

"I've thought about it," Colton said after a pause. "But I've already got as many men as we can afford stationed at each roadblock—"

"They won't stand a chance if Redford's posse comes back. Or Fenix. He escaped with a small army. He would steamroll his way right into Estes Park, killing everyone that stood in his way. The only way we survive is if we get advance warning."

Colton reached into his coat and pulled out a toothpick, wedging it in his mouth. It was the closest thing to a cigarette he could find now that those were all gone. At least his wife was happy he'd finally quit.

Raven was right again. Estes Park was at risk, and this time nobody was going to fly in to help them. Nathan was gone, and his sister had bigger problems than their little mountain town to worry about. A few roadblocks weren't going to stop the coming storm. He looked out toward Rocky Mountain National Park. Twenty-five years prior, the dam at Lawn Lake had broken and washed away part of the valley. The natural disaster had given him an idea last night when he'd lain in bed awake.

"I haven't run this by Mayor Andrews yet, so keep this between us," Colton said. "I'm not as worried about Trail Ridge Road now that the snow is falling, and I think we can defend the town to the south. I'm more worried about highways 34 and 36."

Raven immediately shook his head. "Don't tell me you're thinking about blowing the dam at Lake Estes."

"We may not have a choice."

"Before we do anything drastic, I think we should send out scouts," Raven said. "Those raiders are coming, Chief, and you know it."

"I got your back," Dale said. He jammed his hat back on his head and pulled the brim down. "Even though you left me on the road that night of the attack…"

Raven laughed. "Brother, you deserved it."

Colton chomped on his toothpick. "A lot has changed since that night. We're all in this together now. Right?"

"I ain't got nothin' against you, Sam," Dale said. "And I'm sorry if I pissed off your sister that night. I wasn't thinkin' right."

Colton almost breathed a sigh of relief. For a moment Raven stood there, glaring at Dale. Then he reached out with a hand and said, "Water under the bridge, my man."

Dale took Raven's hand and shook it. "Yes, sir, it is."

"Great, now that's all cleared up, why don't you go back to town, Dale? Get some rest."

"I'll grab a few hours, then head to the roadblock Don's assigned me to."

Colton offered a smile at the veteran as he mounted his horse. Dale seemed to be enjoying his new duties with the Estes Park Police Department.

"I still don't understand why we're not seeing more refugees," Raven said.

Turning back to the railing, Colton scanned the valley again. So far they had only seen a couple dozen refugees since the attack a month ago. Something—or someone—was stopping them from getting to the isolated mountain town.

He knew it wasn't radiation. Most of the south was safe. It had been dangerous days after the attack, but since there wasn't any fallout—only something called "fission products," he still didn't fully understand—the threat had dissipated quickly. The only other explanation was that someone was killing refugees before they got to Estes Park.

The idea should have made Colton angry, but instead he just felt tired. The signs of violence were etched into the concrete platform, where bullets had chipped the ground and walls three weeks earlier. Jake had lost his life a few feet from where Colton stood now.

He realized that this was the exact spot where he and Raven had shaken hands after the showdown with Brown Feather. So much had happened since then, but one thing was certain—Colton was proud to have Raven on his team.

Raven hefted his crossbow up and glassed the valley to the west while Colton studied the town, which looked like a miniature Christmas village below. He pulled his scarf up around his throat to keep the wind off his neck. The air carried the scent of cedar and burning firewood. Fingers of smoke rose from hundreds of chimneys.

"I can put together a team of scouts," Raven said. "I'd suggest sending some up Trail Ridge Road. We can't write off that side of the town just because of the snow. If Redford decides to come back, I bet that's the way he would come, probably in some old trucks with plows."

Creek trotted over to them, showing his muzzle for the first time since they'd gotten up on the mountain. He clamped down on a dead chipmunk in his mouth.

"Resourceful little guy," Colton said.

Raven chuckled. "He knows the only way he'll get a snack is if he hunts it himself. Some folks down there could learn a thing or two from him."

"No shit." Colton thought of the town administrator, Tom Feagen. The arrogant bastard didn't seem to understand rations, or that food had a shelf life. That was another thing on Colton's to-do list, but having a come-to-Jesus meeting with Mayor Andrews and Administrator Feagen was something he wasn't looking forward to.

“Speaking of Redford, have you given up—”

Raven cut Colton off. “Nope. I’m going after him when the time is right. Then I’m going to find Fenix.”

“We’ve been through this, Raven. You need to let the military take care of Fenix.”

Raven glared at Colton, his nostrils flaring with rage. “That Nazi prick is still out there, Chief. He murdered Nathan, ambushed American soldiers, and killed refugees in cold blood.”

“I know.”

“So you also know we have to stop him.”

“I know we have to protect Estes Park,” Colton said. “If Fenix shows up here, I will kill him myself, but I’m not going to hunt him down. That’s Secretary Montgomery’s job, not mine—and not yours.”

Raven lifted both brows. “Have we even heard from her?”

“Not for a week.”

Snorting, Raven turned to look back out over the town. “You didn’t see what Fenix is capable of.”

“I’m sorry,” Colton said.

Raven gripped the cold railing and clenched his jaw, closing his eyes clearly to bury the memory of what he’d seen at the Sons of Liberty compound. Raven hadn’t spoken much about it, so Colton didn’t know the details of what had happened that night. He figured the time would come when Raven would tell him.

Raven loosened his grip, unslung his crossbow, and walked away with Creek on his tail. That was Colton’s cue to leave him alone.

“You need anything?” Colton called out after Raven.

“Don’t worry about me, Chief. I got everything I need for the night.”

“Just watch your back,” Colton said.

“I always do.” Raven stopped and turned around to face Colton. “Maybe I should be watching Estes Park instead of the roads. Half the town still wants my head on a pike for what Redford did.”

“People tend to have short memories when disaster strikes. Sure, you’re a scapegoat, but I hardly think any of them are going to come after you. Just look at Dale. You guys are cool, now.”

“Yeah, but what about Don? I’ve seen the way he looks at me.”

Colton spat out his toothpick. “I’ve got Don under control. Only reason he’s still on the force is because we need the manpower. Nobody’s gonna

follow him again if he tries to start anything.”

“Well, what about Sandra and Allie?” Raven said. “I’ve seen the way people look at them, too.”

“I won’t let anything happen to them,” Colton promised. “I should get back. You sure you’re good up here?”

“Yeah.”

“All right. I’ll see you in a few days then,” Colton said.

“Days?” Raven scrunched his black brows together. “You planning a trip?”

“You’re right, Raven. We can’t hold back a major attack. Scouts may give us warning, but what we need are allies.”

“What are you suggesting?”

“There’s a FEMA camp near Loveland. I’m going to take Detective Plymouth with me to see if we can get some help, maybe contact the sheriff and anybody else who’s still out there. If we work together, I believe Estes Park and surrounding communities can stop the raiders before it’s too late.”

Raven set his crossbow against the railing. “I thought you didn’t like politics?”

“I don’t.”

“Well then, maybe you should let Lindsey do the talking.”

Colton cracked a grin. “Maybe. I’m also thinking I should send someone up to Storm Mountain and try and reach some sort of a deal with John Kirkus and his men.”

Raven looked at the ground, trying to hide a scowl.

“I know you don’t like ’em, but we may need their help,” Colton said.

“Those preppers aren’t going to come out of their bunkers up there to help us. You crazy, Chief? They’re probably all hunkered down and waiting in the brush with sniper rifles. I sure as hell ain’t going up there to ask that cowboy for help. It’s way too dangerous.”

Colton snorted. “Since when are you scared of danger, Sam? Besides, John Kirkus is a good man, and so are most of the folks that live up there. They just want to be left alone to live out their lives.”

“Precisely,” Raven said, eyes wide. “They want to be left *alone*.”

Colton shrugged slightly. “Maybe you’re right about Kirkus being dangerous, but these are desperate times. I think we can work together against a mutual enemy.”

This time Raven shrugged.

“Watch over Estes Park while I’m gone, okay?”

“You got it, Chief.”

They shook hands firmly, holding each other’s gaze for a moment before Colton returned to his horse. He stroked the black mane of the stallion and then climbed into the saddle. Obsidian snorted and set off down the dirt path into town. It would take him almost an hour to get back to the police station. Colton drew in a breath of crisp air and tried to enjoy the quiet afternoon. There was no doubt in his mind it wouldn’t last for long.

He looked out over Prospect Mountain, wondering what was happening beyond the peaks. The analog radio transmissions painted a dreary picture. Many of the surrounding cities had fallen into anarchy, including Loveland and Fort Collins. FEMA and the National Guard had set up a camp, and Colton had a hunch that refugees had been heading there instead of Estes Park. That still didn’t explain why so few had shown up. Even if most folks ended up in Loveland, they should have seen more than the handful of refugees that had arrived.

Halfway back to town, Obsidian’s ears suddenly perked, and the horse halted on the rocky path. Colton reached for the Colt Single Action Army revolver just as a flare shot up toward the clouds. The red light scudded through the falling snow and burst in the clouds, blooming over the Estes Park lake.

Colton twisted in his saddle toward the aerial tramway, his heart pounding. Letting out a breath of icy air, he waited anxiously. One flare was bad, but two…

A second flare never came, and Colton relaxed in the saddle. Whatever Raven had seen up there had only warranted the single shot.

“Let’s go, boy,” Colton said. He gave Obsidian a nudge. The quiet afternoon had been shattered even sooner than he’d expected. His town might not be facing a full-out attack just yet, but he knew it was only a matter of time before the storm hit.

— 2 —

Secretary of Defense Charlize Montgomery arrived on the outskirts of Charlotte, North Carolina, shortly after noon. She hated leaving Ty behind, but it was too dangerous for him to leave Constellation. Surprisingly, her son had been okay with the trip. He trusted her word that she would be back.

But Charlize was already questioning her decision. The flight from Cape Canaveral had revealed a nation in chaos. Charlotte, like every other city, had been devastated by the events that had followed the North Korean attack. Without electricity, transportation, or communications, most people were starving and scared. Some of them had seized the opportunity. Looters had picked the cities clean. Gangs were thriving in the lawless streets. And everywhere Charlize looked, fires raged. There was no one left to put them out.

Charlize couldn’t hear the crack of gunfire over the rotors, but she knew that every few seconds someone, somewhere below, was firing at their former co-workers, neighbors, friends, and perhaps even their own families. The country was tearing itself apart, pitting good people against one another in an effort to survive. And with a pre-attack population of over eight hundred thousand, the survivors in Charlotte would be growing more desperate by the day.

The last food delivery had been a month ago, and the onset of cool fall weather was helping fuel the fear of what was to come. Charlotte was a Southern city, but the nights would still get cold enough to kill this winter. She recalled a FEMA report about food and water shortages. The report had said that three days after the attack, food shortages would escalate. A week after the attack, hospitals would exhaust their oxygen and medical supplies. Two weeks after the attack, clean water would start to run dry.

They were almost at the month mark now. Without access to drinking water, people would start dying very quickly. Disease would spread like wildfire through the camps and the ravaged cities. Another report—one of the hundreds she'd read since stepping into the role of Secretary of Defense—had stated that only one percent of the population had been prepared for a disaster. Those people had stores of clean water, canned food, and other emergency supplies. Most of them also had enough weapons to protect themselves.

The average American had run out of supplies mere days into the crisis. Fifty million Americans were expected to starve by winter, and another twenty-five million were expected to die from disease and violence.

For the survivors, the only choice was to flee to one of the FEMA camps, but even that was no guarantee of safety. The survival centers, or SCs, couldn't keep up with the demand for food, water, and shelter. It was Charlize's job to fix that problem, but looking out over Charlotte, she had no idea where to start.

We can't save everyone, Charlize. That's what President Diego had said to her before she left for this trip. She realized now more than ever that it was true.

Charlize tightened her restraints as the Sikorsky SH-60 Seahawk dipped. The pilots were flying like they were heading for a combat zone.

Then again, the city did look like a war zone. Burning cars on the street. People smashing storefronts with baseball bats. Families pushing shopping carts stuffed with their belongings down highways.

There was something else that gave Charlize pause—a train with hundreds of train cars backed up on the tracks in the distance.

What if we can get them running again? she thought to herself. It was the same way the American West was built and won. If they could do it again, they might have a chance at moving supplies, and people.

"Almost there," Albert said, snapping her from her thoughts.

They were nearing the airport, and Charlize could see the concourses and air traffic control tower. Not far from one of the tarmacs, the wreckage of a 747 lay where the plane had crashed after losing power. Both wings, sheared off, stuck out of the dirt like arrows.

A patchwork of bright colors covered the grounds beyond the tarmacs like a quilt. Thousands of tents were pitched across the terrain. Charlize unbuckled her harness and moved over to one of the windows. On one side of

a fence made from concrete and barbed wire were hundreds of soldiers dressed in green. Trapped on the other side were tens of thousands of civilians. Maybe even a hundred thousand. It looked like a gigantic music festival from this height.

“Good Lord,” Albert said. He gestured for Charlize to move back. “Stay away from the windows.”

“The sight of a working helicopter might draw more than just eyes, ma’am,” said a young corporal named Marko. “This bird’s got a big target on her side.”

Charlize sank back into her seat and buckled the harness. More than one transport had been ambushed en route to a survival center. People were furious at the government’s failure to protect them.

Albert didn’t take his own advice. He lingered near the window, gazing out over the crowds. She knew he was searching for one face in particular. Yesterday, he’d gotten word that his twin sister, Jacqueline, had been entered into the system FEMA was using to track people. She was here in Charlotte, or had at least passed through here a few days ago. After losing Nathan, Charlize was more than willing to help reunite Albert with his sister. Although the big man rarely showed emotion, she knew he’d been going through hell as he waited for some word of his family.

“We’ve got gunfire at two o’clock,” reported one of the pilots. “Everyone hold on.”

The bird banked hard to the right. Charlize jerked forward, the straps tightening across her burned skin. Albert moved away from the window to shield her body with his own.

“Take it easy up there!” he yelled.

Charlize tried to look beyond his massive torso. The bird continued to turn sharply, away from the airport.

“I’m getting us the hell out of here,” said one of the pilots.

“No, you’re not. Turn around,” she said over the comms. They had made it this far; she wasn’t going to retreat now. Besides, the Seahawk needed a drink, and the nearest safe refueling site was too far to risk it.

The pilot took his time responding. “Your call, ma’am.”

“Damn right it is. Take us down.”

Albert looked at her. “You’re sure about this?”

She dipped her head. “I just wish I was the one flying.”

Below, a sea of bodies surged toward the checkpoints around the airport.

The North Carolina Department of Emergency Management, the local police, and the National Guard hadn't been anywhere near prepared for an event of this magnitude, and the airport was the best option for a survival center. It wasn't a terrible choice. From the sky, it appeared to be fairly easy to defend, with lots of open space for shelters, including the hangars and concourses.

"Ma'am, we're going to be exposed no matter where we try to cross," said one of the pilots over the headset.

Charlize took a moment to think, and then gestured to the crew chief sitting across the troop hold. "Get on that M240," she said.

The soldier didn't hesitate like the pilots had. He stood and opened the door. Wind rushed into the open space as the man grabbed the big gun.

"Don't shoot anyone unless we're shot at first," Charlize ordered. She was banking on the sight of the gun deterring anyone from taking another shot at the bird.

"Yes, ma'am," said the crew chief.

Albert continued shielding Charlize with his body as the pilots prepared to come in for another pass. Every head seemed to turn in their direction from the fields below. She could picture what they were seeing—a big gray helicopter packed full of soldiers, the perfect target for any asshole that felt the government was responsible for their predicament. It had only taken a few weeks for ordinary, patriotic, tax-paying citizens to turn on their country.

The crew chief raked the barrel of the M240 back across the crowds as the Seahawk flew over the fields and tarmacs, but he didn't fire. The din of angry shouts rose over the thump of the rotors.

"You think she's down there?" Albert asked her.

Charlize reached up and patted his muscular arm. "She is, Big Al, and we're going to find her."

"Thank you, ma'am," he said.

That was Albert—always the southern gentleman, even when people were taking shots at them. God, she was glad to have the big man by her side. Kind-hearted and strong, he was the most loyal person she had ever known, and the closest friend she had left in this world after losing Nathan.

She drew in a shaky breath as a wave of grief crashed over her. This wasn't the time to mourn her brother. Motion snapped her from her thoughts. The door gunner had swiveled the big gun to the right and leaned into the butt like he was preparing to fire. Trusting the instincts she'd honed as a fighter pilot, Charlize ducked just as a bullet punched into the metal side of the

chopper.

Albert curled around her. “Protect Secretary Montgomery!”

Soldiers closed in, forming a phalanx of bodies to shield her flesh with their own. Charlize brought her hands up and covered her ears, but it didn’t seem to make a difference. The bark of the M240 rang out, the *GAGAGA* echoing through the troop hold. Charlize counted the seconds, calculating the number of rounds the crew chief had just fired into the crowd.

“I think we’re clear,” he said over the comms. “I think I got the bastard that shot at us.”

You think? Charlize had lost sight of the crowd, but she knew fifty 7.62 mm rounds would have inflicted major damage—especially from this height, where it would be almost impossible to get a clear shot. The other soldiers remained clustered around her as the helicopter wheeled over the camp once more.

“Prepare for landing,” one of the pilots said.

Charlize pulled off her headset with a shaky hand and glanced up at Albert. His eyes met hers, his chest heaving like he couldn’t breathe.

“It’s going to be okay, Al,” she said, so quietly that only he could hear her. “I’m fine, and we’re going to find Jacqueline.”

After a long moment, Albert nodded and straightened up. The other soldiers fell back, revealing the crew chief still gripping the gun. A month ago, the man would have earned himself a court martial for firing into a crowd of civilians, but the country was under martial law now. His only punishment would be living with the guilt of killing innocent civilians in his attempt to hit a single shooter.

The Seahawk landed on the tarmac with a jerk a moment later.

“We’re going to find your sister,” Charlize repeated to Albert as she stood.

The soldiers jumped out and fanned away from the bird to set up a perimeter on the tarmac. Albert nudged past the crew chief, giving him a furious look before turning and helping Charlize out onto the pavement.

She looked at the crew chief one last time before taking Albert’s hand. His glassy, downward gaze told her that he was already regretting his actions.

Once her feet were on the ground, Charlize and Albert moved quickly toward a group of National Guard soldiers on the tarmac. The sound of the rotors waned in the background, the draft mixing with the cool afternoon breeze at her back. There was only one other helicopter parked here. Most of the military assets that had been hardened against an EMP attack were being

kept in secure locations, and this wasn't one of them.

An Army captain stood out front of the dozen soldiers. He came to attention as Charlize approached. Recently shaved and boots polished, the man had clearly prepared for her visit.

"Secretary Montgomery, I'm Captain Zach Harris. Welcome to Survival Center Charlotte." He met her gaze with cool blue eyes behind black-rimmed glasses.

She sized him up quickly, from his neat appearance to the keen intelligence in those eyes, and what she saw tracked with the briefing she'd received that morning. SC Charlotte was overcrowded and undersupplied like many of the survival centers, but from what she had been told, Harris was one of the more prepared and competent captains in charge.

"I'm sorry about the…excitement," Harris continued. "I beefed up security, but it's hard to keep guns out of those crowds. Another reason I told Command it would have been safer to approach at night."

Charlize acknowledged his apology with a curt nod. "We're here now, so let's get to work."

"Absolutely. If you'd follow us, please."

Charlize walked alongside Harris, talking as they moved. Albert fell into step just behind her.

"I'm told you have experience with setting up camps like this one," she said.

"Yes, ma'am, I helped establish civilian centers that fed and protected tens of thousands of local refugees in both Iraq and Afghanistan."

"Sounds like you're the perfect man for the job. I wish we had soldiers of your caliber for all of the SCs."

Harris smiled with appreciation. "Thank you, ma'am. We're doing the best we can, but no matter how many shipments come in from abroad, there are always more mouths to feed. Security is also a major problem."

A single gunshot cracked in the distance to punctuate his words, but the noise didn't even seem to faze Harris or his soldiers. They continued walking across the tarmac like nothing had happened.

Charlize eyed the guard towers rigged with industrial lights around the perimeter of the tarmac. Soldiers manned M240 machine guns on the towers, protecting the two choppers, but no one fired. Harris's men were disciplined.

The captain led the group toward a dozen warehouses. A Humvee raced by, a soldier in the turret swiveling in their direction as the truck rounded a

corner and vanished. Another gunshot sounded. Then three more. The flurry of shots hinted at a battle rather than a random shooting.

"Like I said, violence is a major problem here. I estimate one person is killed every few hours somewhere in the city. Sometimes it's much worse, but it's never better. Outside these walls it's a goddamn warzone with the Latin Kings, MS-13, and other gangs wreaking havoc."

Charlize shook her head. She'd read it all in Harris's reports, of course, but seeing the SC in person was much different from reading about it from the safety of Constellation.

Harris pointed at the hangars. "That's where we're storing our food and supplies. I've got this area on lockdown, and we only fly in at night. That way the locals don't riot. Most of the time, that is."

Charlize examined the massive hangars, previously used to house 747s and other airplanes. Now they were full of life-saving food, medicine, and supplies. Harris indicated a particular hangar ahead with open doors.

"Welcome to the EOC," Harris said as they approached.

She did a quick scan of the emergency operations center. Metal tables were set up inside the open space, and a swarm of people were moving about. A wall of soldiers stood sentry behind a machine gun nest. Laptops in metal cases were spread out over tables, along with maps and stacks of reports. Civilians and military worked side by side on recovery efforts, but Charlize could tell just by looking that the SC was understaffed. If this was one of the better-run centers, then the rest must be in terrible shape.

"How are you selecting who gets in these walls?" she asked Harris.

"We've been screening mostly by occupation. Doctors, scientists, engineers, and soldiers are high priorities."

"And if you don't have any skills?" Albert asked.

"You're shit out of luck," Harris said dryly, his gaze sweeping over Albert.

Charlize had forgotten the two men hadn't been introduced. "This is Capitol Police Officer Albert Randall," she said. Harris shook Albert's hand. "He's looking for his sister. Apparently she was logged into the FEMA system here."

"When was that?" Harris asked.

"Thirty-six hours ago," Albert replied. "She signed up for housing and medicine."

Harris pointed at a group of people near a workstation. "Those people can help you locate her. But I'll warn you, lots of people check in and then move

on. If she left the area, it's going to be hard to find her."

"Jacqueline is smart, but she doesn't have any of the skills you mentioned earlier," Albert said.

Harris frowned. "Then chances are we turned her away." He paused, held Albert's gaze, and added, "I'm sorry."

"Let's at least figure out if she's here before we start worrying," Charlize said.

"And if she's not here, I need to know where she went," Albert said.

"I'd consider it a personal favor," Charlize added.

Harris hesitated for a moment. He probably got requests like this all the time from civilians, but if he was upset about Charlize using her position to lean on him, he sure didn't show it.

"If your sister is still in Charlotte, I'll help you find her," he said. "Officer Randall, I'd advise checking in with the FEMA staff first. In the meantime, Secretary Montgomery, why don't you follow me so I can show you more of our facility?"

Albert didn't budge, but Charlize gave him a nod. "I'll be fine. Go see what you can find out about your sister."

"Yes, ma'am, thank you."

Albert hurried away while Charlize followed Harris out of the hangar. While they walked, Harris said, "This is confidential, but we're about to shut the gates. We're bursting at the seams with civilians that we can't take care of. I'm planning to place the entire SC on lockdown."

Charlize saw what he meant by bursting at the seams. The next hangar was packed full of civilians. A thousand cots filled the massive space. The air was thick with the smell of unwashed bodies and despair. Coughing rang out in all directions, and hungry, filthy faces stared at Charlize.

She swallowed hard, trying her best not to stare. But her eyes betrayed her, and she found herself looking at a woman clutching a baby to her breast, trying her best to feed the crying boy to no avail.

"We're almost out of water again," Harris said quietly.

"This is worse than I thought," Charlize said. She looked back to the woman and her child, noting the red blotches on the boy's head. The baby was sick, and as Charlize looked around the room, she saw nurses and doctors dabbing the fevered foreheads of other sick people.

Charlize realized that this wasn't merely civilian housing as she'd originally thought. "This isn't the barracks, is it?"

“No, this is our medical wing,” Harris replied. “I thought I’d show you the worst place first.”

A young nurse hurried past them, her eyes glassy and hard as though she’d seen too many horrors to process. Someone nearby was vomiting, and the sound of it nearly made Charlize retch.

“This is…dear God. I had no idea things were this bad.”

Harris clasped his hands behind his back and jerked his head at the other soldiers. They began to work their way back toward the first hangar, where Albert was checking with the FEMA staff.

“Frankly, I’m just glad you had the guts to come out here and see for yourself. Most politicians would be hiding in their bunkers instead of—”

Before he could finish his sentence, an air raid siren wailed. Unlike the gunfire earlier, the siren got Harris’s attention. His eyes flitted to the balding lieutenant that had been shadowing them.

“Get me a SITREP, Washington,” Harris said.

The lieutenant took off running for the hangar just as Albert jogged over with a hand on the grip of his holstered pistol. “What’s going on?” he shouted.

“Not sure,” Harris said. “But my team won’t sound the alarm unless it’s a level 2 threat or higher. My guess is someone made it through the barricades or cut through a fence. They won’t get far.”

The captain led them back to the EOC, standing in the open doorway to look out over the room. The staff and soldiers were scrambling. Lieutenant Washington conferred with a woman wearing a headset, and then ran back over to them a moment later. Charlize felt the tingle of adrenaline, wondering if she had made a major mistake coming here and leaving Ty.

“Sir, we have a riot at gates nineteen and twenty,” Washington said. “This one looks coordinated.”

Harris cursed. “Stay here, Secretary Montgomery. I’m going to have a look from the rooftop.”

“I don’t think so,” Charlize replied. “I’m coming with you.”

Albert snorted, but the man knew better to argue with her.

“Suit yourself,” Harris said.

Albert and Charlize followed Harris toward a door across the room. Harris opened it and began jogging up a spiral staircase to the top of the building. Several snipers were already set up, their eyes pressed to their scopes and their barrels angled out over the survival center. Smoke from multiple fires

rose across the Charlotte skyline.

"You wanted to see things firsthand," Harris said. He pulled out a pair of binoculars and handed them to Charlize. "Welcome to the front lines of the second Civil War, ma'am."

***

General Dan Fenix slammed down his empty beer can. They were down to their last case, but at least the snow kept it cold. There wasn't much more that he hated in life than a warm brew. Well, besides that bitch Montgomery and the redskin that had murdered a dozen of his men at the Castle.

"Carson, get me another one," Fenix snapped. He tossed the can at the soldier's boots, frustrated, tired, and bored.

Carson put on a stocking cap over his shaved head and then opened the door of the small cabin, letting in a flood of light and chilled air. Fenix squinted and raised a hand to shield his eyes.

The Sons of Liberty, or what was left of them, were camped out on the border of Rocky Mountain National Park. The abandoned cabins were in good shape, considering their age. The Civilian Conservation Corps had built them ninety years ago. Fenix appreciated the craftsmanship those men had put into their work. Once his army was back on their feet, he'd follow in President Roosevelt's footsteps and put together his own New Deal to rebuild Colorado. It was part of his long-term plan—a plan that was currently derailed because of a damn redskin asshole.

Son of a bitch. I still can't believe that fucker killed so many of my men.

Fenix rose up from his chair and walked across the creaky floorboards to the window. Pulling back the curtain, he looked out over the camp. Several soldiers stood guard in white coats, disguised against the snowy landscape. A single pickup truck was parked under a metal shed along with several motorcycles. They'd lost most of the heavy vehicles during the assault.

The camp was isolated, easily defended, and remote. The nearby pines provided plenty of cover from the sky. It was the perfect fallback point for the Sons of Liberty to regroup and plan their next move. For now, Fenix was lying low and waiting for his scouts to come back with intel. For their sakes, they'd better get back with good news before the beer ran out.

Montgomery would come for him, and when she did, he would be ready.

Anger seethed just below his skin. The attack on the Castle had set him back considerably. They'd lost two-thirds of their working vehicles, half of their supplies, and fifty men. They were running out of food, and they couldn't risk fires for fear of giving their location away.

Fortunately, Fenix had other camps throughout Colorado and allies across state lines that would come to his aid. That was the benefit of being part of a brotherhood of like-minded patriots. As long as his heart continued to pump blood through his veins, he would fight for the America he believed in—one that aligned with the values of the Aryan Nation.

First, he needed a win—a major victory for morale. His men were hungry and cold. If they sat around here much longer, they might start getting ideas. The worst thing was when men had too much time to think. They needed something to do—something fun—while they waited for the scouts to return.

The door to the cabin opened, and Carson ducked inside with the cold beer. He held it out, but Fenix shook his head.

"Save it for later," he said reluctantly. He ran a hand through his thick hair and then put on his baseball cap. He squeezed past Carson and walked out into the crisp mountain air. Every soldier turned to look at him.

Spreading his arms wide, Fenix yelled, "You boys ready for a hunt?"

"Yes sir!" chanted his men.

A grin spread across Fenix's face. "Whoever brings me the Injun Spears gets all the beer they can drink!"

— 3 —

Raven pushed the binoculars to his eyes. A tide of refugees slowly advanced toward the barricades on Mary's Lake Road. Colton had arrived on his black horse, and several other newly-minted officers were running toward the refugees, including Dale Jackson.

"That's a lot of mouths to feed," Raven muttered. He counted two dozen people on his first pass, and another group was rounding the corner near the junkyard on the southern edge of town.

How the hell did they get past the roadblocks on Highway 7?

Raven answered his own question with a quick glance. The roadblocks were meant to stop vehicles, not foot traffic. It also explained why it had taken them so long to get here. He moved positions on the concrete landing to look for more refugees. For several days the town had been waiting in anticipation for these people, but now that they were at the doorsteps of Estes Park, Raven found himself surprisingly calm. Zooming in with his binos, he watched from above.

"Scouts would have caught these people," Raven grumbled. "Guess I got to do everything myself."

He cursed when he saw another small group emerge to the south. Colton didn't have enough spotters to keep everyone from getting through the security net, and this time an entire crowd had slipped through. At least the Crow's Nest had an aerial view of most of the valley. If Raven hadn't seen them and sent up a flare, these people would have walked right into town.

He centered his binoculars on the throng of civilians, zooming in on their weapons. Some of the men had rifles slung over their shoulders, while others carried pistols. There were children and women in the group, which told him these weren't raiders. Still, he kept the flare gun at his side, just in case.

Creek looked up and licked a snowflake off his black muzzle. He wagged his tail, anxious to know what was going on.

“Stay put, boy,” Raven whispered.

Colton walked over to talk to the group as the rest of the Estes Park police directed their rifles at the newcomers. The refugees kept their weapons lowered or holstered. Raven could imagine what was being said below. These people would have to be vetted, and most of them would be turned away and told to go to the FEMA camp outside of Loveland. Colton had already planned to send armed and mounted escorts down Highway 34 with any refugees they turned away.

It was a good plan, but most of these people weren’t going to like it. Chances were they’d already been to the FEMA camp, especially if they were coming from the south like the couple Raven and Lindsey had met on Highway 7 last week.

He lowered his binos. Colton appeared to have the situation under control. Creek followed him toward the railing overlooking Lake Estes and the eastern edge of town. Highways 34 and 36 ran parallel to the lake. There were roadblocks set up in multiple locations along both of them, but Raven could only see the one on the southern side of Lake Estes. Several officers and volunteers manned the post. The rest had all taken off to meet the refugees on Mary’s Lake Road.

A single vehicle was chugging along the street. He zoomed in on The Swag Wagon. Behind the wheel of the VW van sat Don Aragon, everyone’s favorite police officer. Raven still wasn’t sure why Colton hadn’t stripped the man of his badge. He was a liability—and an asshole.

Strength in numbers, Raven reminded himself. Still, something felt off. Don suddenly slowed and parked the van. Someone else jumped inside, and Don pushed back down on the gas. Raven couldn’t see who Don had picked up, but he could see they weren’t in any race to get to the refugees. The van drove slowly, like Don wasn’t in any hurry, or was perhaps trying to kill time…but why?

Raven began to cross back to the landing overlooking the south when a distant gunshot halted him mid-stride. He whirled back to the eastern railing. The echo quickly faded away as Raven searched the terrain for any sign of the shooter. He looked toward Lake Estes and glimpsed motion on Highway 36. Bringing his binos back up, he focused on a Toyota pickup truck racing toward the barrier Don had abandoned ten minutes earlier.

A man in the bed of the truck directed a rifle at the roadblock. Raven zoomed in just as the gun cracked to life. Bullets lanced into the car and RV positioned behind the concrete blocks set up at the barrier. Raven flinched as an Estes Park officer was caught in the fire, a round punching through his neck. The man slumped to the ground, dead.

He reached for the strap of his own rifle, but stopped. There was no way he could get a shot from this far out. Instead, he could only watch in horror as the man in the back of the pickup truck continued firing on the roadblock.

A second Estes Park officer popped up to fire. His body slumped a moment later. The third defender fired a shotgun blast that hit the grill of the pickup truck. The driver stopped, but the shooter in the back kept firing. The bullets hit the third Estes Park police officer in the arm, spinning him around. He crashed to the ground and crawled to safety just as another volley of bullets punched into the concrete.

The refugees had been a distraction, Raven realized, just like the burning of the Stanley Hotel. He had to get down there and help fight the raiders.

He put the binos back in their pouch and whistled at Creek. He couldn't just stand by and watch as officers and volunteers were gunned down. After firing off two flares into the sky, Raven grabbed his gear and ran toward his horse. He quickly untied the tether, jumped on the saddle, and gave Willow a nudge.

"Time to fly, girl," he said.

***

Colton craned his neck to the east. The blood pulsing through his veins seemed to ice at the sound of gunshots. He unclipped the walkie-talkie on his ballistic vest and brought it to his lips.

"Margaret, this is Marcus, do you copy, over."

A scratchy response came from the speakers. "Roger, Chief."

"I've got gunfire coming from somewhere near Lake Estes," he replied as calmly as possible. "You hear anything about what's going on out there?"

"Negative, sir, but I'll check. Stand by."

"Where the hell is Don? He should be here by now," Colton said.

"On his way, should be to your location shortly."

Colton looked at the refugees waiting on the other side of the roadblock.

There were fourteen of them, dressed in filthy clothing, faces smudged with dirt and ash. Kids, adults, even a couple of elderly folks. None of them said a word. Their hopeful eyes were all focused on Colton.

Detective Lindsey Plymouth looked over at him, waiting for orders. There were a dozen other officers and volunteers already here, including Dale, all of them with their guns pointed at the refugees. A single flinch could start a firefight neither side could afford. Quick decisions were the only thing that was going to keep the people of Estes Park alive now.

“Drop your weapons, all of you,” Colton said to the refugees. He nodded at Plymouth. “No one leaves. I’m heading east to see what the hell is going on.”

He slung his AR-15 over his back and jogged away from the barricade toward the approaching Volkswagen van. Lindsey disarmed the men and women on the other side of the roadblock with Dale’s help. The other volunteer Estes Park officers kept their rifles shouldered.

Colton waved at the van, and Don brought the ancient rust bucket to a stop, sticking his head out the open driver’s window. Officer Sam Hines and Detective Tim Ryburn were in the back of the van, their hands resting on their weapons.

“Where you going in such a hurry, Marcus?”

Colton pointed toward Lake Estes. “You didn’t hear the gunfire?”

“Gunfire?” Don looked over his shoulder as Colton jumped into the passenger seat.

“There’s some sort of an attack on the east side of town,” Colton said. “Punch it!”

Don twisted the wheel to perform a U-turn.

The van screeched back to the north and Colton turned back to the front. Townsfolk were already running down the streets, away from the gunfire.

“We’re not ready for this,” Colton said. All he could think was how stupid he’d been. He should have listened to Raven and sent out scouts. At least they would have had a warning.

Colton could only pray this wasn’t a coordinated attack from the raiders who’d been hitting towns along the foothills of the Rocky Mountains. He would know in a few minutes. In the meantime he pulled out his Colt .45 and thumbed back the hammer. He already knew the weapon was loaded. The AR-15 next to him was also charged with a full magazine of 5.56 mm rounds. If it came down to it, he would use his bare hands to protect his wife and daughter.

“Chief, you got any idea what’s going on?” asked Hines.

“Are we under attack?” Ryburn asked.

Colton spat out the open window and then said, “Get ready for a fight.” He looked up at the Crow’s Nest as they passed Prospect Mountain. Raven was nowhere in sight—another bad sign. If he’d abandoned his post, then they were really in trouble.

“Don, who’d you leave on 36?” Colton asked.

The patrol sergeant stroked his mustache nervously. “John Palmer, Mike Evans, and Alex Stokes.” He put his other hand back on the wheel. “You think those refugees on Mary’s Lake Road were a distraction to get us to take men off that barricade?”

“My gut says yes.” Colton dragged his sleeve across his mouth.

Hines palmed a magazine into his rifle. “That barricade is the last defense before town.”

Don’s eyes flitted from the road to the rear review mirror, sweat dripping down his forehead.

“You told me to pull everyone else and send ’em to Mary’s Lake Road,” Don said. After a beat, he added, “Just like you said to send everyone to the Stanley when it was on fire.”

Colton could feel Hines and Ryburn looking at him from the back seat, but he didn’t reply. Despite counting to ten in his head, and employing every other trick to remain calm, Colton felt like his heart was going to break through his ribcage.

Had he been tricked again?

He cursed under his breath as the van sped through town toward Lake Estes. Another flurry of gunshots rang out in the distance.

“That’s automatic fire,” Don said.

Rayburn pumped a shell into his shotgun. “Holy shit. Who the hell has automatic weapons?”

Colton waved out the window at a group of civilians standing on the streets, looking east.

“Get inside!” he shouted.

They passed several more groups of people clustered in the middle of Elkhorn Avenue. A crowd had formed in Bond Park, where Mayor Gail Andrews had set up a soup kitchen. She was standing outside town hall with Tom Feagen, both of them looking toward the lake.

Colton grabbed his AR-15 as they sped toward St. Vrain Avenue on the

south side of Lake Estes. The roadblock was just ahead. Colton spotted a hand, palm up, lying beyond the barricade. There were casualties, but he couldn't tell yet if it was his men or the raiders.

"Get the medical pack ready," he said. As they rounded the barricade, his heart sank. Evans, Stokes, and Palmer were all sprawled on the road, none of them moving, a river of blood flowing freely from their bullet-riddled bodies.

Colton brought his rifle up and scanned the roads and terrain for any sign of the raiders, but they were long gone. Don eased off the gas and rolled to a stop behind the barriers. The police officers all jumped out and bolted for the fallen officers.

"Oh shit, oh God, oh…" Don was muttering as he knelt beside Evans. Ryburn and Hines rolled Stokes over, revealing four red spots on his chest. A few feet away, Palmer lay on his stomach halfway under one of the cars making up the barricade. The volunteer firefighter jerked as Colton approached.

"Palmer's alive!" Colton shouted. He set his rifle down and helped move the firefighter onto his back to assess his injuries. Both of his arms had been hit, but Colton didn't see any wounds to his chest or head. If they could stop the bleeding, they might be able to save him.

"You're going to be okay," Colton said calmly.

Palmer, eyes wide, coughed. His lips parted, trying to speak. "Headed toward town… Gotta stop 'em, Chief. Don't let 'em hurt my family."

Colton looked over his shoulder. "Don and Ryburn, you hold security. Hines, help me."

The radio on Colton's vest crackled, but he kept his hands on Palmer's right arm, applying pressure to stop the gushing wound. If an artery had been clipped, they wouldn't have long.

"You're going to be okay. Stay calm and breathe," Colton said.

Palmer tried to look down at his body, but he could barely raise his head. "I'm hit bad, aren't I?"

"Just hang on," Colton said. "Hines, where are you with those supplies?"

Hines opened the medical pack and pulled out combat dressings. "Here, Chief."

"You see anyone out there, Don?" Colton asked. His radio squawked again, but his hands were covered in blood.

"Negative," Don said.

"No more gunshots either," Ryburn added. He was panting heavily behind

them. “Maybe these guys just did a hit and run.”

Another flurry of automatic gunfire sounded in the distance. “Or maybe not,” Colton said.

He moved to look in the direction of the gunfire, but Palmer grabbed his arm, gripping it tightly. “My family,” he gasped. “Please.”

“Watch out,” Hines said, nudging next to Colton. He pulled his hands away from one of the bullet holes and allowed Hines to make a tourniquet. Palmer gritted his teeth against the pain, and as soon as they tightened the second tourniquet, Colton and Hines picked him up as gently as possible and carried him to the Volkswagen. Don jumped into the front seat, and Colton piled into the back with the other officers.

Palmer groaned as the van jerked into gear.

“You’re going to be just fine,” Colton said. “Just stay calm and breathe, man.”

Hines and Rayburn continued to apply bandages to stop the bleeding. Colton wiped his gloves on his tactical pants, smearing blood down the front. He moved between the front and passenger seats for a view of the road.

“You see anything?” Colton asked.

Don shook his head. Scanning the roads, Colton searched for the men responsible, but all he saw were civilians. Men, women, even kids. All terrified. Raiders running wild in Colorado seemed like something out of a graphic novel, not reality. How had it come to this?

Several men on horses emerged on a side street to the right. He recognized two of them as volunteer officers. They were galloping south, probably toward the Mary’s Lake Road barrier.

Don took a left, heading for the Estes Park Medical Center. A Volkswagen bug squealed onto the road ahead of them. Margaret was behind the wheel. When she saw Colton, she waved and leaned on the horn.

“Let me out,” Colton said. Don slammed on the brakes, and as soon as Colton shut the door, he squealed away. Margaret waved Colton toward the Volkswagen Beetle.

“Get in, Chief. I know where these bastards are.”

— 4 —

Raven galloped down the side of Prospect Mountain along a trail that had been used by a construction company. Creek struggled to keep up with the mare, but he was quickly falling behind.

“Faster, girl, faster!” Raven said to Willow, trusting Creek to catch up with them later.

The raiders in the Toyota pickup were driving down Stanley Avenue, firing randomly at civilians, but they didn’t seem to be headed toward any of the town’s supply caches. Was their plan just to kill as many people as possible?

Raven gripped the reins tighter as he urged the horse to hurry. He lost sight of the truck a moment later. Sitting up in the saddle, he searched for the vehicle. A gunshot rang out, followed by a scream. Raven glimpsed the truck turning back onto Stanley Avenue, leaving behind a body in the middle of the street. It was Doug Moore, a local hunter, his rifle still gripped tightly in his limp hand.

If the truck stayed on Stanley, he would intercept them at Prospect Avenue. Bobbing up and down in the saddle, he strained for a better view of the road. The familiar sight of the Estes Park Medical Center rose in the distance, and Raven’s heart clenched.

Now the route the raiders were taking made sense. They weren’t after food; they were headed to the hospital. His sister was on the tail end of a double shift. Allie was there, too, hanging out with Teddy.

“Hell no, you don’t,” Raven said.

He let go of the reins and leaned down to grip Willow around the neck, making himself as aerodynamic as possible. Sucking in the cold wind, he prepared for battle. His ancient ancestors would have done the same thing,

riding low against their horses and visualizing victory against their enemies.

Willow finally reached the bottom of Prospect Mountain and galloped out on Landers Street. Instead of taking the road, Raven directed the horse straight through the backyards of several houses. If she ran fast enough, they would come out at Prospect Avenue right before the Toyota pickup truck.

“Faster, faster!” he shouted.

Willow galloped over the fresh powder, icy breaths coming out in poofs as Raven worked her hard. Far behind them, Creek howled. Several civilians were standing in their front yards, looking toward Prospect Avenue.

“Get back inside!” Raven yelled at them.

Halfway down the street, he tucked his boots tightly into the stirrups, sat up, and unslung his AR-15. The rattle of an old engine grew louder as Willow’s hooves thundered through the fresh snow. They were almost there.

Reins in one hand and rifle in the other, he nudged Willow’s sides. She made a final dash for Prospect Avenue. He was only going to get one chance to stop them. Here he would make his stand. He pulled up on the reins, and Willow slowed to a stop.

Raven quickly dismounted and slapped the horse on her flank. She took off while he ran toward the end of the street where he took a knee behind a boulder, waiting for the perfect shot.

The Toyota screeched around the corner of Stanley Avenue and pulled onto Prospect Avenue. Raven held a breath in his chest and flicked the safety off. From his vantage point, he could see that the driver and passenger both had pistols in their hands. Raven readied his rifle, preparing to fire.

Steady, Sam. Steady…

A man standing in the back of the pickup bed gripped what looked like a mounted M249 SAW. An armored plate surrounded the gun, providing a shield. They all wore bandanas and stocking caps, more like bank robbers than soldiers despite their military hardware.

Raven lined a shot up on the front tire, intending to disable the truck first. He cursed when he saw the armored rim around the tires. He pulled the trigger anyway, firing three rounds into the wheel-well before turning the barrel toward the driver. Several squeezes of the trigger peppered the side of the vehicle and shattered the glass, but the driver powered through the spray, pushing down on the pedal instead of letting up.

“Shit,” Raven muttered. He aimed for the man in the bed of the truck next, but the shots streaked into the sky as the raider ducked down. Before Raven

could fire again, a barrage of gunfire lanced into the boulder.

The driver finally squealed to a stop, allowing the gunner to fire on Raven. Rounds kicked up the dirt as he bolted for new cover. He nearly lost his footing, but kept upright and slid behind a tree just as rounds lanced into the bark on the other side. Taking in a deep breath, he made a run for another tree.

Several shouts followed.

“There, over there!”

More gunfire riddled the tree Raven had just left, and the driver pushed back down on the gas. Keeping his back against the bark, Raven once again waited for a chance. Down the other end of the street, he glimpsed a flash of white and gray fur.

Creek…stay back…

Raven had to end this—and end it right now. He moved his finger back to the trigger, sucked in a breath, and darted around the tree, firing a round as soon as the sights were lined up on the gunner in the truck.

His aim was true, and the round hit the man in the top of the shoulder, jerking him backward. The next shot hit the M249 and knocked the man over the side of the pickup.

The driver sped away, leaving the injured man in the ditch. Raven strode forward, firing several more shots after the vehicle. The rounds shattered the unprotected back window, glass raining down. The passenger broke away the shards with a pistol and then returned fire at Raven.

He rolled for cover and watched from his belly as the truck tore around Fir Avenue and onto Moccasin Circle Drive. The driver made no effort to slow down. A few seconds later, the truck passed the medical center and kept going.

Relief flooded Raven. Sandra and Allie were safe—at least for now. He pushed himself up, panting, and moved toward the ditch. He expected to find a corpse, but instead stepped up to the side of the road and saw the man standing with a pistol raised.

The bullets slammed into Raven’s chest before he could even flinch. The air exploded from his lungs, and he staggered backward a step before crashing onto his butt, losing his rifle in the process.

Gasping for air, he tried to reach over his shoulder for his hatchets, but raising his arms hurt so badly he couldn’t bring his hands up. The shooter climbed out of the ditch, blood dripping down the front of his chest. He

aimed the pistol in a shaky hand and narrowed his blue eyes at Raven.

“Why?” Raven asked. The pain had overloaded his body, and he felt strangely calm. “Why kill civilians?”

The man pulled his bandana away from his face, revealing a silver goatee and a crooked nose. He kept the gun pointed at Raven and shrugged. “They got in our way.”

The rattle of an engine drew his gaze toward the street just as a Volkswagen Beetle turned the corner. Raven could vaguely make out Margaret and Colton behind the windshield.

“Time’s up,” the man said. He aimed his gun at Raven’s head and pulled the trigger. A sharp pain raced through his skull, but the bullet didn’t hurt as bad as he thought it would; more of a sting than anything. The impact his skull made with the concrete was worse. It jolted on the hard surface, blinding him momentarily. He blinked and looked up at the fluttering snowflakes, his vision fading in and out as the VW screeched to a stop.

There was another gunshot, and then a shout.

“Raven!”

Red and black swirled across his vision as he began to slip away. The last thing he heard was the ferocious barking of an Akita.

***

Charlize stood in the air traffic control tower overlooking Charlotte Douglas International Airport. One of the windows was completely shattered, allowing in a cool breeze. Visibility was ideal from the tower, with a three-hundred-sixty-degree view of the city, and what she saw chilled her to the core.

There were over two hundred thousand people surrounding the airport. Many of them had come for safety—others had simply come for a meal. But everyone on the other side of the fence was a potential threat. The violence beyond the walls surrounding the survival center was spreading like a wildfire, with desperate civilians fighting to get through the twenty-five gates around the perimeter.

Charlize couldn’t help but feel somewhat responsible. Her flyover seemed to have lit the match that set the fire off. Now the entire zone had broken into chaos. Captain Harris was barking orders into a handheld two-way radio. At

the edge of the rooftops below, snipers were set up along with their spotters.

"They don't have enough bullets to keep the civilians back if those gates fall, do they?" she asked.

"I've ordered them to only shoot if fired upon, and to retreat if the gates fall and the masses flood in. Our job is to help these people, not kill them."

Honorable, Charlize thought to herself, but she also had to ask the inevitable. "And what happens to the supplies and generators if the gates fall? I've been given strict orders to protect them at all costs."

Harris stroked his jaw. "You'd have me slaughter people to protect these supplies?"

A tense moment followed. She wasn't used to making decisions like this. Dropping bombs and firing missiles at enemies was one thing, but killing American citizens was entirely different. Even if they were shooting at her.

"For now, we have to do everything to ensure the integrity of the perimeter," Charlize said.

"I'm trying, ma'am, but more and more people are coming in from the city by the minute. I've ordered the gates closed, which means they are going to be even more pissed off."

Charlize raised her binoculars at the hangar that had been turned into a makeshift medical center. Fans were set up in the open doorway, blowing air on the civilians. Soldiers had moved into position outside, holding sentry.

"Gang members have been trying to sneak in," Harris said. "If any of them get inside, they could sabotage the gates and open them for their buddies. Then it would really be a bloodbath."

He looked back out the broken window and shook his head. "It would only take one mistake or a rusted pickup truck packed full of explosives to take down those gates. I saw that happen in Afghanistan."

Albert cleared his throat. "Ma'am, I think we should get you back inside the EOC."

"And do what?" Charlize asked. "We're just as safe up here."

Charlize raised her binoculars back toward gates nineteen and twenty. They were just three blocks away from the fences. Close enough that she could hear the civilians on the other side of the fence chanting *We want food! We want food!*

Harris wagged his head and looked over at Charlize. "Everyone's riled up because of the chopper," he said. "I've got to do something, and soon."

"I'm truly sorry," Charlize said. She wasn't sure if she was completely

responsible for the riots, but the flyover had definitely made things worse.

"I'm sorry too, because there's no way in hell I can authorize a mission outside the gates now, sir. I've already lost a lot of good men out there," Harris said to Albert.

"I'll go by myself," Albert replied.

Charlize brought her binos back up and zoomed in on gate nineteen. Two guard towers rose above the fences, and the soldiers inside had angled their machine guns down at the crowd. The civilians pounded against the metal gate, beating it like a drum with fists and feet, chanting and screaming at the top of their lungs.

A gunshot rang out, and the soldier in the turret to the right ducked down. The other guard opened fire on the crowd.

"God damn it," Harris snarled. He brought his radio back to his lips. "Eagle 2, I said no shooting!"

"They were fired upon, sir," came the response.

Harris exhaled a breath and said, "For now tell everyone to hold their fire. We do not want to piss off that hornet's nest."

"Little too late for that," Albert said.

Across the airfield, the crowd surged, slamming into the walls and fences in anger.

Albert stood so close to Charlize that his arm touched her side. "Ma'am," he whispered, "this is madness. I have to find my sister and get her out of here. She's…sick."

Charlize lowered the binos and pivoted away from the ledge. The snipers positioned on the rooftop all kept their barrels angled at the crowd. Albert hadn't told her much about Jacqueline. She'd tried to picture a female version of Big Al and failed.

"What's wrong with her?" she asked.

Before he could answer, another shot rang out in the distance and the roar of the crowd surged into a deafening blast.

The civilians who had made it inside the SC stood on the tarmac below, watching the gates. Many of them had their own weapons. Even if Harris ordered his men to stand down and retreat, it was possible those civilians might put up a fight. One way or another, a major battle seemed inevitable.

If the situation here was indicative of what was happening in the other survival centers, Charlize wasn't sure America had a chance of recovering.

Insanity is doing the same thing over and over and getting the same

results, she thought.

“Captain Harris, how did you handle situations like this in Afghanistan?

“Once, we were forced to kill civilians to get a crowd back. It only made things worse. The next day we were hit by two suicide bombers. That’s why I’m trying to keep my men from stirring the pot.”

Charlize looked down at the hangars. She didn’t know how much food was stored there, but it wasn’t going to do any good just sitting there. If it meant getting them out of this mess without bloodshed, it’d be worth it.

She looked back out over the city. She couldn’t see the railways or the idle trains, but she knew they were out there.

“You know anything about the rail systems in this area?” she asked Harris.

The captain shook his head. “Not really, ma’am. We get most of our supplies from truck convoys. It’s dangerous and slow moving, but that’s all we have. Why?”

“Curiosity. If we could get the rails running again, we would have a form of transportation that could move a lot of supplies and people without fear of attack. Unlike the highways.”

“True, but right now I’m more worried about protecting what we have. Got any ideas?”

She nodded, returning her attention to the hangars below.

“I’m all ears, Secretary Montgomery.”

“We need to get the word out that at nightfall we’re going to bring a container of food outside the gates to be distributed fairly,” Charlize said.

Harris smirked. “One container to feed two hundred thousand people? Ma’am, all due respect but we’ve hardly got enough for the twenty thousand already inside the gates.”

“We have enough for this,” Charlize said, keeping her tone polite. “It will buy us time to bring in more supplies—and give us a distraction.”

Harris stroked his jaw again. “A distraction?”

“Yes, so Albert and a small team can escape the walls and go look for his sister.”

Albert’s hopeful gaze flitted to Harris, then back to Charlize. “But what about you, ma’am?” he asked.

“I’ll stay here and help Harris get things under control. I want to make sure no one dies for a can of beans.”

The radio crackled, and Harris held it up so they could all hear.

“Sir, gate nineteen isn’t going to hold much longer.”

Harris sighed and pushed the radio to his lips. “Washington, I want you to pull a shipping container of MREs and get it ready to drive out through the gates for distribution. Announce it over the loud speakers. At 1900 hours, we’ll use a flatbed to take it outside the gates.”

He ended the transmission and shook his head. “I sure hope this is going to work, Madam Secretary.”

“Me too,” she replied. “Me too.”

***

The doors to the emergency room exploded open, and Sergeant Don Aragon and Officer Sam Hines pushed a gurney inside. Sandra Spears recognized the patient immediately by his bushy beard. It was volunteer firefighter John Palmer, one of the nicest and most genuine men in Estes Park. Blood dripped off the edge of the gurney, splattering the floor.

“We’ve got a gunshot victim!” yelled Doctor Duffy.

“He’s been shot four times,” Hines announced. “Twice in the left arm and twice in the right.”

Palmer, still conscious, groaned as they wheeled him into the emergency room. He tried to raise his head, but Doctor Duffy eased it back down.

“Don’t move,” Duffy said calmly.

Don and Hines were anything but calm. Both men, pale and covered in blood, were breathing heavily.

“He’s lost a lot of blood,” Don wheezed. “I tried to stop it. How the hell did those assholes slip past Colton? Damn it, we lost two men today! When Gail hears about this—”

“Now’s not the time,” Duffy said.

The doctor made a cursory inspection of the wounds, but even from a few paces away, Sandra could tell it was bad. The blanket covering Palmer was soaked.

“We need to get him into surgery,” Duffy said. He waved the team into the other room and, working together, the three men helped move Palmer onto the operating table.

Sandra and Jen, the only two nurses on duty, were already dressed in their operating gowns. Gloves and facemasks were in short supply, but with this much blood, Sandra decided to tap into their supplies.

“We’ve got to get back out there, Doctor,” Don said. “The town is under attack.”

Hines and Don turned to leave, but Duffy called out after them. “What kind of attack?”

Don paused in the open doorway. Keeping his voice low, he said, “Raiders, Doc. They hit one of our checkpoints. Alex Stokes and Mike Evans are dead, and we saw other bodies on the drive here.”

“Better get ready for more injured,” Hines said. “This is what happens when we don’t have strong leadership.”

Duffy looked to Jen. “We need Doctor Newton back here. Go get the word out and then get back here.”

She nodded and took off after Hines and Don, while Sandra stepped up to the table with Duffy.

“Just you and me, Spears,” he said. She could hear the weary smile in his voice even if she couldn’t see it behind his mask.

She worked fast to get a catheter in Palmer’s external jugular vein and connect the IV while Duffy grabbed his instruments. By the time she had finished Palmer was losing consciousness, which was probably for the best. The last thing they needed was to have their patient flopping around on the table. She exposed his chest and quickly placed ECG electrodes to monitor his heart rhythm.

“My family,” he whispered to Sandra. The veins in Palmer’s neck bulged.

“Your family is fine,” she replied. She infused a liter of normal saline, talking as she worked. “Please, don’t move. Just try to stay calm, okay?”

Palmer’s eyelids slowly closed and Duffy cut away Palmer’s shirt to expose his wounds. The officers had already applied a tourniquet on both arms, which had probably saved his life, but the work had been done hastily, and Sandra had a feeling Duffy would want new ones.

“Ulnar artery was clipped. I need to resect it, but first let’s use the BP cuffs to cut off the blood flow,” Duffy said.

She helped remove the old tourniquets. Blood gushed out of the wounds, and Palmer’s chest heaved with a ragged breath. Working together, Duffy and Sandra quickly used blood pressure cuffs on both arms, inflating them to cut off the flow almost instantly.

“Does he have a femoral pulse?” Duffy said. He went to work on stitching up the torn artery while Sandra tried to stabilize Palmer. Her gloved fingers, slippery with blood, searched for the pulse in Palmer’s femoral artery. Weak,

but still palpable at the same rate as the heart monitor's rapid beeping. She tried not to let her thoughts distract her, but she couldn't help picturing Palmer's wife and kids waiting for him to come home.

She knew that feeling all too well these days.

Allie was safe inside the medical center, hanging out as usual in Teddy's room, but Raven was out there in the thick of things. She had a feeling he was hunting down whoever shot Palmer.

Her damn fool brother was always trying to play the hero while she worked to save the innocent people caught in the crossfire. One of these days, he was going to be the one on the table. She had pulled so many double shifts at the hospital she barely had a chance to talk to him about the guilt he was carrying like a millstone around his neck. It was going to get him killed.

She switched to Palmer's right leg and finally found the femoral pulse. It was weak, but it was there. Palmer was a strong man, but even the strongest of men would have a hard time surviving his wounds. If he made it through the surgery, he would still have an uphill battle against infection. She relayed her findings to Duffy as he continued working.

"Looks like his right humerus is shattered, and so is his left radius," Duffy said. "Damn, they really did a number on…"

Duffy's words trailed off as he focused on the task at hand. They worked together methodically, Sandra passing instruments, hanging more IV fluids and monitoring vitals while Duffy repaired the shredded artery and removed a bullet that had lodged in Palmer's bicep. Ten minutes after Palmer had been dropped off, shouts rang out in the hospital lobby. Doctor Newton pushed open the doors to the emergency room, panting as he jogged at the head of a gurney.

"We've got more gunshot victims," he said.

Duffy looked up. "How many?"

"Five." Newton met Sandra's gaze. "One of them is your brother."

— 5 —

“General, we’ve got company!” Carson shouted, jolting Fenix out of his uneasy doze.

Fenix jumped out of his chair and grabbed for his M4, accidentally knocking the gun over. It clanked on the floor. He threw on his coat, laced his boots, and then plucked the carbine off the ground.

Nearly stumbling in the darkness, he hurried outside the cabin into the chilled night. Carson and a dozen other Sons of Liberty soldiers had been hanging out around a small campfire, but it had been doused recently. The men fanned out across the snow in the waning glow of the dying embers.

Fenix scanned the horizon above the pine trees towering over the buildings, but he didn’t see any suspicious lights in the starry sky.

“Where?” he shouted to Carson.

“On the road! It’s one of ours!”

Fenix charged across the camp, still emerging from the fog of sleep. They weren’t under attack from above, as he’d feared, but a vehicle was making its way down the road. He followed his men toward the checkpoint they’d established at the southern edge of the camp. A dozen soldiers were already there with their rifles raised at a pickup truck rattling down the road. Fenix stopped a few feet behind them, sucking in icy breaths. He was out of shape, and it was getting too damn cold up in these mountains. He needed to step his game up and set an example for his men.

“Is it Butzen?” Fenix asked when he’d caught his breath.

Carson shrugged. “Not sure. Can’t see.”

The truck puttered down the pass and stopped about one hundred feet from the barriers. Flashlight beams painted the pickup, and Fenix saw two men sitting inside. A dozen rifles followed the rays of light while the soldiers

waited for the driver and passenger to identify themselves.

“I thought each team was sent out with three men?” Fenix said, turning to Carson.

“They were, sir. Something must have happened to the third.”

A large man dressed in a camo green coat and black stocking cap hopped out of the cab, leaving the engine running. Flashlight beams illuminated the rough face of Aaron Butzen, one of Fenix’s most loyal soldiers.

“I sure hope you got Raven’s corpse in the bed of that truck,” Fenix called out. He stepped around his men and made his way to the checkpoint.

The other soldiers all lowered their weapons and several moved the barrier out of the way. The others returned to finish off their supper, leaving Carson and Fenix with Butzen and his passenger—a man named Rich Blake, if Fenix remembered correctly.

“Where’s your other comrade?” Fenix asked.

“Shot,” Butzen replied. He hocked spit onto the snow and wiped his mustache with a sleeve.

“And left behind?” Carson said.

Butzen nodded. “Didn’t have a choice.”

“You better have a good goddamn story and an excuse for not bringing me Raven Spears,” Fenix said. He zipped his collar up to his chin to keep out the chill.

“The roads east of the Rocky Mountains are pretty well blocked off, and Estes Park is dug in with multiple defenses,” Butzen said. “We also scoped out that FEMA camp near Loveland and then proceeded to Fort Collins. It was there that Maxon took a sniper bullet to the forehead. Blew his fucking brains out all over the road, man. It was nasty.”

“Never saw the shooter,” Rich added. He snorted out an icy breath.

“Damn shame,” Fenix said a bit too quickly. His mind was already on other matters. “That FEMA camp. How well guarded is it?”

Rich shrugged. “About fifty National Guard soldiers and some wannabe cops. I think we could take ’em. Thing is, that sniper wasn’t part of the camp. There are vigilantes in that area. Makes things even more dangerous.”

“Estes Park is probably a better target,” Butzen said. “We intercepted a few refugees who claimed the town got a government supply drop.”

Fenix narrowed his eyes. “That’s where Raven Spears lives, isn’t it?”

“Yes, sir,” Carson replied.

The intel seemed too good to be true. Raven Spears was number one on

Fenix's hit list, and if the town had supplies, then it made Estes Park a plum target. He considered putting together a platoon of men to take the town, but before that happened, they needed more information.

Motion in the sky distracted Fenix. He squinted at a light crossing the horizon to the east of the mountains. Looked like an aircraft, which meant trouble.

"Shit," Fenix muttered. He turned to his men. "Get everyone to their stations!"

***

Static crackled over the radio with a chilling message from the FEMA camp outside Loveland.

"We're under attack by an unknown number of hostiles," reported the operator. "To anyone listening, please stay where you are and do not attempt to approach the gates until we've given the all-clear."

Colton shook his head and leaned over a table covered in maps, sweat beading his forehead despite the chilly room. A drop plopped over the marker for the Lawn Lake trailhead, spreading out like a miniature lake over the paper. That was where this madness had started back in September, when Raven and Colton had set off on the trailhead to find Melissa Stone.

So much had happened in the past month, and Colton feared that society would only continue to crumble. Desperation brought out the worst of humanity. Once again there was a killer loose in Estes Park, the police were down two more officers, and three civilians were dead. To top of it off, Palmer was in critical condition and Raven was unconscious in the hospital. But his people weren't the only ones facing violence. The FEMA camp sounded like it had even bigger problems.

Hurried footfalls rang out in the hallway, and Colton looked up as Lindsey entered the room, Don right behind her.

"Those new refugees are all rounded up and waiting for us to talk to them in Bond Park," Lindsey said.

Don pulled off his cowboy hat. "We got two guards on them. None of them are going anywhere until we figure out what's going on. But you already know my opinion…"

"Mayor Andrews and Administrator Feagen are on their way," Margaret

said. She was waiting in the hallway, mascara bleeding down her cheeks from sobbing. Mike Evans had been her brother-in-law.

Colton brought his hands up from the war table and folded his arms across his chest. He was even more convinced now they were going to need allies. People like John Kirkus of Storm Mountain, or Sheriff Gerrard. They were all facing the same enemies these days, and the only way he could see to survive was to join forces.

He exhaled and prepared himself for the conversation with the mayor and her second in command. Things were going to get heated, and Colton was thankful there weren't more officers in the room. Tension and emotions were already running high. Colton had sent almost everyone to guard the roads or look for the raider Raven had injured. At least Raven had taken his advice about wearing a vest; he'd taken three rounds to the chest that afternoon, and bruised ribs were a hell of a lot better than bullet holes.

"Where are we at in our search for the shooter?" Colton asked.

"Last sighting of our suspect was here." Don pointed at the map, and Colton drew a red line from Riverside Drive to Trout Haven Fishing Pond. He dropped his pen and balled his hand in anger.

"How the hell has this guy slipped through our nets?" he growled in a voice that would have given Jake a run for his money. "This bastard's managed to get from the east side of Prospect Mountain all the way to the west."

No one else spoke, and Colton took that as a cue to continue. "We've lost five people today. *Five*. With another five injured."

Margaret hovered in the doorway, wringing her hands, and Lindsey brushed a strand of red hair over an ear without meeting Colton's eyes. Don simply stared at the map. His left hand, still covered in Palmer's blood, was shaking by his side. Colton closed his eyes for a second and then snapped them open. Now was not the time to take out his frustration on anyone else. They were all in this together.

"I'm sorry," Colton said. "I'm just…"

"It's okay, Chief, we're all shaken up. But we will find this guy," Lindsey said. "Just a matter of time."

Colton reached for a toothpick from his chest pocket. "I want him alive. Get the word out to everyone on the search. We need to know who this guy's working with."

Margaret moved away from the doorway as Mayor Andrews and Tom

Feagen walked into the room.

“I’ve got the situation under control,” Colton said, trying to cut off the interrogation before it began.

“We’ve lost three civilians and two officers,” Feagen said. “Tell me how you have the situation under control.”

Don remained quiet, his eyes flicking from face to face as everyone waited for Colton to answer.

“I told you raiders were coming, Tom. I told everyone. We’re lucky they didn’t hit us harder. So before you decide to throw me under the bus again, remember that this is just the beginning.” He turned on the radio for everyone to listen to the messages coming from the FEMA camp.

“We’re not the only ones that are dealing with violence,” Colton said. “We all need to remain calm and united.”

Lindsey, hands on her hips, cleared her throat. “He’s right. This attack was just the first salvo. They were testing us and trying to strike terror into everyone that lives here. My guess is that the raiders that hit us are also the ones testing the defenses at that FEMA camp. These guys were organized and smart. They’re not just some random gang.”

Colton nodded, impressed, and then scrutinized the map for a moment, looking at all the arteries leading into and out of the heart of the town.

“We’re going to need help protecting Estes Park,” Colton said. “That’s why I’m heading to the FEMA camp once they give the all clear. If Lindsey is correct, then maybe the soldiers there will see this as an opportunity to join forces and fight against a common enemy. I’m also looking into other allies, like John Kirkus and his group on Storm Mountain.”

Gail took off her green-rimmed glasses and rubbed her eyes before putting them back on. “You know I’m not a huge fan of Kirkus, but I’m not opposed to reaching out to him. What I am unsure of is you leaving Estes Park. Sounds dangerous if you ask me, Chief.”

“What choice do we have? Those raiders are going to come back, and we’re going to need allies to help repel them. If we’re careful with our supplies, we will get through the winter. But not if we’re attacked again, and especially not if we continue to fight amongst ourselves,” Colton said. “I’m going to talk to those refugees, and then I’m going to hunt down the shooter myself. By this time tomorrow, I hope to be on the road to Loveland.”

Gail and Feagen both nodded in agreement, to Colton’s surprise. He tapped his knuckles on the desk and walked away from the table before they could

question him on anything else.

He motioned for Lindsey and Margaret to follow him out the door, leaving Don behind with the administrators. Colton knew it was dangerous leaving the trio together, but he had a dozen other things to worry about right now besides them stabbing him in the back. Don had been acting shifty all morning, and Colton still intended to confront him about what happened at the roadblock. But not in front of an audience. Stepping through the doorway, he paused in the hallway and turned slightly.

"You're welcome to come with me to the FEMA camp, Mayor Andrews. To see with your own eyes what we're up against this winter," Colton said.

"I'm not sure…" she said.

"Sleep on it, ma'am," he said as he continued into the hallway.

Lindsey and Margaret followed him away from the conference room. Colton handed over his walkie-talkie to Margaret and then stopped outside the door to the police station. She stuck her hands inside her Estes Park Police Department sweatshirt. The hood was over her dark hair, casting a shadow over her features. Colton could see the purple bags under her bloodshot eyes.

"I'm sorry about Mike," he said.

She smiled and pulled the hood down. "I'll be here throughout the night, monitoring things. Be careful out there, Marcus."

"I will. Thanks."

Colton didn't like leaving her to pull a night shift, but they needed her now more than ever. Margaret was the only person that could help Colton communicate with his other officers. She had become the heart of the department.

"Let's go talk to these people," Colton said to Lindsey.

They left town hall and set off across the parking lot to Bond Park, where the refugees sat huddled around two fires burning inside rusted barrels from the junkyard. Colton motioned to the two men guarding them to lower their weapons. He wanted the refugees to feel comfortable while he talked to them. They'd be more likely to tell the truth that way. He was still reeling over the refugee from Laramie that claimed she was a nurse. Turned out she was a receptionist at a car dealership.

"As many of you know, there was a shooting today about the same time you all rolled into town," Colton said, not wasting any time. "Now I'd call that one hell of a coincidence."

The group's apparent leader, a tall woman with the build of a long distance runner, took a few steps forward with her hands in her tight fitting jacket. She was about Mayor Andrews' age, with crow's feet around her eyes and streaks of gray in her hair.

"Sir, I can assure you we had nothing to do with the shootings. We came here for help. The FEMA camp is hell, and we heard you had supplies," she said. "Please, please help us."

The desperation in her voice tugged at Colton's heart, but he'd gotten used to hearing stories like hers from people trying to seek refuge within Estes Park. These people would do almost anything to get in. He'd even had a woman offer her body if Colton would shelter her and her son.

"What's your name?" Colton asked.

"Jennie Song, sir. I'm begging you. Please do not send us away. We will work. We will do whatever's asked of us. We may not be doctors or engineers, but we can contribute."

She took another step forward and pointed to the man on her left. "Wilbur Smith here is an expert locksmith, and his brother Brett Gilmore knows how to can food."

Colton raised a hand to stop her, but Jennie kept talking. She pointed to a couple standing behind her. "This is Todd and Susan Sanders. Todd is former military and Susan is a police officer. They can both help protect the town."

"I'm a good hunter with a bow and a rifle," Todd said.

Susan nodded firmly. "I'll stand guard all night if I have to. Please, just give us a chance."

Colton could feel Lindsey looking at him from the side, but he kept his focus on Jennie. There was something about her that seemed sincere. He felt the same way about Susan and Todd. He could really use the help securing the borders if they were who they said they were, and while his gut told him these people weren't responsible for the attack, he had no way of being sure. It was too risky.

"Look, I get that you're all capable of helping out, but we hardly have enough resources to get through the winter," Colton said. He pulled his leather gloves out of his pocket and put them on, looking north for a moment at the area the Stanley Hotel had once stood. "I'm sorry, but you can't stay."

A girl no older than ten made her way up next to Jennie. "We can fight," she said. "We can help you get the bad people that shot your friends today."

Jennie put her arm around the young girl, who reminded Colton of his

daughter, Risa. Her voice, her innocent yet feisty demeanor, even her frizzled hair in untidy braids under a colorful stocking cap.

"This is Sarah," Jennie said. "She's quite the little firebrand."

Sarah smiled at Colton despite the fact he'd just told her they had to leave Estes Park.

"Her parents were both killed by raiders outside of Loveland. Maybe even the same raiders that killed your folks here," Jennie continued. "Sir, we didn't have anything to do with what happened today—and we can help you stop it from happening again."

Colton kept his eyes on Sarah, picturing his daughter standing there instead. Could he really send her back out there to face the same fate as her parents? Jesus, how had it come to this? His position of power frightened the hell out of him. What if Risa were in this girl's place, and a man like Don stood in Colton's shoes?

He let out a long sigh and flexed his fingers in his gloves. "I need to think about this. In the meantime, you can all stay here for the night. We have fires to keep you warm, and I'll have someone bring you soup."

"Thank you," Jennie said. "You're a good man, Chief Colton."

Colton turned with Lindsey, who greeted his gaze with a smile.

"There's nothing to be happy about, kiddo," he said as they walked away. Pulling out his Colt .45 from the holster, he said, "We have another killer to catch."

***

Raven dreamed of the Cherokee spirit world.

Six small humanoid nature spirits called the Yunwi Tsunsdi' danced around him under the glow of the moon. Normally the creatures were invisible, but these had decided to show themselves. They were squawking and clicking their tongues at him. Dressed in colorful outfits with necklaces made from bone and beads, the dwarf-like spirits were trying to tell him something. They shook ceremonial turtle shell rattles, the clicking sound echoing through the quiet night.

In his dream, he was sitting cross-legged in a field of prairie grass that seemed to go on and on. The blades whipped back and forth in the breeze under a full moon. The heat of a raging fire warmed his face, the crackle of

burning wood joining the din.

Creek sat on his haunches a few feet away, grinning at the Yunwi Tsunsdi'. Willow was there too, but the horse didn't seem interested in the dancing or the camp fire. She kept her head down, chomping on grass near an oak tree.

This wasn't Colorado, but wherever his dream was taking place, he didn't recognize it.

"Where am I?" Raven asked. "What do you want?"

Something furry brushed against Raven's left hand, and he looked over to see a rabbit looking up at him, an all-too-human grin on its face. Not a real rabbit, then, but the trickster Jistu. Raven jerked his hand away. He looked back to the six humanoids with the bodies of children and the faces of adults, still circling around the campfire with their haunted eyes on Raven.

Thunder boomed in the distance, and the clear sky transformed as bulging clouds suddenly rolled across the skyline, bellies swollen with lightning and rain. The largest of the masses began to sculpt itself into a towering figure, and Raven's eyes widened at the sight of a Thunderer, a storm spirit.

The Yunwi Tsunsdi' halted and lowered their turtle shell rattles to stare at the sky. The rabbit trickster followed their gazes, grin folding away and leaving behind two buck teeth.

Raven looked up as the Thunderer took the shape of an ancient Cherokee warrior dressed in a leather loincloth with a plate of bone chainmail over broad chest muscles. Braided hair with feathers intertwined blew in the wind behind the man's stony face. A quiver of arrows and an intricately decorated bow shaft were slung over his wide, muscular shoulders.

"Raven," the warrior boomed, "You must let go of your guilt."

Emerald lightning flashed through the clouds, and thunder answered. A brilliant strike sizzled through the sky and speared into the fields.

Willow looked up from her meal, and Creek nudged up against Raven.

The warrior raised the battle-axe in the sky and yelled, "Your guilt consumes you like a snake consumes a mouse. Inevitably, it will swallow you whole. You must move on to have any hope of surviving the coming storm!"

Apparitions of Billy Franks, Nathan Sardetti, Melissa Stone, Jake Englewood, and the dead officers at the checkpoint near Lake Estes joined the Thunderer in the cloudscape. The raid in North Korea that started it all played out in shades of gray and black, each bullet punctuated by lightning. Raven flinched and looked away, but the faces of the people he'd failed to

save still haunted his mind. The warrior in the sky was right—the guilt was eating him alive.

"I can't," Raven finally said. "I don't know how."

The Thunderer reared back, his long hair flowing behind his head like a waterfall. He let out a bellow that shook the clouds. Rain surged, pounding the earth. Jistu and Creek both huddled next to Raven, and the Yunwi Tsunsdi' wiped the water from their wrinkled faces.

"You can't control the destiny of others," the warrior said. "It was their time."

"Why them?" Raven asked. "Why not me? Why do I always survive when better people die?"

Another network of lightning surged across the skyline, and the boom of thunder rattled the muddy ground. The chill rain came down in sheets, pecking his skin like tiny ice needles.

After the thunder faded, the warrior said, "The chain of events on Earth is set in motion by the Creator, and the Creator only. If a life is lost, it is not your fault. If you continue to dwell on the past, you won't survive the future, and the future needs you like a flower needs water."

Raven had learned this lesson long ago, but for some reason it was always hard to accept. He always wanted to control things, to fix them. His blood was a mixture of Sioux and Cherokee, and the Sioux side compelled him to try and change destiny.

But it was time to start listening to the Cherokee side. It was the only way he was going to survive and keep his family safe.

"I hear you, Thunderer," Raven shouted. He pushed himself up, feet squishing in the mud. He looked up and raised his hands into the sky. "The past is the past, and the future is the future. All I can do is continue fighting without guilt, without regret."

"There will be things you can't change, Raven, and before the storm passes you will lose more that you hold dear to your beating heart, but a warrior never gives up fighting. A warrior doesn't look over their back at the bodies they've left behind."

The Thunderer suddenly turned away, and the rain ceased. The clouds melted into a clear, jeweled sky. When Raven looked back to the smoldering fire, the Yunwi Tsunsdi' had vanished. Jistu was gone, too, leaving Raven alone with Creek and Willow.

A distant voice called out in the quiet night. For a moment Raven thought

it was the Thunderer again, but this voice was kind and familiar. A woman, calling his name.

The fields and sky vanished, replaced by a bright bank of recessed lights in the ceiling. Raven blinked and then reached down to feel his chest. It hurt to breathe, but he couldn't remember why.

"You're okay, Sam," said the same kind voice.

He tilted his head and found his sister standing next to him. He focused on Sandra's freckled nose as she talked. A tear streaked down her face, and she used her shoulder to brush it away.

"Why do you always have to be so brave?" she asked. "Why do you always have to be the one to get hurt?"

"I'm fine," he muttered, trying to look down at his chest.

"You're lucky as hell, Sam. The ballistic vest stopped the rounds, but you have a bruised rib, a mild concussion, and you lost a hunk of your ear from the bullet that was meant for your brain."

Raven didn't feel any pain when he touched the bandage covering his right ear. That seemed like a small blessing, given the circumstances.

"Did Colton find the guy?" he asked, wincing as he tried to sit up. "That hurt."

Sandra reached out to stop him from moving. "Sit still. You're going to be here for a few days while the swelling goes down."

"Did you find the shooter?"

"Not yet."

Raven sat up farther, gritting his teeth against the pain. "How long have I been out?"

"Ten hours, maybe a bit more," Sandra said.

Memories continued to flood his mind. He recalled the sting of the bullet, the chase on horseback, and Creek's frantic barking. His heart kicked. Raven searched the room for Creek, but the Akita was nowhere in sight.

"Where's my damn dog?"

"Creek is with Allie. You need to rest, Sam." She heaved a long sigh. "You've about used up all of your lives, I think. No more adventures for a few days. You need to heal."

Raven swung his legs over the side of the bed and ripped the IV catheter out of his arm.

"Sam, what are you doing?" Sandra shouted.

"I've already wasted enough time. I have to track this son of a bitch down

before he can kill anyone else.”

Sandra grabbed Raven’s arm, but he pulled away. “Sis, you can’t keep trying to turn me into someone I’m not. If there’s a fight out there, I need to help. I can’t rest. I can’t stop.”

They locked eyes, and Raven saw the sadness in his sister’s gaze. Sandra was a healer at heart, and she didn’t want him to get hurt. But this was the reality of the world they were living in now, and it needed people like him. Fighters. Killers. His dream had shown him the truth, and helped him realize he had to stop harboring the guilt of the past or it would get him killed.

The Thunderer had also said he would lose another loved one.

He had to prove the warrior spirit wrong.

— 6 —

Charlize watched from the observation tower as the gates were sealed all around the survival center. The public address system continued playing the message about a food delivery, keeping the masses at bay for now.

She watched as the final gate was closed three blocks away. A second metal gate was moved into place, creating an additional barrier just in case someone got any bright ideas about driving a pickup truck packed full of explosives forward.

“It’s done,” Harris said. “Now let’s see if your plan works.”

They made their way back down into the EOC hangar, where Albert began final preparations for his trip outside the walls. Decked out in matte black body armor, a helmet to match, and night vision goggles, he looked like he was about to raid a terrorist compound. He palmed a magazine into a suppressed M4 and looked through the scope.

Charlize thought about going out there with him, but Albert would never agree to it. Besides, she had Ty waiting for her back at Constellation. She’d promised her boy she would be back within a day or two, max, and she needed to return to Command to report on the state of SC Charlotte. Her job was to keep SCs like this one running. The future of America depended on places like this.

Two Army Rangers, outfitted with same armor as Albert plus additional Beretta M9s, joined them, followed shortly by Captain Harris.

“You ready to rock ’n roll, boss?” one of the men said.

Albert dipped his helmet politely. “When you are, brother.”

“Two men isn’t much, but it’s all I can spare,” Harris said. “Make no mistake, though, Corporal Van Dyke and Sergeant Flint are two of my best.”

“I appreciate their help,” Albert said.

Charlize took a second to scrutinize both men. They were both in their mid-thirties and muscular. Van Dyke sported a mustache, but Flint was clean shaven. They had the confident, capable look of career soldiers. She hoped they were as good as Harris promised.

“Captain Harris!” a voice shouted from across the room.

Lieutenant Washington, the second in command at the SC, hurried over from a table of radio equipment and cleared his throat.

“Tell me you don’t have more bad news,” Harris said.

Washington stopped and straightened his back. “President Diego is on the horn and wants to speak to Secretary Montgomery.”

Charlize frowned. She already knew what the president was going to say, and she really didn’t have time for a scolding. A young female officer stood at the radio equipment, holding a receiver. Charlize took it from her and brought it to her lips.

“Hello, Mr. President, this is Charlize.”

“I sure hope you have a good explanation for the stunt you pulled this morning. I’m told you created quite the ruckus on your flight in,” Diego said.

Charlize glanced over at Albert, who was watching her.

“I’m sorry, sir. We didn’t realize things were so bad here, which is another reason I’m glad I came. You put me in charge of the survival centers, and seeing this one up close and personal has been a very sobering experience. I hope that I can use what I’ve learned here to ensure the other SCs run more smoothly.”

“Remind me why you’re in North Carolina again? There were other, closer, SCs to tour.” His tone sounded frustrated, and although he didn’t come straight out and say it, Charlize had a feeling Diego knew she had picked Charlotte for another reason.

Albert continued to hold her gaze. He trusted her, and she wouldn’t throw him under the bus.

“I wanted to see with my own eyes how the SCs are doing so I can adapt our strategy,” she said firmly. “I heard that Harris was the best, so I came here.”

If Diego did know about Albert’s sister, he didn’t say anything. He simply let out a sigh and said, “Well, I hope you’ve seen enough, because I need you back at Constellation. We’ve got a situation.”

Situation, Charlize knew, was a codeword for *classified*, so she didn’t bother asking for details.

“I’ll get in the air as soon as it’s safe, sir,” Charlize said.

The connection severed, and Charlize walked back to Harris and the other men. Although she was anxious to go home to Ty, she really didn’t want to leave Albert behind.

“I’ve got to return to Command,” she said. “Let’s get started.”

Harris nodded and gestured to Washington, who had returned to another table. Throughout the space, officers, civilians, and foreign aid workers were sitting at their desks and stations. They would be at it through the night, fighting to keep the people here alive for another day.

Charlize had toured much of the SC earlier, and had seen how the civilians lucky enough to make it inside were living. The concourses were set up as mass housing units, and the hangars were too, with heat coming from the generators brought up from southern Florida. Food and water was distributed twice a day, but supplies were running out, and new supplies were difficult to move. The more she thought about it, the more she was convinced that the railways were the way to jumpstart the recovery efforts. They were faster, safer, and more efficient.

Seeing these people living like rats was heartbreaking, and now she was headed back to Constellation where food, water, and everyday comforts like a warm shower were still the norm. But at least she was heading back there with an idea to help these people.

“Ma’am, is everything okay?” Albert asked. “Do you want me to put this mission on hold and return with you to Command?”

She shook her head. “Absolutely not. After you find your sister, I’ll send a bird to get you both.”

That got Harris’s attention. He glared at them, showing his disapproval. “I hope you’re not planning another daylight flyby,” Harris said.

“I’ll have the bird packed full of medical supplies,” Charlize said. “Get me a list of what you need the most, and I’ll have it delivered for you. Under cover of night, of course.”

Harris nodded, but he still didn’t seem mollified.

“Do we have a problem?” she asked, one eyebrow raised.

“Permission to speak freely, ma’am?”

Charlize hesitated before granting it with a jerk of her chin.

“I heard about Lieutenant Dupree and his men,” Harris began. “Word gets around, even now. I’m a father myself, so I understand why you sent those men to their deaths in the search for your son.”

She opened her mouth to interrupt, to somehow justify Dupree's sacrifice, but she couldn't find the words. Harris was right, and the guilt continued to eat at her conscience.

"I'm not happy about sending my boys into a warzone to find a single civilian," Harris continued. "No disrespect meant, Officer Randall, but a lot of people have families out there. We've all lost people, and we'll all lose more."

Albert looked down at his boots, his eyes gleaming with emotion. He'd finally given up wearing his charred and tattered Air Jordans. "Sir, I don't—"

"The trailer is ready to move," Washington announced, interrupting at the perfect moment.

Harris brought his fingers to his lips and let out an impressive whistle that got everyone's attention. Fifty faces roved in his direction.

"All right, everyone, the next few hours are going to be intense, and I want everyone on their A-game. I'm sending out the trailer and armed escorts. Food will be distributed quickly and fairly. I don't want *any* civilians killed. Do I make myself clear?"

Charlize knew that order would be difficult to follow, but fifty voices all echoed in sync. "Yes, sir!"

"Get it done, people," Harris said. He turned back to Charlize. "Once that trailer is on the move, you'll be back in the air and Albert will sneak out with Van Dyke and Flint. My reservations have been noted, but I respect the chain of command."

"It takes balls to say what you just did. I have a feeling that's why you're so good at your job, Captain. I appreciate your support," Charlize said. "I won't forget what you're doing for us."

"Like I said, I'm a father, I understand why you did what you did using your position." He gestured back toward the open hangar doors.

Charlize nodded and followed the teams. When they got outside, Albert halted. He clenched his jaw and flared his nostrils. "Thank you, ma'am, for helping me with this," he said once his emotions were under control.

She put a hand on his shoulder pad. "You just get back safely, or I'll hunt you down myself."

That got a chuckle from Albert. "Will do, ma'am. Tell Ty I'll be ready for my Star Wars monopoly rematch when I get back."

This time Charlize was the one to laugh. "You always let him win," she said.

“Time to move out, sir,” Flint said, jerking his chin.

Albert nodded one more time at Charlize, and then reached out to shake her hand. She embraced him with a hug instead.

“Be careful,” she whispered.

“You too.”

As soon as they pulled apart, Albert took off running to the south with Van Dyke and Flint. She watched them for a few minutes before Harris directed her to the east, where her chopper was waiting.

“Thank you for the hospitality, Captain,” she said as they walked. “I’ll make sure you get all the support we can manage. Continue to hold the SC until then.”

“I’ll give it my all, ma’am,” Harris said. “Good luck.”

She caught a hint of anger in his voice, but she understood the source now and she didn’t blame him. Her trip hadn’t gone as planned, but it had taught her how terrible things were outside. She would return to Constellation with a new appreciation for the work they had ahead of them, and with some ideas on how to strengthen the other SCs across the country. They were going to rebuild their country the same way they built it in the first place—using the railways.

A few minutes later, she was inside the Seahawk and climbing into the sky. The soldiers that had accompanied her from Constellation held their weapons at the ready, ready to give their lives for her own. Charlize rested her head on the bulkhead as they climbed.

“There’s the transport,” one of the soldiers in the troop hold said.

Charlize twisted to look out the window. A semi with a shipping container on the bed drove toward the gates on the west side of the airport. The majority of the crowd had clustered in front of those fences. Albert and his comrades were moving across the SC in the opposite direction.

Flying dark, the pilots pulled away from the SC. Charlize lost sight of Albert. She looked for him again as they banked over the airport, but it was too dark. It didn’t feel right to leave him behind, not when he’d been by her side every step of the way since the night the bombs fell. She pressed a palm against the window and prayed he would find his sister soon.

***

Albert Randall never would have said so out loud, but he felt relieved that Charlize was heading back to Constellation. He never balked at his duty, but protecting her had come at a high cost. Most of his family had perished in the nuclear explosion in D.C., but as much as he blamed himself for leaving them to protect Charlize, he knew that nothing he could have done would have saved them even if he had tried. He would have ended up dead along with them.

Fate was a weird thing. Albert found himself thinking about it more and more as the pain of his loss cut deeper. Duty before self was something he'd learned a long time ago, but it was hard to stomach when your family was at risk.

That's why he was here in Charlotte, on a mission to find his twin sister. A woman he hadn't spoken to in almost a year. Or was it longer than that? Before the North Korean attack, Albert had been consumed with work. When he'd been home, he had tried to be a good husband and father, but now he would never have the chance to make up for all those missed dinners and skipped recitals. It was just him and Jackie now.

His relationship with Jacqueline had always been strained. Albert had chosen the high road: sports, academics, and duty to country and family. His sister, on the other hand…well, he hoped that the end of the world had finally put the fear of God into her, or the fear of something, at least. He didn't really care what it was as long as she believed in something, especially herself.

Albert was determined to save the only family he had left—whether she liked it or not.

He shook his mind clear and followed Flint and Van Dyke to gate ten. The world had taken on an eerie green glow. The night vision optics had taken some time to get used to, but it was better than nothing. From the sounds of it, the goggles were hard to come by, most of them having been fried when the grid went down. The pair on his helmet were French, delivered in a shipment a few days earlier.

Glancing up, he saw a carpet of clouds rolling across the sky, blocking out the moon and stars. That was good. As soon as they left the safety of the center, they would have targets on their backs. He focused on the barbed wire fences that separated the airport from the fields beyond. Where there had been thousands of people earlier that day, there was now only trash and a sea of empty tents. The sound of the civilians was distant, the masses drawn away by the promise of a food drop a mile to the west.

So far, Charlize's plan was working. Her Seahawk was already gone, the distant thump of the rotors hardly audible over the shouts of hundreds of thousands of civilians. Albert could feel them moving toward the food like a stampede of starving animals. Nothing good happened when starving humans armed with high-powered rifles were squeezed into a small area. Humans, in his mind, were good by nature, but even a good dog would bite when starved. And while he was glad Captain Harris had ordered his soldiers to only fire if absolutely necessary, he had his doubts the food drop was going to be peaceful.

Heck, Albert wasn't sure anything they could do at this point would ensure peace. People were desperate, resorting to actions they would never have dreamed of months before. That's what life had come to in the cities—good people doing bad things to survive in extraordinarily difficult times. He could only pray his sister was still alive.

I'm coming, Jackie. I'm going to find you and get you out of this mess.

Albert paced as they waited in front of the gates. The snipers in the towers flanking the gate did a final scan of the area. From his vantage point, Albert didn't see anything moving out there. He thought back to the map they'd memorized, and tried to orient himself with the terrain.

The Carolinas Aviation Museum stood on the other side of the tarmac, and beyond that was a small forest they would have to cross before gaining access to a residential area. Whole blocks of houses were already burned to the ground, leaving behind charred buildings and rafters. Downtown was another two miles beyond that, approximately, and it was in even worse shape, apparently. There were thousands of threats standing between him and the apartment building his sister called home.

"All clear," Flint said in a gruff voice. "I'll take point. Officer Randall, you stay behind me. Van Dyke, you got rear guard."

The chain-link fence creaked open on wheels that crunched over the concrete, revealing a second gate, this one made of pure metal. It towered fifteen feet and took five men to push open. The soldiers put their shoulders into the steel and pushed it open manually to reveal the dark terrain beyond.

Van Dyke shouldered his carbine and tilted his helmet at Albert, a cue to start walking. Albert followed Flint through the open gate and across the tarmac separating them from the fields. Setting off on foot seemed like a terrible idea, but zipping out of here in a Humvee or helicopter would have been even worse. They wouldn't have made it far before gunshots took them

down. The three men bolted across the tarmac, moving quickly toward the grassy fields. Albert slowed when he saw the outline of a civilian lying in the grass, unmoving. He gestured toward the fallen man, but Flint shook his head and flashed a signal to the tree line.

Van Dyke put a hand on Albert's back and whispered, "Nothing we can do for that guy. Hopefully he's just drunk."

Albert had moved another few steps and was close enough to see the guy wasn't intoxicated. Someone had bashed the left side of his skull in, and the grass was matted red.

They continued moving, and within minutes they had crossed the tarmac and were moving into the fields. Trash, feces, and discarded belongings littered the grass where the desperate civilians had camped out just hours earlier. Flint kept to the east side, cautious to stay out of sight. Anyone might be hiding here, and one wrong move could end with them all dead.

These men were risking their lives to accompany Albert, and he didn't even know their first names.

A voice stopped Albert mid-stride. "Hey, who's there?"

Flint balled his hand and crouched down, Albert following suit. Van Dyke took a knee right behind him and pointed to a tent ahead. The noise of a zipper opening sounded, and a face peered out from the tent. The moon emerged overhead, spreading a faint glow over the encampment. Albert could see the ghostly shape of a thin man with curly hair. He didn't appear to be armed, and Flint waved the small team onward.

"Is someone out there?" The man coughed into a sleeve. "Gloria, is that you?"

The man crawled through the opening into the grass, coughing louder. Flint stood and began to move before he could spot their position.

"Hey, I can hear you!" he called out to them. "Wait up. I need help!"

Albert ran after Flint, and Van Dyke kept pace behind. They raced around the edge of the encampment. They had almost cleared the final tent when a new voice called out.

"Soldiers! There are soldiers coming!"

Albert risked a glance over his shoulder as more tents were unzipped. Several figures appeared, and in the green hue of his optics, he saw one of them had a rifle.

"Don't let them get away!" yelled another man.

Albert ran as fast as he could, but he wasn't in nearly as good a shape as

when he'd played college football. Flint and Van Dyke were much faster, and within a few moments Albert was starting to fall behind. Looking over his shoulder didn't help. He nearly tripped over a bag abandoned in the grass. When he looked to the forested area ahead, both of the soldiers were already slipping into the safety of the trees.

A shotgun blast boomed behind them, and the spray peppered the trees.

"Move it, Randall!" Van Dyke yelled.

The corporal knelt next to a tree and brought the scope of his carbine to his NVGs while Albert jumped over a fallen tree.

Pop. Pop. Pop.

The suppressed fire whizzed past him, away from the woods. A scream rang out, followed by the sound of a body hitting the dirt. A female voice began shouting profanities.

"Hostile down," Van Dyke said quietly. He brought up his rifle and stood, scanning the encampment one more time before following Albert into the forest.

And just like that, the first blood of the night soaked into the soil. Shock gripped Albert, freezing him in place. They had only left the camp a few minutes ago, and a life had already been taken.

"You bastards!" the woman screeched. "You're supposed to help us!"

The words stung Albert like a bee. She was right, and it was all beginning to sink in, right now, right here in the woods. He was a firm believer the government had a duty to protect its citizens, but the combination of the EMP and nuclear attack had crippled the United States beyond repair. People tended to forget he was there listening, despite his massive bulk, and they said things he wasn't supposed to hear. He'd heard plenty while Charlize was being briefed. There was no coming back from this; there was only surviving by any means possible.

"Let's move, Randall," Van Dyke said.

Albert pushed onward through the underbrush, more determined than ever to find his sister. He'd drag Jacqueline kicking and screaming from this madness if he had to.

He picked up his pace as he followed the two soldiers into the inky green darkness, doing his best not to make any noise. Through the fence of limbs and branches, he glimpsed the residential area. They were almost there.

A shot rang out in the distance, but Albert couldn't tell where it was coming from. Van Dyke and Flint halted at the edge of the forest, crouching

down and waiting. He leaned against a tree when he got to them, chest heaving, sweat dripping down his forehead.

The sporadic gunfire evened into a steady flurry of different calibers.

“That’s coming from the other side of the camp,” Albert said, still trying to catch his breath.

“Goddamn,” Flint said. He drew up and walked a step back into the forest as if a magnet were pulling him toward the airport.

“The food shipment must have been hit,” Van Dyke said. “Maybe we should go back and help.”

Albert hesitated. They were almost a quarter of the way to the city, and he needed these soldiers to help him get the rest of the way there. Flint and Van Dyke exchanged a few hushed words while Albert stood guard, his heart beating in sync with the gun battle.

“Harris gave us orders,” Flint said.

“Shit don’t work the same way it used to, Sarge,” Van Dyke replied.

Flint moved over closer to Van Dyke and said something that Albert couldn’t make out. Van Dyke seemed to slouch at whatever Flint had said, the fight gone out of him.

“Come on, let’s keep moving,” Flint said.

Van Dyke glared up at Albert for a long second before squeezing past.

— 7 —

“Got room for a third?” came a familiar voice.

The words sent a chill up Colton’s spine. He shut the lift gate to the 1952 Chevy pickup truck and turned to see if it was really Raven.

It was.

Standing in the moonlight, a hand on his side, Raven flashed a wide pearly grin. Creek came trotting around the side of town hall, right behind his handler, ears and tail up.

“Uh, aren’t you supposed to be in the hospital?” Lindsey asked. She dropped her backpack into the bed of the truck and joined Colton with her arms folded across her chest.

“The guy I shot should be in the hospital—or six feet under—but he’s not, and I’m not lying around waiting for him to get caught,” Raven said.

His wide smile didn’t deceive Colton—he was injured, and injured bad. A man didn’t take three bullets to a vest, have part of an ear blown off, and get knocked unconscious, and then expect to be walking less than half a day later.

Most men, anyway, Colton thought. Then again, Raven had proven to be one tough son of a bitch. He’d been stabbed, beaten, and shot in the past month. Colton wasn’t sure whether to be impressed or worried.

“What did the doc *really* say about you getting out of bed?” Colton asked, knowing he wasn’t going to get a straight answer.

“Said I’m good to go and that I should be out here tracking this asshole down,” Raven said. “I just need my gear. What’d you do with it?”

Colton could see by the determined look in Raven’s dark eyes that there was no arguing with the man. Lindsey, however, wasn’t done with her interrogation yet.

“And what about your sister?” she asked. “Did she say it was okay to come out here with us?”

“No.” Raven’s voice was firm and a little cold.

“You lost the top of your ear, for God’s sake,” Colton said, examining the side of Raven’s head.

Raven turned away and touched the bandage. “I said I’m good, man.”

“Okay, Sam, whatever you say,” Colton said. He picked another backpack up and slung it into the truck. “But you’re still not coming with. You need to sit this one out. We can find this guy on our own.”

Raven’s grin vanished in an instant. He staggered forward, his hand falling away from his tactical vest. “Bullshit. You haven’t caught him yet. You need my help before he kills anyone else. You’re dealing with a pro, Marcus.”

Lindsey and Colton exchanged a glance.

“You think this guy is a professional?” Lindsey asked.

Colton heaved a long and deep sigh. He’d hoped their chase was just lucky, but Raven was probably right. The man had managed to avoid every officer and volunteer looking for him in Estes Park, despite being wounded.

“Fine, Sam. Grab your gear and meet me back here in five minutes. It’s in your locker inside the station,” Colton said.

A hint of a smile returned on Raven’s face as he hurried off toward the back entrance of the police station. Creek stayed put, watching Lindsey and Colton finish packing the truck while Raven retrieved his weapons.

“He better not slow us down,” Colton said.

Lindsey shrugged. “We’re talking about Raven, Chief.”

Colton started the pickup truck. The back door to the police station swung open and Raven walked out wearing a black coat, leather gloves, boots, and a stocking cap over his long hair. Instead of a rifle, he held his crossbow, and a pistol was holstered at his side.

Lindsey jumped into the passenger seat, and Raven climbed into the back with Creek. The truck rolled out of the parking lot, engine rattling and rusted underbody scraping the cement. The noise attracted the attention of the refugees in Bond Park. Most of the people were huddling around the fires in the old barrels from the junkyard. A few them shared bowls of soup provided by volunteers working in coordination with his officers. Jennie and the orphan girl, Sarah both stood and watched the truck drive past.

For now, these people were safe, but he still wasn’t sure what he was going to do with them. He glanced in the rearview mirror at Raven, who sat with his

back to the cab, stroking Creek's head. It was just after nine o'clock and the temperature had dropped into the forties. The ground would freeze tonight. The refugees would need shelter from the cold.

Lindsey loaded her weapons while Colton drove down the empty streets. Most of the residents were inside their houses, keeping warm, but everyone that knew how to use a weapon had been assigned a roadblock or critical facility to protect. After today's attack, Colton wasn't taking any chances. Until he managed to find some allies, he had conscripted every able man, woman, and kid old enough to fire a gun into service.

They were coming up on one of those roadblocks now. The first person Colton saw was Dale Jackson, and to his right was Heath Minor, the eighteen-year-old star quarterback of the high school football team. Colton knew Heath's dad and had even gone hunting with them a few times. He eased off the gas and held a hand up as he passed. Dale nodded, but Heath simply stared at the truck, a dumbfounded look in his eyes—the look of a boy thrown into war when he should have been off chasing girls and drinking beer.

After steering through the gap in the concrete barriers, Colton pushed down on the gas and sped out toward the Rocky Mountains. Behind them, Dale and Heath shoved the concrete barriers back into place and resumed their positions.

Lindsey finished her gear check and looked over. "Have you thought any more about those refugees, Chief?"

"I haven't decided yet," he replied. "Let's focus on finding this guy first."

She fidgeted uneasily in the old seat. He could tell she had something to say, but she remained silent, waiting for him to ask.

"Let's hear it, kiddo."

"I don't like it when you call me that, Chief. Detective Plymouth. Or Lindz, if you want. That's what my friends call me."

"I'm sorry, sometimes I just think of you as a…"

"Kid?" Lindsey shrugged. "Yeah, I get it, but hopefully I've proved that I can take care of myself by now." She shook her head and looked out the window.

"You have, but I don't want to see anything happen to you. I'm not sure I could forgive myself."

"Like I said, I can take care of myself."

Colton didn't reply. Lindsey didn't often talk about friends or family back

home. Her life before arriving in Estes Park was a closed book, but he hoped that one day she would open up. *If we live that long*, he thought wryly.

Colton pulled out a toothpick from his vest and wedged it into the side of his mouth. They were coming up on the entrance to the park. The headlights hit the ranger station a moment later. As the truck climbed up toward Trail Ridge Road, the drab landscape became a white winter wonderland. Pine trees were coated with snow, their branches weighed down. The road turned to reveal a view of the Rocky Mountains, their snow-brushed peaks glowing under the light of the moon.

"Over there," Lindsey said, pointing at a Volkswagen Beetle.

Colton steered to the right and parked behind the car in the lot behind Beaver Meadows. A herd of elk were grazing nearby. As Colton and Lindsey approached, they all looked up, ears perking.

Colton flipped on his flashlight and pulled out his map. He flattened it on the hood of the truck.

"Officer Hines and Tim Beedie are on this trail to the northeast. There are other patrols combing the resort area just in case our suspect went that way," Colton said, pointing. "We'll take this trail to the southwest."

Raven nodded and whistled at Creek. "Time's wasting, Chief," he said. "Let's go."

Lindsey followed Raven across the gravel road and into the snowy field. Colton grabbed his gear and then jogged to catch up, gripped by a moment of déjà vu. A month ago, the night everything had gone to hell, they'd set off to find Melissa Stone. Brown Feather had been watching them then, and Colton felt that same sensation of eyes on his back now. He turned, raking his beam over the area, but all he saw was skeletal trees and snow.

***

Charlize arrived at Constellation shortly before midnight. She hurried through the hallways of the underwater bunker, guided by the pair of armed guards that had accompanied her on the flight. It felt odd not having Albert with her.

"I won't be long," she said to the two soldiers. "Please tell General Thor I'm on my way."

They nodded and continued walking down the white hallway, boots

clicking on the tiled floor. She unlocked the door to her quarters and walked into the carpeted living space furnished with a small dining room table and love seat. A kitchenette with a sink, stove, and dorm-sized fridge took up the western corner of the room.

This was home now, and would be for the foreseeable future. It sure as hell beat the conditions back at the airport in Charlotte. Many of those people would have literally killed for a place like this.

She crossed the room and opened the door to the only bedroom. To her surprise, Ty was wide awake, sitting in his wheelchair between the two twin beds. He was reading a book called *Gates of Fire* by Stephen Pressfield so intently that he didn't notice her presence at first. She knew President Diego was waiting on her, but she hadn't seen her son this peaceful for a very long time, and took a moment to watch him.

He finally looked up and said, "Mom! When did you get back?"

"You're supposed to be in bed, mister," Charlize said. She stepped into the room and walked over to Ty.

He closed his book and smiled, his cheeks dimpling. "I wanted to stay up until you got home. An officer came by earlier saying you were on your way."

"I'm sorry I was gone for so long, but Albert and I had an important mission."

"It's okay." Ty shrugged and placed his book on his lap. "It's just…every time I fall asleep, I think I'm back there. With *him*."

She sat on the bed in front of him and took his hands. They felt so small in hers.

"You're safe now, and I'm never going to let anyone hurt you again," she said soothingly. "He will pay for what he's done." She didn't like saying the so-called general's name out loud, but they both knew who she was talking about.

Ty bowed his head, shaggy hair falling over his forehead. "When do I get to see Emma and Micah? Are they okay?"

Charlize didn't know how to answer the question. The kids that had been rescued from the Castle had been taken to various locations, and she wasn't even sure where Ty's friends had ended up.

"I'll find out where they are, okay?" she said.

Ty nodded and looked up. "I really miss Uncle Nathan."

"Me, too. And I promise we're going to punish the man that took him from

us.”

Sniffling, Ty reached up and wiped his nose. “You better, Mom. I told General Fenix you would come for him. I told him he would be sorry.”

“We don’t call him that,” Charlize said. “He doesn’t deserve the respect of a title. And he will be, soon.” She helped Ty into bed and pulled the sheets up over his thin legs. He tugged them up over his chest and smiled.

“I missed you.”

“I missed you too. Now go to sleep, sweetie.”

“Aren’t you going to bed?”

“I’ve got some more work to do, but I promise I won’t be gone too long.”

Ty’s lips moved, twisting into a frown, but he didn’t reply.

Feeling guilty, she said, “I’ll stay with you until you’re asleep.”

Charlize ran her hand through his hair. His breathing slowed and his eyelids fluttered until they were closed. Within a couple of minutes, Ty was fast asleep. She tucked the sheets in tightly and then left the room, slowly shutting the door behind her.

By the time she arrived at Central Command, the cabinet meeting was already underway. She paused in the main chamber, unsure which conference room she needed to find. The multilevel room was set up like an auditorium. Officers and staff were working on each level and at every station to monitor events across the country and the world.

Colonel Mark Raymond stood at the bottom of the stairs dividing the two levels of operations. The tall officer with a bulbous nose and thick brown hair was one of her favorites at Constellation.

“Follow me please, ma’am,” Raymond said. He led her across the bottom floor, around several workstations, and past the war table set up in the center of the space. He opened the door to one of the conference rooms and gestured politely for her to go inside.

“Colonel, will you get me a map showing the rail system in the United States?” she asked.

“Certainly.”

“Thank you.” She walked inside the room and did a quick scan. Secretary of State Lane Hudgins, a forty-five-year-old former tech CEO, sat at the end of the table next to Secretary of Health and Human Services Doctor Ellen Price, a stern-faced woman with shoulder-length brown hair. Price’s presence told Charlize something was up at the survival centers.

“Ah, Secretary Montgomery, welcome home,” President Diego said as she

entered. He stood and pointed toward the seat next to General Thor.

She took a seat between General Thor and the new National Security Advisor, Duane Ibsen. The advisor looked up from his briefing to acknowledge her.

“Good to see you safely returned from Charlotte. I presume you will have a full report shortly,” Diego said.

“Yes, sir, I do. But don’t let me interrupt.” She wanted to wait for the maps before she gave her briefing.

“Please turn to page nineteen, Secretary Montgomery,” Thor said.

Charlize opened the folder marked *Classified* in front of her. The usual charts of resources and memos about the survival centers filled the pages. There were death estimates put together by actuarial scientists that had previously worked for insurance companies and were now crunching the numbers of how many people would die by year’s end. She found page nineteen, opening it to see aerial images of North Korea.

Thor cleared his throat and continued the briefing. “Our allies in the Pacific are on high alert for other North Korean submarines. Japan, South Korea, even our friends down under, are sending out warships. But so far the seas remain calm, with no indication the North Koreans have other subs out there.”

“And no indication they were working with the Chinese?” Diego asked, a brow raised.

Thor nodded firmly. “That’s correct, Mr. President. The Chinese have also been one of our biggest allies when it comes to aid shipments. If they wanted this to happen, they sure aren’t showing it.”

Charlize remembered trailers back at the SC in Charlotte marked up in Chinese. Thor was right; the Chinese had gone above and beyond what any of them had expected, which seemed fishy to her.

“The North Korean leadership still hasn’t emerged from their bunkers, but we’ve got constant surveillance in the area,” Thor added. “If any of those bastards survived, we will take them down eventually.”

“What about casualties in South Korea?” Charlize asked.

“Page twenty,” Thor said.

Everyone in the room turned the page. This was the first time Charlize had seen any hard numbers. Her fears were confirmed when she saw the data. Their forces in the demilitarized zone had been decimated, but the civilian death toll was unimaginable.

Colonel Raymond returned with a folder containing the rail system maps.

“Thank you,” she said.

“I’ll turn it over to Ibsen for a report on Korea,” Thor said.

The National Security Advisory waited for Raymond to sit, and then continued the briefing.

“The South Koreans are still evacuating survivors from Seoul, but we’re finally seeing numbers of casualties.” Ibsen paused, and then continued solemnly. “Hundreds of thousands of civilians were killed in artillery fire from the North Korean military. They were dug in pretty well, and a good number seem to have survived our initial nuclear attack.”

Thor nodded and took over. “Our forces only had twenty minutes to retreat from the demilitarized zone after we launched our nuclear arsenal. Thousands of our soldiers were killed in the North Korean bombardment of Seoul.”

Ibsen’s icy glare swept over Charlize and then Diego. “Mr. President, I’m afraid the radiation from our nuclear warheads has affected the survivors in South Korea. Many more will die.”

Diego maneuvered the folder on his table, a nervous habit. Perhaps he was right to be nervous. If the United States ever managed to rebound, people would be very critical of every move Diego had made. After all, he had ordered the nuclear attack that had resulted in the artillery bombardment of Seoul. Thousands of Americans and hundreds of thousands of innocent South Korean civilians had died. Now the radiation was killing millions more.

“We’re all disturbed by these reports,” Diego said. “Our prayers are with everyone lost abroad. However, we did what we had to do to cripple the North Korean regime. With that threat and the threat of their submarines eradicated, our job now is to focus on the violence spreading across our country.”

He looked at Charlize, and she sat up a little straighter.

“That’s why I asked you to come back to Command, Secretary Montgomery. We aren’t just dealing with violence, starvation, and dehydration at the SCs. I’ll let Dr. Price explain.”

Price tucked her hair behind her ears and nodded. “Thank you, Mr. President. We’ve been working with the CDC and supporting agencies to get ahead of the outbreak, but the close quarters and lack of clean water at many of the SCs has provided the perfect outlet for the spread of cholera. As noted in your folder, the worst hit is the SC outside Houston, Texas. We’ve lost control of the situation, and we’ll be evacuating all personnel and assets from

that center over the next twenty-four hours.”

“Just personnel?” Charlize asked. “What about everyone living there?”

“We’re abandoning this SC and moving our resources to others that are in better shape,” Price said. “It’s a matter of resources. Cholera is extremely contagious, and we simply don’t have the ability to stop the spread.”

“You’re just going to leave all of those people to die?” Charlize asked. She thought of Captain Harris and the orders to his men about respecting all innocent lives.

“It’s a lose-lose situation.” Diego rubbed his forehead and sighed. “We all know the reality. We all can see the numbers. We have to focus on saving the people we can.”

Charlize stared at him, aghast. “We’re talking about hundreds of thousands of lives. We can’t abandon that many people and leave them to die.”

“We have no choice,” Price said. She paused to look Charlize in the eye. “Have you seen what cholera can do, Secretary Montgomery? Have you ever held a starving, dying child in your arms?”

A memory of the woman clutching the sick child to her breast in the medical wing of SC Charlotte surfaced in Charlize’s mind, quickly replaced by Ty shortly after his accident.

Price didn’t give her a chance to respond. “I have, Secretary Montgomery. I worked in third world countries for the first ten years of my career.”

“And I’ve fought in them,” Charlize said. “Do not lecture me. I just spent the day in Charlotte witnessing exactly what you’ve just described. They may not be afflicted with cholera, but they have other problems that are just as bad.”

Price hesitated. She looked to Diego for his opinion. General Thor tapped his pen on his folder, and Colonel Raymond folded his arms across his chest, both of them clearly preparing for a battle between the two cabinet officials. President Diego apparently had the same idea.

“Everyone, take a break. Secretary Montgomery, a word,” he said.

Price held Charlize’s gaze for a moment before getting up and leaving. Charlize felt adrenaline flood her system as the room cleared. As soon as the last person left and the door clicked shut, Diego stood and palmed the table.

“First off, don’t you ever pull a stunt like the one in Charlotte again,” he said sternly. “I didn’t make you Secretary of Defense so you could go on personally motivated rescue missions and put yourself in the line of fire. I need you to help now more than ever to get our SCs under control.” He let

out a breath. “Hell, Charlize, you saw firsthand what we’re up against. I need your support.”

Charlize stiffened in her chair. “I’m sorry, sir, it’s just…”

“I know you’ve been through a lot after losing your brother, but I won’t put up with insubordination again. I also won’t have you questioning me in front of my cabinet and staff. When you were off playing tourist, the decision was made to start the evacuation in Houston. I’m sorry, but Dr. Price is correct. There is simply nothing further we can do there given the supplies and manpower we have at our disposal. If it comes down to it, I’ll cut the country in half to save those that we can. It’s the burden of leadership in these troubled times, and you share that burden with me now, Charlize.”

He paused and looked at the ceiling, then back at her. “We’re fighting for the very future of our children, and I need to know you’re on board. Diseases aren’t the only problem. Gangs are infiltrating the SCs. Gangs like MS-13. The Sons of Liberty aren’t the only domestic terrorists out there.”

Charlize stood to face the president. “I know, sir, and *that’s* why I went to Charlotte. While Dr. Price looks at numbers in the safety of this bunker, people are dying out there in terrible ways. She may have been in the field when she was younger, but I’ve been in the muck most of my life, and today I saw the horror with my own two eyes. It’s hell out there.”

She tried to keep her voice measured, but her response grew in pitch and volume until she was nearly shouting, causing Diego to rear back.

“I’m more determined than ever to help those people and save our country, sir,” Charlize finished, reigning in her temper. “I’m sorry.”

Diego stroked the scruff on his jaw and scrutinized her for a moment. Then he nodded and said, “That’s all I wanted to hear.”

“I don’t suppose you want to hear my idea on how we can start moving supplies more efficiently, do you?”

“I’m all ears,” Diego replied.

She picked the folder off the table and pulled out a map showing the network of train tracks across the United States.

“On the flight to Charlotte, I saw trains stranded on the tracks in multiple locations. So far we’ve focused our recovery efforts on moving supplies using the highways, but that’s just slowed us down.”

“Go on,” Diego said.

“I was reminded that we had the same logistical issues of moving supplies and people when we were settling the American West as we do now. If we

can get the rails working again, we can start moving more supplies as they come in from foreign nations. It's safer, and more efficient. We won't need as many soldiers to guard the transports either."

Diego studied the map, then looked at her. He cracked a half smile. "Let's run it by the rest of the team. I don't know the slightest thing about the rail system, but perhaps there is a way. I'm sure Doctor Lundy will have some insight."

A knock sounded on the door and Thor opened it slightly.

"Sorry to interrupt, Mr. President, but I have some news both you and Secretary Montgomery will want to hear."

Charlize waited patiently, lacing her fingers together to keep from tapping the table.

"We think we may have found Dan Fenix," Thor said. "I have a team moving in on his location right now."

— 8 —

Dan Fenix awoke to a hand gripping his shoulder. He swung at the air, and his fist connected with something that felt like bone.

“Son of a…” someone grumbled.

In the glow of a candle, Fenix saw a figure staggering away from his bed. Still in the grips of a deep sleep—and a bit hungover—he grabbed the Desert Eagle he kept under his pillow and directed it at the figure.

“Sir, don’t shoot! It’s me, Carson!”

Fenix slowly lowered the gun and blinked until his eyes adjusted to the light. His skull pounded from a beer-induced headache, and his tired body groaned.

Carson pulled the ratty drape back from the window and ducked down to look at the sky. “We have to get out of here, sir.”

“What the fuck do you mean?” Fenix asked. He swung his legs over the bed. As soon as his feet hit the floor, he heard the faint chop of a helo in the distance.

Carson looked away from the window. “They found us, sir. We have to leave, now!”

Fenix had slept in his boots just in case something like this happened. He grabbed his rucksack while Carson palmed a magazine into an M4. He tossed the charged gun to Fenix and then grabbed an M4 of his own.

They left the cabin and stepped out into the chilly night. A second after the freezing air stung his exposed skin, an M240 lit up the skies, sending green tracer rounds into the camp at six hundred rounds per minute. The finger-sized spray punched into the fresh snow, kicking up dirt and pine needles as it carved through the center of the camp.

Sons of Liberty soldiers bolted for cover, but for one it was too late. Lance

Hawkings screamed in pain, both of his muscular arms now nothing more than stumps. His rifle hit the snow, hands and riven stumps still attached where the 7.62 mm rounds had severed muscle and bone.

Stunned, Fenix stood staring at the silhouette of a Black Hawk descending on his hideout. All around him, soldiers ran out of their cabins. The chopper's crew chief, clearly an expert on the big gun, cut them down with automatic fire, shredding flesh and painting the fresh snow red.

It took the spray of bullets slamming the dirt in front of Fenix to snap him into action. He hopped behind a tree just as a dozen rounds bit into the ground where he'd been standing a second earlier. Carson hit the dirt beside him, rolled, and fired his M4 at the bird.

"Follow me to the trucks!" he yelled.

Fenix raised his M4 and peered around the tree to aim at the door gunner. Soldiers were already fast-roping from the troop hold as he pulled the trigger. The crew chief cried out as Fenix's bullets found their mark, and the bark of the M240 went silent. The gunner slumped and fell out of the open door, plummeting past the men on ropes, taking one of them with him. They crashed into the snow, a tangled mess.

"Fuck you!" Fenix yelled.

A dozen government soldiers hit the ground a few beats later, night vision goggles snapped into position. Beams from Sons of Liberty flashlights flickered across the camp, trying to track the men.

The government soldiers strode forward like machines, rifles shouldered, firing with calculated precision. The SOL men, lacking the night vision optics, fell beneath the onslaught.

Fenix popped off another three shots and took one of the Special Ops soldiers down before Carson yanked on his arm.

"We have to move, General," he said.

The chopper pulled away, but Fenix knew it would be back. The men it had dropped were fanning across the camp, hunting down SOL soldiers.

Fenix looked over his shoulder as he ran after Carson toward the south side of the camp, where they kept their pickup trucks. The vehicles were all stocked with gear and supplies, ready to move at a moment's notice. They rounded a cabin and dove into the dirt as one of the four trucks exploded. A tire whizzed overhead and smashed into the side of the cabin they just passed. The two SOL soldiers guarding the trucks followed, their smoldering bodies landing in the snow a few feet from Fenix.

The main storage shed collapsed in a ball of fire. Fenix shielded his face from the wave of heat. Carson pointed at another shed where two more trucks sat idle. He helped Fenix to his feet. He could barely hear or see from the combination of his hangover and the explosions, and he had to lean on Carson as they ran toward the vehicles.

The battle raged in all directions, but Fenix knew his loyal men stood no chance in these conditions against the better-trained and equipped Special Ops soldiers. Automatic gunfire, explosions, and shouting filled the early morning hours as his men were slaughtered.

Fenix used to love the din of war, but not when he was losing the battle. He fought against the ringing in his ears and wobbling in his legs as he made a final push to the trucks. They were fifteen, maybe twenty, feet away when Carson yelled, “Get down!”

Carson tackled him to the ground and shielded Fenix’s body with his own. From the ground, Fenix saw a grenade sail through the air and into the open door of a cabin. He buried his head in the snowy dirt just before the explosion. Shards of wood and hunks of a foundation blew through the air, and the ground rattled Fenix.

“Get off me,” Fenix tried to say. His ears were ringing so bad he couldn’t even hear his own voice. He yelled again and then pushed Carson off when the man didn’t respond. The soldier’s body crumpled to the ground next to Fenix, blood flowing from his lips, eyes wide and dead. Two dozen shards of wood stuck out of his back like arrows.

A damn noble act—and one that surprised Fenix. The Sons of Liberty talked a lot about loyalty, but Carson had proven himself to be a true patriot and martyr to the cause. His sacrifice would not be forgotten. He patted his old friend on the arm and then stumbled away into the darkness, head pounding and vision fading. He almost lost his balance from a wave of dizziness. There was no time to get to the trucks; the soldiers were already on his trail. His only chance of escape was the woods.

Two other SOL soldiers came running around another cabin.

“General!” one of them yelled.

In the flickering glow of light, Fenix saw the features of Aaron Butzen and Rich Blake.

“This way!” Butzen yelled.

Fenix took off running for them, thrilled to see two of his best soldiers were still alive. They were bolting for the forest.

Rich suddenly jerked and his legs gave out. Looking to the right, Fenix saw a salvo of bullets tear into the fallen soldier. Butzen turned to fire off a shot.

“Run, sir!” he shouted.

Fenix sprinted past Butzen just as a bullet hit the man in the center of his forehead. He crumpled to the ground in a fetal position.

Rounds whizzed past Fenix, but he somehow made it into the forest unscathed. The crack of suppressed rifles followed him into the trees, cutting into the bark and branches all around him. He tripped on a log, hit the dirt, and fumbled for his rifle. He couldn’t find the damn thing.

Pulling out his Desert Eagle instead, he aimed at the shapes of the government bloodhounds moving into the woods. Three men hunted his trail. He’d have to make every shot count, but this wasn’t the place he would stand his ground. He needed to get farther away first.

Fenix continued onward, pushing past the pain that came with every step. The gunfire seemed to fade behind him, or maybe that was just his hearing. There weren’t many of his men still fighting out there, judging by the sounds.

“That bitch,” he raged as he moved, thinking of Secretary Montgomery and how sweet it would be when he finally got his revenge. Although that revenge seemed less and less likely as he made his way deeper into the cold darkness of the woods.

He stopped to catch his breath, and flinched at a voice.

“Fenix.”

He whirled with his gun up to see a man looking at him from behind a pine tree. It was too dark to see who it was. Fenix raised his pistol and prepared to blow the guy’s face off. Better safe than sorry.

“It’s me, General. Doc Rollins.” The man stepped around the trunk of the tree with a shotgun in his hands.

“Doc,” Fenix said, letting out a huff of cold air. He gestured for the gun, and Rollins handed it over.

“We have to get out of here.” He turned to run in the other direction, but Fenix halted and looked back to the burning camp. Carson’s body was still back there, and his men were being gunned down like dogs.

“Those traitor fucks are killing my men,” he snarled. “I’m not runnin’ no more.”

Fenix pumped a shell into the shotgun and began to jog toward the camp, using the flames to guide him through the forest. He placed the butt of the

shotgun in the sweet spot and aimed the barrel at a shadow making its way toward him, pulling the trigger as soon as he saw the soldier was wearing a helmet topped with NVGs. His boys didn't have fancy optics.

The boom was louder than Fenix had expected, and the recoil kicked against his shoulder. He quickly roved the barrel toward another shape and fired, just as a spray of bullets punched into the tree to his right.

Taking a knee, Fenix squeezed off a third shot toward where the muzzle flash had come from. He was rewarded with a wail of pain from the injured soldier he'd just shot.

Fenix made his way around and crouched down next to the two soldiers. Both were dead. The one on the left was missing part of his face, and the guy on the right had taken the brunt of the blast into a vest that hadn't saved him.

"Assholes," Fenix said. He snatched the night vision goggles off the dead man's helmet, put them on, and then grabbed one of their M16s. The sporadic crack of automatic gunfire told him a few of his men were still in this fight.

"I'm coming," he said quietly.

Armed with the M16 and renewed determination, he set off in a hunch through the forest, ducking under branches and navigating the trip-me logs. He was three steps from the edge of the forest when a stern voice stopped him.

"Freeze and put your weapon down."

Fenix's hand twitched toward the trigger, and a suppressed shot cracked behind him, the round hitting the tree to his left.

"*Now*!" the soldier shouted.

Fenix dropped the rifle when he felt a barrel stick him in the back.

"Put your hands on your head and start walking, you piece of shit," his captor said.

Judging by his voice, the man was young, maybe twenty years old. Fenix knew the type. He'd be anxious to make a name for himself. Twenty-five years ago, Fenix had been in the same position. He'd earned his reputation by gutting three soldiers in the Colombian jungle on a mission not that different from this one.

"Take it easy," Fenix said. He raised his hands and put them on his head, then began the march back to camp as a prisoner, watching the ground carefully so as to not trip and earn himself a bullet to the back of his head.

As he walked, he plotted his escape, calculating his chances of taking this guy down before they got back. He put it at forty percent. He could definitely

kill the guy, but he would probably get shot in the process, and Doctor Rollins wasn't around to save him now.

The Sons of Liberty would survive Fenix, but that was cold comfort. This hideout was just one of many. Several hundred more of his soldiers were spread out across central and southern Colorado. Communication was slow, however, and no one was going to come and help him now. Fenix was on his own.

A cabin collapsed in the center of camp, sending a mushroom cloud of sparks into the sky. He needed another distraction like that to take his captor down. He slowed his pace even more and waited.

Two hundred yards from the camp, his boots hit a root and he stumbled. He froze, not daring to move again in case the eager young soldier fired.

Guttural coughing sounded from behind Fenix. Then a thump, like a body hitting the ground.

What the hell?

Fenix slowly turned to see a man towering over the dead soldier that had been leading him back to camp.

"Got 'em," came the familiar voice of Doctor Rollins. He held a blade dripping with blood. It gleamed in the light of the raging fires.

"I'll be damned, you're not a coward after all," Fenix said with a grin. "Nice work, Doc."

***

Sandra Spears was running on pure adrenaline. Since coffee was in short supply, she had taken an Adderall to keep her working through the night. It wasn't ideal—nor was it especially safe—but she needed the energy to help Duffy and Newton keep the medical center running.

For now, the pill was doing the trick. Her mind felt focused, and she was able to provide care for all of her patients without keeping them waiting for long periods of time. Things were going as smoothly as could be expected in her domain. The main problem tonight was what was happening outside of the medical center.

Raven had once again defied her. Against both medical advice and her heartfelt pleas, he had left several hours ago to track down the man that had gone on a shooting spree and blown off the top of Raven's ear. This wasn't

the first time she'd had to work while her brother was hunting someone down. It had become the norm over the past month, and judging from the recent uptick in violence, she had a feeling it wasn't going to end anytime soon.

There was nothing she could do for Raven now, but she could at least check on her patients again. She stopped by Teddy's room first, stopping outside the door to listen to Allie and Teddy. The kids had taken a liking to one another.

"When do I get to see Creek again?" Teddy said.

Allie shrugged from the chair next to his bed. "I think he's out with Uncle Raven."

"Doing what?"

Allie shrugged again.

"Someday I want to go out on a hunt with them. Maybe I'll catch the bad guy," Teddy said. His grin faltered. "A lot of people got hurt today. I saw them bringing in the stretchers."

"I think some of those people died," Allie said.

"I hope your uncle gets those bad men," Teddy replied.

Sandra pulled open the door and stepped inside the room before the conversation went any further.

"What are you guys talking about?" she asked.

Teddy didn't bother to lie. "The bad men." He raised his stump and rubbed the bandaged end with his hand. "Is what Allie said true? Did those people who got brought to the hospital today die?"

Sandra knew she was supposed to be checking on her patients, but she also had a responsibility as a mother to talk to these kids about death. There was no way to shield them from the harsh reality of the world they lived in now, but she could at least help them understand it a little better.

She moved up to the side of Teddy's bed. "I'm sorry, but we couldn't save everyone. Sometimes people are too sick or hurt for medicine to fix them."

"But Mr. Raven is going to hurt the bad guys, right?"

Sandra sighed. "He's going to bring them to justice."

"Why doesn't he just kill them?" Allie asked.

The question made Sandra flinch. Her daughter had changed so much in the past month. Sandra could barely recognize her as the little girl who used to play with ponies and sing pop songs. Allie was quieter now, her big, dark eyes ever watchful. Brown Feather had stolen some of Allie's innocence, and

for a moment Sandra felt a surge of satisfaction in knowing that Raven had split the bastard's head open with a hatchet.

She took a deep breath, closed her eyes briefly, and then exhaled.

"When someone does something bad—really bad—sometimes you want to do something bad to them in return," she said slowly, searching for the right words. "For now, you two should focus on healing so that maybe someday you can be police officers or doctors and help people instead."

Teddy shook his head. "I don't want to be a police officer. I want to be a hunter like Mr. Raven. I want a dog like Creek, and I want to go out and track the bad people down and hurt them so they can't hurt anyone else. Besides, Chief Colton said he was gonna shoot the guys who hurt Mr. Raven and all those other people."

"What? When did you hear that?"

Teddy lowered his stump next to his side and hesitated before replying, "I overheard the doctors talking with Chief Colton, and he was saying he was going to kill the people responsible for the shootings. Doctor Duffy said that was good."

Sandra rubbed her forehead and sighed. A lot of things had changed so drastically since the bombs dropped.

Everything had changed.

"What about those people who were hanged in Bond Park?" Allie asked. "Those people deserved to die, right?"

"I…it…" Sandra's words trailed off. "Raven and Colton don't *want* to kill anyone. They only do it if they are forced to in self-defense, or to save someone else."

Teddy squinted at Sandra like he was trying to understand and finally said, "Okay, Miss Sandra."

Allie moved over to the bed to stand next to Sandra, holding her tattered stuffed pony.

"Nurse Spears," called a voice.

In the doorway stood Doctor Duffy. He gestured for her to join him in the hall. She smiled at the kids.

"I'll come check on you two later. Be good, okay?" Sandra said.

Allie and Teddy both nodded. Sandra kissed Allie on the cheek and then walked out into the hallway.

"What's wrong now?" she asked Doctor Duffy.

"What's not wrong? The generators are running low on fuel already.

Doctor Newton thinks we're going to have to amputate John Palmer's right arm and part of his left. We've lost six patients today, and another six are critically injured."

"God," Sandra breathed.

"I sure hope Colton can find the bastard responsible, because we're all tapped out here. We can't take on another patient."

Sandra thought back to what Teddy had overheard earlier. "You really need to watch what you say around the kids, Doctor."

"Excuse me?" Duffy raised a brow.

"About how you hoped Colton kills the shooter. Teddy overheard you say that."

Duffy scratched the stubble on his chin, and then shook his head. "Did you not just hear me list all the problems we have, Sandra? And you're lecturing me about what I should say around Teddy?" He let out a huff.

"I'm sorry, it's just…"

"I have a lot to do, and so do you, so let's get to it," Duffy said, turning and walking away.

Sandra drew in a breath and followed Duffy. She stopped at the open door to their current morgue. Bloody blankets covered the victims of the attack. Six more souls lost. And there would be more bloodshed. Her heart sank at the thought of Raven laid out under a blanket. It seemed like just a matter of time.

Duffy continued on, but Sandra paused, her heart heavy. The evil that had killed these people wasn't going to stop, but she couldn't let Allie and Teddy grow up thinking it was okay to fight evil with evil.

And how can you tell them that when you're glad Brown Feather is dead?

She shook her head and kept walking.

— 9 —

A distant cracking sound rattled Raven's bones. His first instinct was to look up for Thunderer, but this wasn't his dream, and the sound wasn't thunder—it was a gunshot.

The herd of elk heard it too. They bolted across the meadow toward the woods, away from the gunfire, while Raven led Colton and Lindsey in the opposite direction. The single shot faded into the night, leaving only the crunch of boots on hardened snow. Creek emerged between a pair of Douglas firs on the trail ahead with his tail between his legs.

"I sure hope Hines or Beedie fired that shot," Colton said.

Raven slowly pivoted in the snow to find the source, but it was impossible to determine the direction from the echo, and he hadn't seen a muzzle flash. He waved the group down the trail meandering through the meadows, letting Creek take point. The Rocky Mountains towered all around them, the jagged peaks reaching toward the moon. Each step brought them deeper into the park, which made no sense to Raven. Whenever he began a hunt, he would transport himself into the mind of the creature or person he was tracking, trying to plot out their moves. But he couldn't figure out why their chase would have headed into the wilderness. Why not head south or take refuge in a house in the town? Why come all the way out here?

The farther Raven trekked, the more he struggled to understand the shooter. In his mind's eye, he pictured the man pulling down his bandana to reveal a silver goatee and crooked nose. Those cold blue eyes had stared into Raven's, but when Raven had stared back, he had seen nothing but hatred. Their chase was like Brown Feather and his brother, Turtle: psychotic.

Raven halted to check on Creek. The dog had stopped to sniff the snow. Crouching down sent a flash of excruciating pain across Raven's ribs. Stars

danced before his vision. He sucked in an icy breath and waited for the pain to pass.

You're as light as a feather. Light as a feather, he repeated in his mind. It was the motto that had helped him in the past when darkness or pain threatened to send him over the edge.

After his vision cleared, he directed his flashlight at a cluster of red spots in the snow. Something or somebody had bled here. Creek took off running into the forest with the scent fresh on his muzzle.

Colton and Lindsey caught up to Raven a moment later. Another gunshot rang out before anyone could say a word. This one was closer than the first, and there was no doubt of the direction this time. Raven could tell it was coming from the northeast. Colton looked that way and flashed an advance signal.

They silently stepped off the trail and cut through the woods. Raven's shredded ear throbbed from the cold. He was really hurting now. Maybe Colton had been right back in the station parking lot. Hell, maybe he should have listened to Sandra just this once.

No. You have to fight.

The words from Thunderer in his dream replayed in his mind, and he brought his crossbow up with new determination. They had to find this guy and take him alive. It was the only way to figure out who these raiders were and what they were after.

For the next thirty minutes, they moved toward the direction of the second gunshot. The wind had died down, but the temperature continued to drop. It was going to be freezing soon, and while Raven at least had the proper clothing, his injuries were starting to slow him down.

He knew this area well, fortunately. They weren't far from the place where he'd found a missing girl that had wandered away from her family into the park. That seemed like a lifetime ago.

As they moved deeper into the woods, Raven found himself once again contemplating why the hell their chase would come all the way out here. Unless the man had somehow managed to patch up his injury and get some warmer clothes, he wouldn't last long in the frigid temperatures without shelter.

A chilling thought rushed through Raven as they worked their way through the trees. Was it possible this guy was a former soldier himself, maybe a Special Ops type that was trying to lure the officers out into the woods to

even the playing field? He recalled the heartless words the man had said when asked why the raiders had killed innocents. *They got in our way…*

Raven halted in the snow and searched the trees with his flashlight, cursing under his cold breath. What if he was leading his friends into an ambush? What if this guy was trying to inflict the most possible damage for no other reason than that he liked killing?

He suddenly had a bad feeling Hines and Beedie had already walked into a trap.

“Why are we stopping?” Colton asked quietly.

Gusting wind rushed through the spindly branches overhead, loosening the compact snow. Chunks plopped down and crumpled on the hard ground. The howl of the wind ebbed and flowed like the forest was trying to speak to them—a warning, perhaps.

Colton and Lindsey raked the woods with their flashlight beams. Lindsey’s captured Creek’s white fur. He was almost camouflaged in the backdrop of snow. The dog wagged his tail and then took off running down a narrow trail they had previously overlooked.

Raven whistled after the dog, his heart pounding at the thought of his best friend bolting into a trap. Despite the pain, Raven ran after Creek. Colton and Lindsey fell into line behind them. The trail Hines and Beedie had taken wound up through the Rockies, where it would intersect with Trail Ridge Road. They were already at nine thousand feet above sea level, and Raven was having difficulty breathing from his bruised ribs. It was only going to get worse from here.

He kept moving, pushing past the ache of his burning lungs. Colton and Lindsey were by his side now, jogging with their weapons raised.

They moved for another ten minutes until Raven had to stop and rest. He raised a hand, gasping for air. Colton directed Lindsey to hold security and then walked over.

“You okay, Sam?”

Raven nodded. “I’m good, just need a second to catch my breath.”

A flash of white darted across the trail, and Lindsey swiveled toward the movement. Colton raised his AR-15 and then lowered the barrel.

“Don’t shoot,” he said.

Creek had reemerged on the trail with something in his maw.

“I told you to get back here,” Raven said sternly. He signaled for Lindsey to watch their rear and for Colton to take point while Creek trotted over. The

Akita dropped a stocking cap on the snow in front of Raven's boots. He shone his light on the Estes Park Police Department logo stitched to the wool.

"Shit," Colton muttered.

Raven bent down and picked up the hat. "I think we got ourselves a real Rambo."

"Great," Colton said, spitting his toothpick out. "That's just fan-fucking-tastic."

Lindsey, shivering, looked away from her shotgun's sights to study the ridgeline. "There are some cabins and a ranch just over this hill, right?"

Raven knew the place she was talking about, but it still didn't make sense for the shooter to come all the way out here to take refuge. He motioned for Creek to get behind them. This time Raven took point with his crossbow aimed up the trail. Dizzy but relentless, he stalked his chase. They were getting close now—but Raven still had no idea what he would find at the end of this hunt.

"Stay sharp," Colton said, directing them onward.

The forest became a two-dimensional canvas, and Raven divided the terrain horizontally into thirds. His eyes moved with his flashlight beam, roving from left to right and back again in a systematic scan for movement. He was completely in tune with his surroundings, at one with nature, which helped keep his mind off the pain of his injuries. Flakes fluttered away from branches in the wind, falling to the rocky ground, but Raven paid them no heed.

Halfway up the trail, he slowed his pace and squinted at what looked like smoke rising from a chimney. They were right on the border of the park now. There were several people living out here. Some of them had been grandfathered in by the federal government, which allowed them to keep family property in the park, while others had built on the border.

Raven placed the butt of his crossbow against his shoulder and continued up the hill, his lungs rattling. He could see part of the valley beyond now. At the crest of the ridgeline, he stopped and shut off his flashlight, motioning for the others to do the same. Darkness flooded the forest, closing in like a blanket tossed overhead. Blinking, he waited for his eyes to adjust to the glow of moonlight. The wind howled and brought a voice that seemed to be coming from everywhere and nowhere.

"Help!"

Raven turned toward the silhouettes of Colton and Lindsey. For a split

second, he hesitated, unsure if this was part of the shooter's ambush. "Lights," he whispered.

One by one, their flashlights flickered on and illuminated a crumpled body at the bottom of the hill about two hundred feet away. The bearded man reached up toward the lights with a hand covered in blood.

"That's Beedie," Colton whispered. He scanned the area for several seconds. "Where the hell is Hines?"

Lindsey took a step forward, but Raven held her back. "Wait."

"I'll check it out," Colton said. "You guys cover me."

He set off down the hill, and Raven and Lindsey took up positions to cover him. Creek had vanished again, but Raven didn't call him back this time. He needed the dog in this fight even if it was a risk.

Colton cautiously made his way down the steep incline and stopped behind a tree about ten feet from Beedie. Raven could hear them talking quietly, but he couldn't make out the words.

Then a shout rose out above their hushed voices. "Over here!"

Lindsey waved at Raven and said, "That sounds like Hines."

She moved before Raven could stop her. For a moment his mind froze like the air around him. This didn't make sense. Why would Hines leave Beedie?

Gunfire whizzed through the forest, shattering his worried thoughts.

Raven dove for cover as bullets punched into the bark above his head. Return fire rang out at the bottom of the hill, lancing east toward the ridgeline. Flashlight beams crisscrossed the forest and sky like beacons. He shut off his beam and crawled in the pitch-blackness for safety.

For a moment everything was quiet, nothing but the rustle of the wind in the trees.

Then came the voices.

"Colton, where are you?" It was Lindsey.

"Stay where you are," Colton said back.

Raven pushed himself up, grabbed his crossbow, and set off at a hunch. Somebody was going to get shot if they carried on like this. Another flurry of gunshots flashed to the west and hit into the snow at the bottom of the hill.

Lindsey cried out in pain.

Light as a feather. Light as a feather, Raven repeated as he bolted for a tree. He stopped and whistled for Creek. He couldn't see the dog but knew he was out there, flanking the shooter. Raven was doing the same thing. He moved around the outcropping of rocks and halted to look down the valley.

Lindsey was crouched behind a tree, and Colton was about two hundred feet away. Hines was still nowhere in sight, and Beedie was still in the snow, unmoving now.

The shooter was positioned in a fort of rocks to the west, dug in from the looks of it. Raven kept his beam off and moved in the darkness, using his other senses to guide him. He scrambled across the snow, keeping low. If Raven couldn't see much, then neither could their chase.

Colton fired, speckling the terrain with bullets. Return fire flashed, and Raven used the opportunity to move behind the fortress of rocks. Creek darted through the woods to his right and disappeared a moment later.

We got you right where we want you now, Raven thought.

He raised his bow as he ran up a track to the top of the rock formation. It was narrow and gave Raven little room to maneuver. Halfway there, he crouched and waited for Colton to distract the shooter, trusting him to understand the situation and back his play. The cracks came a moment later. Raven bounded around the final outcropping of rocks and fired a bolt at the sniper positioned against the north side.

A scream of agony echoed through the valley. The man slowly turned toward Raven, who had dropped his bow and un-holstered his Glock. He prepared to shoot again, but then he realized something that made him draw in a sharp breath. The man was unarmed.

So where was the rifle they'd heard?

The man he'd shot staggered into the moonlight, and Raven glimpsed his face. Instead of a silver goatee and blue eyes, he saw the pained features of Officer Sam Hines. The tip of the bolt Raven had fired into his back stuck all the way out of his upper chest.

What happened next seemed to unfold in slow motion. His gut dropped as the hammer of a revolver clicked and a cold barrel touched his cheek. In his peripheral vision, Raven saw the man with the silver goatee, now dressed in a heavy winter coat and holding a Colt .45 revolver.

"I thought I killed you already," the man said. "Guess I gots to kill you again."

Hines collapsed to his knees a few feet away, groaning in pain.

Raven suddenly understood what had happened and how devious the trap had been. The shooter had ambushed Beedie and Hines, taken Hines hostage, and used him as bait. It was smart, really smart.

"Any last words, injun?" the man said.

“What were you, Delta Force, SEAL? Green Beret?”

“Don’t matter now. All that matters is this gun to your head.”

Raven had to keep the guy talking to give Creek a chance.

“You said on the road you killed those people because they got in your way,” he said.

“That’s right, and since this is the second time you’ve gotten in my way, I’m going to make sure you feel it.”

A growl came from above, and the man jerked the gun away to look for the source of the noise. Raven wasted no time turning and slamming into the guy. He glimpsed Creek standing on top of the rocks, teeth bared and saliva dripping from his mouth.

Raven wrestled the man to the ground, and Creek leapt on top of the pile. The shooter screamed in pain from the dog’s ferocious bites. While his dog worked on subduing their chase, Raven worked on getting the gun. He finally pulled it from the man’s grip and stood, pointing the gun down.

Relentless, Creek continued to tear at the guy’s neck. Raven let his dog have a few extra seconds before calling him off.

The question about the toughest, smartest, most lethal dogs had always been a matter of heated debate when Raven was in the Marines. Some people preferred German Shepherds, while others were partial to Rottweilers, Dobermans, or the Belgian Malinois. But for Raven’s money, there was nothing more fearsome than a pissed off fully grown Akita.

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It was nearing three in the morning and Albert, Corporal Van Dyke, and Sergeant Flint were still sneaking into the city. Albert hadn’t yet fired his rifle, but Van Dyke and Flint were already a good way through their first magazines.

They were making their way toward an apartment building towering in the distance. The entire fifteen-story structure had been burned to a crisp, leaving behind charcoaled scree and debris at the bottom. It wasn’t hard to see what started the fire weeks ago. Helicopter rotors stuck out from the top of the tower. Without a fire department to combat the blaze, it had torched much of the surrounding area. Albert’s boots left tracks in the ashen carpet covering the street.

Flint led the small team through an alleyway to avoid any contacts. The next street appeared empty. Most of the remaining residents were fast asleep, but it was the late-night prowlers that posed a threat.

They moved down another road clogged with stalled vehicles. At one point someone had attempted to push a few of them to the side, but had just ended up blocking the sidewalk instead. A charcoaled police cruiser was just ahead. Bullet holes riddled the side of the vehicle, and a skeleton was slumped next to the car, nothing but blackened bones.

That was the second police officer's corpse Albert had seen tonight. After a short prayer for his brother in blue, he moved his finger along the trigger guard. Whoever had killed that cop might still be in the neighborhood. They needed to find his sister—and fast.

Flint picked up the pace on the next street. He flashed hand signals, and the men fanned out in combat intervals, moving at a hunch and hugging the storefronts. Albert was growing more anxious with every step. What if Jacqueline wasn't there? What if something had happened to her already? It was a risk Albert had understood before setting out. He knew the journey could end with failure, even with his own death, but it was a risk he didn't regret taking.

A distant scream filled the night, stopping the men and sending them all crouching for cover. Albert searched the apartment building on the left side of the street. Hundreds of windows, some of them shattered, were directly overhead. In one of them, he saw a face looking down at him—a small one, perhaps just a child. By the time he brought his rifle up to zoom in with the scope, the person was gone.

The scream didn't come again. The city of Charlotte, once the financial center of the Southeast, was shrouded in silence. The lack of noise chilled Albert to the bone. Gone were the sounds of human engineering: cars, sirens, televisions, cell phones. It was like a time machine had transported Albert into a bygone era.

Flashing another hand signal, Flint snapped Albert from his trance. They were coming up on a large, gated park. Another fire, still raging nearby, cast a glow over the area, illuminating hundreds of trees, a playground with slides and swings, and a cluster of gardens built around a central fountain. Albert did a quick scan for contacts and then joined Flint by a shrub that shielded their position. Van Dyke held security on the sidewalk, looking over his shoulder and whispering for them to hurry the hell up.

Flint held the map for Albert to see. “We’re about two blocks away from your sister’s apartment.”

Albert nodded.

“When was the last time you were here?” Flint asked.

“Uh,” Albert muttered, “I’ve never actually visited her here before.”

Van Dyke flipped up his NVGs and wiped his forehead with a sleeve. “So you and your sister are real close, huh?”

The corporal snapped his goggles back into place. He didn’t say another word, but judging by his tone, Albert could tell he was annoyed. Flint looked over his shoulder at them again, likely thinking the same thing. Captain Harris had sent them out into a warzone to find the sister Albert had never even bothered to visit.

The thought made Albert feel nauseous. His guts dropped farther when a shout rang out. Instinct took over, and he brought his rifle up at a man standing at the street corner on the east end of the park.

“What we got here?” the man yelled. “Nice hardware.”

Five more shadowed figures strolled out onto the sidewalk and into the street, their bodies like green aliens in Albert’s optics. He scrutinized them in the seconds it took the group to walk out into the open, his police training kicking in. All six were carrying weapons, from baseball bats to a shotgun. Most of them were Latino and sported multiple gang tattoos, including the five-point crown symbol of the Latin Kings.

“Back up, bro,” Van Dyke said, directing his M4 at the man who had spoken.

Several of the gang members pointed flashlights at Albert, Flint, and Van Dyke. Albert continued scanning them, prioritizing who appeared to be the biggest threat. Five of the men were thin and muscular, but the guy carrying the baseball bat had tree trunk legs and a massive gut.

“Lower your fucking lights and get the hell out of here,” Flint ordered. He moved his barrel from face to face. “Don’t test me.”

It took only a moment to see who the leader was. A Latino man with a Mohawk and neck tattoos strode forward with a machete in hand, his jeans hanging low and a gray sweatshirt tight across his muscular chest.

“Yo, you guys look like GI fucking Joe!” he said.

The other men laughed in sync.

“More like a bunch of terminators!” the fat man with the bat chuckled.

“Shut the fuck up and back up, or I’ll shoot your little pecker off,” Flint

said.

Albert almost let out a sigh. Clearly Flint and Van Dyke weren't trained on winning the hearts and minds of the population. But it wasn't like these guys were the average civilian. Latin Kings were known for their brutality, just like MS-13, and the leader of this group was holding one of their weapons of choice, a sharp machete.

He took another step forward, twirling the weapon. His pants sagged farther down his butt, but he didn't bother pulling them up.

Flint pushed the barrel of his M4 in the man's direction, the red dot sight hitting him just below the belt.

"I said back the fuck off," Flint said.

The Latino man's eyes flitted down at the marker on his crotch. "All right, all right," he snarled. "But you and your GI Joes are in Latin King territory now, so you best watch your backs."

Flint and Van Dyke were slowly backpedaling. "Let's go, Randall," Flint said.

Albert didn't need to be persuaded. They all kept their guns shouldered, red dot sights flitting from chest to chest, ready to pull the trigger if the gang members so much as moved another inch. The leader watched them, nostrils flared like a raging bull, veins popping out on his muscular arms as he gripped the machete.

It was obvious the guy was waiting for the right moment to send his posse at the trio, but doing so would be suicide. They had automatic M4s, and these guys only had a shotgun and couple of pistols. As long as everyone stayed cool, they'd all make it out of the park.

A few steps later, a guttural crack sounded, and Van Dyke yelled out in pain.

Albert saw a flash of motion in his peripheral vision. Someone had flanked them. Another man with a baseball bat hit Van Dyke a second time in the back. The corporal crashed to his knees. Flint spun and pumped three holes into the attacker's chest, and then one in the head for good measure.

"Rear guard!" he yelled at Albert.

Albert was already moving. He fired a three-round burst into a man lunging forward with a knife, scoring shots to chest and gut. The gangbanger crumpled to the ground, blood gushing onto the road. Three more came at Albert, and Flint took two of them down with quick bursts.

The suppressed fire was answered by the boom of a shotgun. Flint cried

out in pain and hit the ground not far from where Van Dyke was still gasping for air.

Albert roved his rifle toward the shooter and fired directly into the man's face, blowing out an eyeball and sending a round up his nostril. The corpse fell to the ground, leaving only two gangbangers standing, including the man with the Mohawk.

The second guy took off running, but the leader screamed in rage and ran at Albert with his machete raised and a flashlight directed at his optics. The bright light blinded Albert for a moment. He pushed his night vision goggles up and fired blindly, holding the trigger down and spraying in the direction of the light.

A scream followed and Albert backed away, blinking. When his vision finally returned, the gang leader was striding toward Albert, gripping a wound with one hand and swinging his machete with the other.

Albert brought his rifle up and parried the machete attack. The clang echoed over the groans of the dying men around them.

The leader had lost his flashlight, leaving them in almost complete darkness. Albert didn't dare reach up and pull his NVGs down, so instead he backed away and listened for footsteps. The move likely saved his life, as he felt the machete slash the air where he'd been standing. He swung the rifle again but missed.

Another slash came, this one scoring a line of fire down his right arm. This time when Albert swung his weapon, he caught the man in the face with the butt of the rifle. He flipped his NVGs back into position to see the leader sprawled on the ground, a mouthful of teeth on the concrete next to his shattered face.

Albert breathed heavily as he scanned the other fallen gang members. The violence had driven the air from his lungs. It was the first time Albert had ever killed anyone, and he felt like he was going to puke.

The fat man reached for his baseball bat and Albert raised his rifle.

"Don't!" Albert shouted.

The man gripped the bat and pushed himself up.

"Drop it!" Albert yelled, louder.

The man staggered forward, and then fell backward as gunshots riddled his gut and chest.

Albert lowered his rifle, seeing Flint had been the one to fire. The sergeant's hand was slick with blood. He reached back down and gripped his

side where some of the shotgun pellets must have penetrated his vest.

“You hurt, Corporal?” Flint asked.

“I’m fine,” Van Dyke said. “Just winded.”

Flint nodded and pulled his hand away to have a look at his side. Albert tried to help, but the sergeant waved him away.

“Just a flesh wound,” Flint grumbled. “Come on, let’s go find your sister and get the hell out of this shithole.”

— 10 —

General Dan Fenix was freezing his ass off. Morning was still hours away, and it was cold as hell. He'd had to leave his camp, his dying men, *and* the rest of the beer. To make things even worse, he was now lost in the goddamn woods with Doc Rollins.

Their escape didn't matter if he and Rollins didn't find shelter soon. Otherwise, they were going to end up as icicles.

The howl of a wolf sang through the forest. Fenix raised his M4, and Rollins brought his weapon up a moment later. The guns moved in opposite directions to search for the beast.

The sound faded into the night, leaving the two men in silence and shivering in their coats.

"You sure you don't got a cigarette, Doc?" Fenix asked.

"Carson had us hand in all of our reserves this morning."

Fenix thought of his right-hand man, the guy that had given his life to protect Fenix. He could clearly picture the dozen sharp spears of wood sticking out of Carson's back.

"Fucking A," Fenix said, his teeth chattering. "What a c-clusterfuck."

He hoped some of his men had survived the attack, but he had his doubts. For all he knew, Rollins and him were all that was left of their camp. There was only one way forward. He had to reach the closest Sons of Liberty outpost before he froze to death. Or got his balls eaten by a wolf.

"Come on, Doc," he grumbled.

They continued north through the forest, following the compass Fenix always carried with him. It was five miles to the shack where two of his sentries were posted. They were equipped with a working radio that would allow Fenix to contact his men in the other camps scattered across Colorado.

Now if he could just find his way back to the road…

Another howl sounded in the distance, but Fenix didn't stop this time. He pressed onward, his aging joints creaking like the canopy of pine trees overhead. The thought of a cigarette and warm coffee kept him moving as the temperature continued to drop. Rollins shivered behind him, his rifle shaking in his grip. For October, it was an unusually cold night in Colorado. A storm front had moved in, bringing with it freezing temperatures and the threat of snow. Fenix spotted heavy clouds rolling toward the moon. The last thing he wanted was to be caught out here in a snowstorm.

After another hour of heading north, he finally came up on a hill overlooking a country road. The sight of asphalt filled him with relief. He crouched next to a tree and aimed his rifle at a single car parked in the middle of the road. Rollins stopped on the ridgeline a few feet away from Fenix.

"Looks clear," the doctor said.

Fenix held up a hand. "Hold on, Doc."

He focused on the car. It wasn't as good as a cabin, but it was shelter from the wind and cold. Maybe they could hunker down for a few hours until dawn. Fenix moved to scope the rear of the vehicle. He cursed when he saw the shattered windows. It wasn't going to keep them warm or protected.

After another scan for contacts, Fenix waved Rollins onward. They carefully made their way down the side of the hill and moved onto the shoulder of the road.

Rollins took to the right side and Fenix moved to the left. They walked for another half hour, maybe longer. A snowflake fluttered onto his face, stinging his cheek. Looking up through his stolen NVGs, he saw a sky full of flakes, like green confetti coming down at a New Year's party. A long green streak of light flared across the horizon. At first he thought it was a shooting star, but then he heard the unmistakable bark of an M240 gun. Tracer rounds ripped through the darkness.

"Down, down!" Fenix yelled. He bolted across the road and hid with Rollins near the base of a tree at the edge of the woods.

"Who's shooting at us now?" Rollins asked.

Peeking around the tree, Fenix spotted the outline of a helicopter hovering over the forest to the west. The tracer rounds were centered on a hilltop position, which at least meant the bastards weren't firing on his sentry post. According to his map, the post was tucked in a ravine.

Was this the helicopter gunship that had attacked his camp earlier come

back after refueling, or was this a new one?

He moved cautiously out onto the street, brought up the rifle to his NVGs, and zoomed in on the helicopter. It was a mile away, maybe more.

“Come on, Doc,” Fenix said.

Rollins reluctantly moved back into the road. They kept to the shoulder as they walked toward the battle, which lay between them and the sentry post. Ahead, the asphalt snaked around a corner that was blocked by more trees. Hills and snowy peaks protruded above the pines.

The snow picked up as the two men walked with their rifles aimed at the chopper. Flakes fluttered in front of his sights, and Fenix reached up to brush off the scope and his NVGs every few steps.

Over the din of automatic gunfire, he heard the faint rattle of an engine. He halted and then took a knee when he realized it was moving in their direction. The tracer rounds changed trajectory. One of them streaked down the road and hit a tree behind them.

“Shit!” Fenix yelled. He dove for cover just as a trio of pickup trucks rounded the corner ahead.

Fenix crawled behind a tree and was preparing his rifle when he saw men in black fatigues were firing from the beds of the pickup trucks at the chopper.

“Fuck yes! We got reinforcements, Doc!” he said.

“You sure those are our guys?”

Fenix wasn’t sure. In fact, it didn’t make much sense that they would run into the Sons of Liberty out here in the ass end of nowhere. But who else could they be? It had to be his men coming to rescue him, right?

“Give them some covering fire!” Fenix shouted. He pushed himself up and, using the tree for cover, roved his barrel at the helo. The suppressed crack of his rifle joined the chorus of war.

He held the trigger down with glee—sending rounds downrange was one hell of a feeling when you had your enemy in your sights, especially when the enemy wasn’t firing back at you.

Smooth as shit, baby, Fenix mused.

He fired burst after burst, more rounds cutting through the darkness. The bird pulled up, but the door gunner continued firing, relentless. Flames burst from the pickup in the back of the column, the gas tank igniting and sending the men in the bed cartwheeling away in a brilliant flash.

Another bullet whizzed toward Fenix, pushing him back. He changed his

magazine and waited for another opportunity to fire.

“Shoot your damn weapon!” Fenix yelled at Rollins.

The chopper continued its pursuit of the trucks, which were closing in on Fenix’s position. Fenix palmed the fresh mag into the cold rifle and angled the carbine up toward the cockpit.

“Die, you fucking traitors,” he growled.

The helicopter was heading right for him now, closing in on the trucks.

An explosion suddenly bloomed overhead, the bird blowing to pieces mid-air. Burning hunks of metal streaked through the sky, and a flaming corpse dropped to the ground like a flake of snow.

Fenix lowered his rifle and shielded his eyes with a gloved hand. The blast had been close enough that he could feel the heat on his face, and it felt damn good. He grinned and strode out into the road to link up with the Sons of Liberty soldiers that were apparently on their way to rescue his sorry ass.

“Doc,” Fenix said. “Doc, come on.”

He turned to see Rollins sitting in the snow near the tree, cross-legged, his hands on his stomach.

“Doc?” Fenix said. He hurried over and crouched down in front of Rollins, who looked up with sad eyes. His NVGs were pushed up on his forehead, and he seemed to be looking through Fenix instead of at him.

“I’m cold, General,” Rollins choked, reaching up with one hand. “You got a cigarette?”

Fenix knew by the question that Rollins was a dead man. The doc might have been a drunk, but he wasn’t forgetful. He put a hand on the doctor’s shoulder and moved him back slightly to see the blood splatter on his stomach.

“I’ll get you one,” Fenix said. He stood and turned toward the approaching trucks. “Just hang on. I’m sure one of these boys can spare a smoke.”

The rusty trucks and ancient Jeep eased to a stop, their engines coughing and whining. The front door of the lead vehicle opened, and a man with short-cropped gray hair stepped out. A hatchet and sheathed knife hung from a duty belt around his waist.

Fenix didn’t recognize him, but new soldiers were joining the ranks of SOL every day.

“Hello, boys,” he said. “You’ve got good timing.”

The man looked over his shoulder at the others but didn’t say anything. Several guns were still angled at Fenix.

“Lower your fucking weapons. It’s me, General Fenix, and I really need a cigarette.”

The man in camouflage laughed. “*You’re* Dan Fenix?”

“Who the fuck are you?” Fenix snarled. He took a few steps forward to look at the face of the man that had disrespected him so blatantly. The move earned Fenix another four guns pointed in his direction.

The man wagged a gloved finger. “Now, now, General. If you’d be kind enough to stay put, I promise we won’t shoot you dead.”

Fenix narrowed his eyes. The guy had some sort of an accent he couldn’t place.

“You don’t look like much, if I’m being honest,” the guy said. He shrugged and pointed a pistol at Fenix. “We’ve been looking for you for a while, but this is just too damn easy. It’s almost like it was meant to be.”

He reached down and pulled the hatchet from his belt. “I’m not sure how we’re going to spend the ten million in gold bars, but I’ve got a few ideas…”

Fenix had just long enough to realize he was well and truly fucked before someone clocked him on the back of the head.

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Colton punched the prisoner in the stomach for a third time. The man fell to his knees, hands cuffed behind his back, bald head dipped toward the concrete floor. He spat out a mouthful of blood and then looked up with a grin.

“You’re a bigger pussy than that injun,” he said.

Outside the jail cell, Raven unfolded his arms and strode forward, but Lindsey held out a hand to hold him back.

“Let me have a shot at this, Chief,” Raven said.

Colton shook his head. The last thing he was going to do was let Raven in here with this piece of shit.

“I got this,” Colton said. Without warning, he threw another punch at the man’s jaw. The crack echoed through the small cell.

“I’m only going to ask you one more time who you’re working for, asshole,” Colton said. “And you’re also going to tell me where your buddies are camped out.”

The man cracked his jaw from side to side, chuckled, and then spat at

Colton's feet. Whoever he was, he was a professional, and he wasn't saying much so far. But they had plenty of time to interrogate him.

It was still dark in Estes Park, and Colton had just gotten their prisoner back to the station. The bullet Raven had fired had gone clean through, and the guy had patched himself up pretty well before they found him. Of course, he'd sustained a few more injuries since then.

Officer Hines was at the Estes Park Medical Center, where the doctors were removing the arrow Raven had accidentally fired into his shoulder. Tim Beedie, the volunteer that had accompanied Hines on the hunt, was dead, having bled out from a gunshot wound in Beaver Meadows.

One hell of a night, Colton thought as the man in front of him continued moving his jaw back and forth. He finally looked up and held Colton's gaze, narrowing a pair of blue eyes surrounded by bulging purple bruises. Raven had done a number on the bastard before Colton could cuff him. Creek had also done some major damage to his neck and right arm. Bite marks and lacerations still oozed blood.

"You want me to set the dog back on you?" Colton asked. "Talk!"

"Screw you," the man growled. "I'm not telling you jack shit without a lawyer."

Colton almost laughed at that. Lindsey couldn't resist, chuckling so hard she ended up bent over with her hands on her knees.

"We're under martial law in Estes Park," Colton said calmly. "The only person that you're going to talk to is me."

He leaned down, tired bones aching as he crouched. "You killed seven residents of my town, and if you count Officer Sam Hines, you injured another seven. And for what?" Colton asked. He thought about hitting the man again, but he held back. Never in his career had he beaten information out of anyone before, but these were different times. The old rules of engagement didn't apply. That didn't mean he enjoyed it.

"You're not leaving me with many choices here," Colton continued. "You're either going to start talking or I'm going to start hurting you real bad."

Raven and Lindsey kept watch, their faces masks of worry, but Colton didn't let that distract him. He was determined to get this guy to talk with whatever means possible.

"Jason," the guy finally said. "My name is Jason. And what you don't understand is that nothing you can do to me will be worse than what my boss

will do to me if I gave him up to a fucking pig.”

Jason sucked in another long breath and then sighed, apparently done talking for now. His silver goatee was dripping blood from his broken nose, and his swollen eyes seemed to be getting worse.

Colton stood and let out his own sigh. He motioned for Lindsey to open the barred gate to let him out. Jason pushed at the floor with his cuffed hands and then sat on the single bench in the small cell while Colton left.

“Guess you won’t mind me leaving you with Raven,” Colton said. “I mean, he is a pussy and all, right?”

Jason’s eyes flitted to Raven, who cracked his knuckles.

“He ain’t a cop, either, so maybe you’ll be able to have a more cordial conversation,” Colton added.

“Doubt that, Chief,” Raven replied.

Colton shrugged a second time and jerked his chin at Lindsey. “Come on, Detective, let’s let Raven have a chat with our new friend.”

“All of you are dead when they come!” Jason yelled. He staggered over to the bars, the veins in his neck bulging as he looked at them.

Colton turned halfway. “When who comes?”

Eyes wide like a wild animal, Jason retreated back to the bench. “There’s a storm coming your way,” he said. “And there’s nothing you can do to stop it.”

***

The situation room at Constellation was packed with military and civilian staffers with high-level security clearances. Doctor Peter Lundy, the leading scientist at the facility, sat at the far end of the conference table, stroking his red goatee and reading over reports. Colonel Raymond and General Thor were at the head of the table with several of their staffers standing behind them. Even President Diego had stayed up into the early morning hours to monitor this situation.

Covering his mouth to hide a yawn, Diego said, “We got a SITREP yet?”

“Sierra Team found Fenix’s hideout about a mile from Apache Peak,” Thor announced. “The Rangers took two of the SOLs captive, but Fenix escaped. We’re still combing the area for him.”

Charlize couldn’t believe Fenix had gotten away a second time. It was

taking every inch of self-control not to shout orders to find him at all costs.

Stay calm, stay in charge, she kept repeating to herself. She already felt guilty about pulling strings to rescue Ty and now Albert's sister. Good men had died to bring Ty home, and Charlize would have to bear the burden of her decision to send Lieutenant Dupree's fire team to Colorado. Sending more Americans into danger just to get revenge on the man who murdered her brother would be beyond selfish. Except that Fenix wasn't just a murderer—he was a terrorist.

The atmosphere now reminded Charlize of the moments before the nuclear explosion that had leveled Washington, D.C. and destroyed the PEOC beneath the White House. The room was tense, the air fraught with shouts and updates as they monitored the raid. But this time the enemy wasn't North Korea—it was domestic terrorists that called themselves the Sons of Liberty.

All across the country, groups like SOL were popping up and threatening the survival centers. Gangs, vigilantes, and other groups hell-bent on taking generators, food, water, and supplies were making it very difficult to keep any sort of order at the centers. They needed to cut the head off this particular snake to stamp out the Aryan Nation groups rising in Colorado and neighboring states.

Colonel Raymond walked over to a wall-mounted monitor. They didn't have a real-time feed of what was happening in Colorado, but they did have a map that showed the area. Charlize had practically memorized every mountain, road, and trail in the state of Colorado over the past month. They'd had plenty of false leads and tips that led nowhere. But this time the lead was real. Fenix and his men were out there, hiding like rats.

"This is where the SOL camp was located," Raymond said, pointing. "Sierra Team is searching this area for Fenix and any other men that may have escaped."

Thor leaned over for a report from a staff member while Raymond continued briefing the president. Charlize took another drink of coffee. Not that she needed the caffeine. It was two a.m. and she was wide-awake. She just hoped Ty was sleeping peacefully. Maybe when he woke up in the morning, she'd be able to tell him that Fenix was dead and could never hurt him again.

Diego took a seat next to Charlize after Raymond finished his short briefing. The president offered her a tired smile.

"At least there's some good news," he said. "We've got more shipments of

generators, oil, and other supplies coming in on the west and east coasts from our allies. The British and French have also sent us soldiers to help move these resources across to our SCs."

"That's great," Charlize said. She wanted to ask if it was too little too late, but every shipment meant more saved lives.

"More troops are coming home, too," Diego added. "More men and women to protect our assets and deliver them to the people that need them."

Charlize considered asking if there were enough troops to send to Houston to help with the cholera outbreak, but she knew there weren't. It wasn't just a matter of able-bodied soldiers, it was a matter of logistics and moving supplies.

"Shipments from Australia and New Zealand will be arriving in a few days as well," Diego said.

She took a deep breath, but before she could add her opinion, General Thor stood and said, "Mr. President, we just got word from Buckley AFB that Sierra team has gone dark."

"What do you mean *gone dark*?" Diego asked.

"The pilots aren't responding over the comms," Thor said. "Buckley will continue trying to get through, but for now, we have no way to contact the pilots."

Charlize let out a huff of frustration. "Someone find out what the hell is going on," she snapped.

"We're doing our best, ma'am," Thor said. He sat calmly, eyes ahead.

Charlize was sick of sitting around calmly. The old military saying "Hurry up and wait" rang even more true now that communication happened at a snail's pace. The other staffers and officers went back to their duties while Charlize sat at the table, trying to keep her cool. Maybe she needed a break. She had been meaning to go check on Ty for over an hour now.

"We're going to catch him," Diego said quietly to her. "Fenix will not get away again. It's just a matter of time before he's in our custody."

Charlize thanked the president with a nod, but didn't reply. She stood and walked over to the wall-mounted monitor to look over the area herself. At least that would keep her busy. There wasn't much near Apache Peak, which made it one hell of a hiding place. The remote area gave them a ton of ground to cover, even for a helicopter, and especially at night.

"This is where we lost contact with the team," Raymond said. He pinched the touch screen together and zoomed in on a road. "The pilots said they were

engaging a convoy of vehicles before going dark.”

Charlize knew what the news meant. Sierra Team was gone, another victim to the Sons of Liberty.

“Goddammit,” Diego said. He balled his bandaged hand into a fist and stopped just short of pounding the table. “How long until we can get another bird out there?”

Thor shook his head. “An hour, sir. Maybe more. By the time we send another team, the enemy will be long gone.”

There was a long silence that seemed to linger. They were all aware that sending another bird wouldn’t find Fenix; all it would do was recover the bodies of the previous team. How many more men would die at the hands of these terrorists?

Diego shook his head, his bewildered expression like a poker player that had just lost a hand he’d been certain of winning.

“Send another helo to recover our boys and look for any survivors,” he said.

General Thor reached up to make a call when a knock came on the door. A female officer peeked inside.

“Sorry to interrupt, but there’s someone here that needs to see Secretary Montgomery,” she said.

Charlize craned her neck to look for the visitor, expecting an officer or scientist to be standing outside with more bad news. Instead she saw Ty, sitting in his wheelchair wearing his NASA t-shirt instead of pajamas.

He raised a timid hand.

“If you’ll excuse me, Mr. President,” Charlize said. She shot up from her chair and hurried out of the room, heart beating even harder now. The door closed behind her with a click, and she bent down in front of Ty.

“What’s wrong?” she asked.

“I… I can’t sleep. I keep thinking about *him*…have you caught him yet?”

— 11 —

Raven walked out of the Estes Park police station at sunrise. He sheathed his bloody knife and held a battered hand up to his face like an addict after a bad night, shielding his eyes from the rising glow of the sun. He *felt* like an addict after a bad night.

It was a new day in Estes Park. In a way, he felt like a new man—but not in a good way. He'd spent the past two and a half hours beating the living shit out of Jason Cole, a former Special Operations soldier and world-class asshole. It had taken some work, but Jason had finally come clean about his actions over the past few weeks.

What Jason had told Raven made him want to puke. The guy had taken the same oath as Raven to uphold the honor and safety of his country above all else. Instead, Sergeant Jason Cole had spent the past month raping, pillaging, and killing his way through Colorado with a group of bandits and raiders from Fort Collins. Who they were, exactly, he wouldn't say, but Raven knew enough now to take the information to Colton.

Creek trotted out of the station and followed Raven around the side of the building, looking up every few steps to check on his handler. Dogs could sense when someone was in pain. They picked up on the subtle signs humans could never see. Creek would do everything in his power to protect and comfort Raven. Now that was loyalty. That was honor.

And Creek wouldn't judge Raven for what he'd had to do to Jason.

Damn, I need a drink.

Raven shook his head. "No you don't, Sam."

Drinking was actually the last thing Raven wanted to do now. He was a changed man in more than one way, and he wasn't going back to his old habits. Sam Spears had made promises, and to keep them, he needed to be of

sound body and mind. Right now, he had to find Colton to explain what Jason's "storm" really meant.

He found the chief of police talking to the refugees in Bond Park. Even from a distance, Raven could tell Colton hadn't slept for more than an hour. Maybe not at all. That made two of them. Sleep, like New Zealand chocolate or a nice medium-rare steak, was a luxury Raven wasn't going to be experiencing for a very long time.

"Chief," he said.

Colton pivoted away from a tall, slender woman and a girl that looked to be about eight or nine. The girl straightened a multi-colored wool cap over her braided hair and looked at Raven, her eyes widening at the dried blood on his clothes.

"You got news?" Colton asked.

Lindsey made her way over, her smile slipping off her face at the sight of Raven.

I must really look like shit, he thought.

"Best we talk in private, Chief," Raven said.

"All right." Colton gestured for the street, and Raven followed him away from the park.

"Sir," the girl said as Colton walked away. "Can we stay or not?"

The tall woman put her hand on the girl's back and looked at Colton. "Sorry. Sarah's just anxious."

"I'll make my decision soon. In the meantime, please make sure your people stay in Bond Park, Jennie."

Jennie smiled politely and ushered Sarah back toward the tents. Smoke rose from the fire barrels, filling the area with the scent of cedar and metal.

"How'd it go with Jason?" Colton asked. His eyes flitted to Raven's bloodied knuckles.

"He's still alive, if that's what you mean," Raven said. He swallowed and forced the memories out of his mind. There was a mess to clean up, but that was the least of their worries right now.

Lindsey finally walked over and folded her arms across her chest. "What's going on?"

"Like I thought, Jason is a former Special Ops soldier. He's well trained, and I'm guessing the other raiders are too. He wouldn't give up his friends, but there are definitely more of them out there."

"You think he's part of the Sons of Liberty?" Colton asked.

Raven shook his head. “Nope, and he’s not aligned with Redford’s posse either. He’s one of the raiders that have been terrorizing the cities east of the mountains. Sounds like he’s from Fort Collins, but I couldn’t get much more out of him. He’s more afraid of his ‘boss’ than my blade.”

“Great, more psychopaths to worry about,” Colton said, heaving a sigh.

“I told you, Chief,” Raven said. “We’ve got enemies barreling down on us from all directions. We need to send out scouts, beef up our security, and make some friends.”

“We can start with them,” Lindsey said, jerking her chin toward the refugees. “They want to help.”

Raven wasn’t sure that welcoming so many refugees into town was the right move, but it wasn’t his call.

“All right, I’ve made up my mind,” Colton said. “Lindsey, change of plans. I want you to stay here while I go to the FEMA camp outside Loveland. Start arming the refugees and assigning them to roadblocks and other facilities. Then, I want you and Raven to head to Storm Mountain and convince John Kirkus to fight with us. Tell him about Jason and what’s headed our way.”

Raven raised a brow when Colton looked at him, knowing exactly what was coming next. He almost protested, but he shut his mouth and put his battered hands in his pockets. He had expected different orders, but he wasn’t complaining. He needed to get home to check on Sandra and Allie.

“But, sir, you can’t go by yourself,” Lindsey protested. “It’s far too dangerous.”

“I’ve got to do this on my own. We can’t afford to take another person off our barriers in town,” Colton said.

“At least get a few hours of sleep first,” Lindsey said. “You can’t go out there exhausted. You need to be sharp. Besides, the FEMA camp hasn’t sounded the all-clear yet.”

Colton hesitated and finally nodded. She was right; he couldn’t go out there until they had signaled the attack was over.

“I’ll head home and grab a few hours of shut eye and say goodbye to my wife and daughter. Radio me if you hear the all-clear. As soon as you do, I’m heading out there to see if I can track down Sheriff Gerrard. We’re going to need help if we have any hope of standing against men like Jason.”

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Sergeant Flint grimaced as he joined Corporal Van Dyke and Albert at the window. The sun was up and the city had come alive outside the apartment building where they were hiding out.

Albert kept to the shadows as he watched the street below fill with people. Some of them seemed to be normal citizens: men and women that looked like average office workers and neighbors, but a closer look revealed filthy faces, thin frames, torn clothes, and desperate eyes.

Everyone was looking for something, and most everyone was starving or on the verge of starving.

Albert took a drink of his water bottle. This was supposed to be a quick in and out, all under the cover of darkness, so they hadn't weighed themselves down with rations. But now they were going to need to wait until night to sneak back into the SC—assuming he was able to find Jacqueline first.

He shook his head. They were just a few blocks away from his sister's apartment, but after the attack in the park, the team had been forced to find cover and lick their wounds. Van Dyke had suffered two nasty strikes from a baseball bat, and Flint had been hit by the shotgun blast. Their armor helped save their lives, but they were still hurting.

Albert wondered if they were in any shape to move. Maybe he should tell the men to return to base without him while he continued the search for Jacqueline. This wasn't their fight, and he didn't feel right about putting them at risk for his sake.

"This is messed up," Van Dyke said, moving away from the window. "Soon as we show our mugs, we're going to get annihilated down there. Last Humvee that went outside the SC hardly made it back at all. Looked like it had passed through a gauntlet of machine gun fire."

"Captain Harris warned us," Flint said. "MS-13 and the Latin Kings are terrorizing this area. We're on their turf. You know what happened to…you know."

"What?" Albert said, turning from the window.

Van Dyke and Flint exchanged a glance.

"Is there something I don't know and need to know?" Albert asked.

"I'm sure you heard there is major gang activity in these areas," Flint said, pausing. "However, I doubt Harris told you details. A few weeks ago a group of National Guard soldiers were taken hostage. We found their bodies hanging from a bridge. All of them were skinned alive."

"My God," Albert said.

“We’re lucky, man,” Van Dyke said. “Back at that park, if those guys had captured us, we’d be the ones hanging from a bridge.”

Flint pointed to the closet. “See if you can find any clothes and some backpacks. We’ll change clothes and take what we can. I’m sure as hell not leaving these NVGs behind, though. Harris would shit a brick.”

Albert went back to look out the window. A dark-skinned man wearing a track jacket was standing on the hood of a vehicle halfway down the street. He cupped his hands over his mouth and shouted something Albert couldn’t make out.

“What’s he saying?” Flint asked. He moved over for a better look, one hand on his injured hip.

“Not sure, but looks like it’s got the attention of everyone down there.” Albert pulled the drape back for a better view as a crowd formed around the man. Several were carrying shotguns and rifles. Most everyone had a pistol holstered or wedged under a belt. There was enough firepower on the street to start a bloodbath.

“It’s all girl shit,” Van Dyke announced as he finished going through the closets. A pile of discarded shirts and pants were on the floor.

Flint looked over his shoulder. “Then go find another empty apartment and bring some stuff back.”

“You got it, Sarge,” Van Dyke said.

“Go with him,” Flint said quietly. “Last thing I need is Van Dyke getting spooked and blowing away some civvies.”

Albert nodded and followed Van Dyke toward the door. They removed some of their gear, including their packs, and proceeded out into the hallway with their weapons raised. It was quiet. The carpet reeked of stale piss.

“Clear,” Van Dyke said.

Albert followed him down the hallway. It felt odd walking through an apartment building wearing combat gear and carrying a machine gun, but he was slowly getting used to treating everyone like an enemy. People were shooting each other for cigarettes, and the gangs were committing unthinkable crimes.

Van Dyke stopped at an apartment halfway down the corridor. The corporal stopped and knocked on the door. When no one answered, Van Dyke nodded at Albert, who in turn kicked the door off the frame. A moment later they strode into the apartment with their M4s sweeping over the space.

“Clear,” Van Dyke announced in the living room. He flashed a hand

signal, and Albert proceeded toward a hallway, barrel roving to the left and then the right. Van Dyke followed him into the open passage and moved to the left bedroom while Albert took the right bedroom.

A stench hit his nostrils before he even opened the door. Raising his rifle in his left hand, he slowly pushed the wood door open with his right.

“Get out!” someone screamed.

Albert lowered his gun and reached out toward the boy that bolted from a hiding spot in the corner of the room. The kid dove for the twin bed before Albert could catch him.

“Shit,” Albert muttered.

The boy wedged his body under the bed and growled like a dog. Albert got down on his knees and looked under the side at an angle.

“I’m not going to hurt you, kid,” Albert said.

The boy appeared to be maybe seven years old with shaggy black hair. He was shirtless, and wore a pair of filthy jeans. The stink wasn’t just body odor—this kid had clearly soiled his pants.

“Where are your folks?” Albert asked.

The boy bared his teeth and growled again.

“Stop doing that,” Albert said. “You’re not a caveman.”

“Get out!” he screeched.

Albert held up his hands and slowly rose to his feet. “Okay, kid, just chill out.” He walked a few steps away, bringing a finger to his lips when Van Dyke moved into the doorway. Then Albert pointed at the bed, drawing the corporal’s gaze.

The boy peeked out a moment later and screamed again.

“GET OUT!”

Van Dyke laughed, but Albert shook his head.

The corporal backed into the hallway. Albert went to follow, but something made him pause. The kid looked like he hadn’t eaten in days, and he smelled like a dumpster. Albert couldn’t just leave him here like this. He pulled out his water bottle and put it down near the edge of the bed. Then he gestured for the energy bar he knew Van Dyke had in his vest.

“Hell no,” Van Dyke said.

“Don’t be an asshole,” Albert replied.

Van Dyke snorted and pulled out the bar. He tossed it to Albert, who set it on the floor beside the water. A hand shot out from under the bed. The water bottle and bar both vanished.

Albert listened to the kid eating, and waited a few minutes before speaking again.

“Can you come out now and talk to us?”

Van Dyke whispered, “What the shit for? We can’t help him.”

“Go find some clothes like Sergeant Flint ordered,” Albert said, shooting him a glance.

“Fine. Whatever, man.”

Albert bent down and sat on the floor casually, just like he would have done with his own kids. “Where are your parents?” he asked.

“They left me here. All by myself.”

“When?”

The boy’s dirty face peered out from under the bed.

“I don’t know,” the boy said. He wiped his lips and slowly crawled out. His ribs were showing. Red sores covered his stomach from scratching.

“My parents were on a trip to the White House.”

“The one in Washington, D.C.?”

A nod.

“They just left you here?” Albert asked.

“I had a babysitter, but she took off a long time ago.” He looked at the ceiling as if in deep thought. “She’s dumb anyway.”

Albert narrowed his eyes. He wasn’t sure what to make of this kid. “What’s your name?”

“Dave, but my friends call me D-Money.”

“I’m Albert, but my friends call me Big Al.”

Dave bit off another hunk of the energy bar and chewed noisily.

“How old are you?” Albert asked.

“Almost eight. You a football player or something?”

Albert smiled. “I was.”

“I’m going to be a pro someday. My dad said that I got some growing to do, but…” Dave flexed his right bicep.

“Impressive,” Albert lied.

Van Dyke returned a few minutes later with clothes draped over his left arm and two backpacks over his shoulders. “Found us some stuff. We better get moving. Sarge is waiting.”

Dave, still chewing, looked up at Van Dyke with a scowl. “Those are my dad’s clothes.”

“Yeah, well your dad ain’t here now, is he?”

“He’s coming back. You can’t have those,” Dave replied.

Van Dyke chuckled. “Whatever, kid.”

“Knock it off, Corporal,” Albert said. He stood and motioned for Van Dyke to get out of sight. The man looked like he was going to protest, but then just shrugged.

“I’ll meet you back in the other room in a few,” Albert said. “Me and Dave need to have a chat.”

Van Dyke left without a further word, and although Dave watched him go with the same scowl, he too remained silent.

“I don’t like that guy,” Dave said a moment later.

“He’s okay,” Albert replied. He let out a short sigh and said, “I got to be honest with you. Your parents probably aren’t coming home.”

Dave lowered the bar and stopped chewing. “Why would you say that?”

“Because Washington is gone. My family was there too, and they died. There was a bomb. I came here to find my sister, and I think you could help me.”

For a moment Dave just stared at Albert. Then the tears came racing down his dirty face, burning away the grime.

“I’m sorry,” Albert said. “Losing loved ones is hard, but you got to keep fighting. Even when your team’s down, you can’t give up.”

Dave’s sniffles gradually subsided, and he nodded firmly. “Okay, Big Al. I’ll come with you on your quest. It’ll be like the Fellowship of the Ring.”

Albert laughed. “Something like that… I guess.” He gestured toward the closet. “Change out of those clothes, okay? Grab something warm to wear.”

While Dave dressed, footsteps sounded outside the door. Albert raised his rifle but then lowered the barrel when Van Dyke and Flint moved into the room, frantic looks on their faces.

“Get out of your gear right now,” Flint said, shutting the door behind them.

“Why? What’s wrong?” Albert asked.

“That guy in the street earlier,” Flint said. “I heard what he was saying. Apparently those guys we killed last night weren’t just some low level gangbangers. One of them was pretty far up with the Latin Kings. They’re looking for three soldiers in black body armor.”

“We got to ditch the kid,” Van Dyke said. “He’ll slow us down.”

Albert looked at the boy, who was halfway into a sweatshirt. Dave pointed at Flint. “You’re Legolas, ’cause you got big ears,” Dave said.

Flint raised a brow. “No, I’m Sergeant Flint.”

“Leave the goddamn kid,” Van Dyke insisted.

“We need him,” Albert said. “Those people are looking for three soldiers, right? Three guys and a kid won’t be as suspicious, then.”

Flint snorted. “Okay, fine, whatever, but we need to get moving, stat.”

Dave threw on a Ninja Turtles sweatshirt, and grinned to reveal two missing teeth. “Let the Fellowship of the Ring begin!”

— 12 —

The radio crackled, stirring Colton awake.

“Chief, this is Don, you copy, over?”

Colton groaned in his bed and picked up the radio. He paused for a moment to sit up and then said, “Copy, Don. Go ahead. Over.”

“The FEMA camp is all clear. Detective Plymouth said you wanted to know.”

“Roger that. I’ll be at the station shortly, over.”

Colton rubbed the sleep from his eyes and looked out the window. He had no idea how long he’d slept, but it was still light outside. The bedroom door creaked open and Colton’s wife, Kelly walked in holding a cup of coffee.

“I thought I heard voices,” she said.

Colton swung his legs over the bed and she brought him a warm mug.

“It’s pretty watered down, but I’m rationing.”

“This is great, thank you,” Colton said.

For several minutes he sat on the edge of the bed drinking the watery coffee. Kelly watched in silence, waiting for him to speak. He was so exhausted he couldn’t find the right words. Instead, he stood and walked downstairs to the kitchen table. Kelly joined him, and a few more moments of silence passed.

“I don’t like you going by yourself,” Kelly finally said. “In fact, I hate it. I can’t believe I’m saying this, but maybe you should take Raven with you.”

Colton shook his head. “No, he’s needed here. I can’t risk pulling a single man away from our barriers right now, either. We need all the firepower in Estes Park that we can manage.”

He took another slug of coffee. The caffeine was starting to kick in, but what he really needed was another five hours of sleep. After a second gulp of

the weak brew, he set the cup back on the kitchen table and went over the checklist he and Kelly had created to help their family get through the winter. Colton noted with pride that forty of the fifty items had already been completed.

“This is good, Kelly. While I’m gone, I’d sure appreciate it if you could get—”

“Marcus, I really don’t want you going by yourself,” she interrupted.

He looked up to meet her gaze. “I have to go.”

She folded her arms across her chest. “So I don’t get any say in the matter? That’s what you’re saying?”

Colton waited a moment before replying. He was on edge from the lack of sleep and the violence of the previous day. The last thing he wanted to do was get into an argument with his wife right now, especially before heading out on a dangerous mission.

“I have to do this for our town, and our family,” he said. “We’re not going to make it without help.”

To his surprise, Kelly nodded and said, “I know, Marcus. I’ve never been able to talk you out of anything you were determined to do. It’s just…we need you to come home, okay?”

He covered her hand with his. “I promise, love.”

After a moment, she grabbed the checklist and looked it over. “I’m behind on a few things you asked me to do, but I’ll get caught up today. I’m heading into town with the Travises from next door.”

A spike of fear went through him. “No, dammit! I told you a dozen times already that you have to stay inside,” Colton snapped. His words were sharper than he meant them to be. “I’m sorry. I’m exhausted. But it’s not safe out there. We lost seven people yesterday. I don’t want you going anywhere until I’m back. We have plenty of food, water, and supplies until then.”

Kelly reared back to study him. “Keep your voice down, Marcus. Risa is already worried enough. Frankly, I’m worried too if you’re keeping things from me. What’s going on out there?”

Colton stood from the table and gestured for his wife to follow him to his office, where they could talk in private. Risa looked up from the book she was reading on the couch as they passed.

“We’ll be right back, sweetie,” Kelly said.

Colton quietly shut the door to his lightly furnished office, taking a moment to look at the snow-brushed boulders in their backyard right outside

the window.

“I’m sorry about cursing,” he said.

Kelly held his gaze for a moment and then nodded. “I understand you’re tired, and that you have a major burden trying to keep everyone safe, but don’t snap at me. I’m your ally, not your enemy.”

“You’re my rock.” Colton reached out, and Kelly hesitantly accepted a kiss to her forehead.

“I’m scared, Marcus,” she said when he pulled away. “What if something happens to you out there? Isn’t there anyone else you can send on your behalf or take with you?”

Colton thought for a moment, but who could he send? He didn’t trust Don, and it was too dangerous to send Lindsey. The detective was tough and savvy, but a pretty young woman like her would be a target for every raider from here to Loveland. Raven didn’t know the first thing about negotiation. There wasn’t anyone that could do this job but him.

“I’m sorry, but there’s no one else that can do it.”

Kelly wiped at her eyes, smearing a tear into her hair. “I wish Jake could go with you. He always had your back.”

Colton glanced at the picture of him and Jake Englewood on his desk. They were younger men then, and stronger. God, how Colton wished he was still here to help fight the coming battles. Kelly stepped over to his bugout bag and rucksack on the floor in front of his desk. His gear was all spread out, including his weapons and ammunition.

“Looks like you’re preparing for a war,” Kelly said.

“I’m preparing for the future,” he said. For the past month he’d shared most everything with his wife, trusting her to handle the harsh realities of their world with the same strength and grace she’d always shown during their marriage. But now, as he was about to leave Estes Park for the first time since the bombs dropped, he feared telling her what Jason Cole had said. It would only make her worry.

“What else aren’t you telling me, Marcus? I know there’s something…”

He almost laughed; she was sharp as ever. “Raven and I both think a fight is coming. Not like the skirmish with the raiders or the sporadic violence we’ve seen in the past few weeks. Something much, much worse. That’s why I’m going out there to find help.”

Kelly was silent for a moment, fear radiating from her eyes. He wrapped his arms around her and held her for several moments. “How bad is it out

there?” she asked.

“It’s getting worse every day,” Colton said. “The FEMA camp outside Loveland was attacked, Fort Collins is in shambles, and Denver is hell.”

Kelly placed a hand on her heart, silent.

“We’ve been lucky compared to the cities east of the mountains, but the violence that’s torn those communities apart is headed our way,” Colton continued. “I have to find allies to help us keep order until the government can make it out this way and get the grid back up. I just hope we can survive until then.”

Kelly locked eyes with Colton. “Can’t Secretary Montgomery help?” she asked quietly, like she knew it wasn’t possible.

“She’s got her hands full with a thousand other communities that need help. Estes Park already got more than most.”

The door creaked open and Risa walked into the office. She clutched her stuffed donkey to her chest, the one Colton had wanted her to give up. He was glad she’d kept it.

Risa looked at the rucksack and bugout bag, tilting her head curiously. “Papa, are you going somewhere?”

“Yes, sweetie, I’m going to meet some friends.”

“Can I come?”

“I’m sorry,” Colton said. “I need you to stay here, okay?”

Kelly gestured for Risa. She walked over, and Kelly wrapped her arms around their daughter. Having his wife and daughter staring at him with fear in their eyes broke Colton’s heart—but it was the exact reason he had to leave them tonight. This was the best way to protect them.

“I’ll be back in two days,” he said. “I’ve already told Raven and Detective Plymouth to check on you guys.”

Kelly nodded. “Okay.”

He hesitated, and then said, “You still have that thing I gave you?”

“Yeah.” Kelly lifted up her shirt slightly so Colton could see the grip of the pistol without Risa seeing the gun.

“Good,” he said. “Remember to keep rationing the food and water. If something happens, go to the safe room in the cellar.”

“I hate that place,” Risa said. “It’s dark, and cold, and…”

“It’s a safe place, kiddo,” Kelly said, running a hand through Risa’s hair.

“Actually, let’s go take a look at it before I go,” Colton said. “I’m going to grab some more gear from there.”

They made their way through the house to the basement, where Colton had installed a safe room after the 2013 floods. Usually they used a bookshelf filled with paint cans to hide the steel door, but he'd gone inside for gear earlier and had pushed it aside.

Colton clicked on his flashlight and walked into the large room that was built directly under their deck. Bunk beds were positioned against the north wall, and barrels of fresh water and crates of MREs lined the west and east walls.

"If something happens, this is where you're going to come with your mom," Colton said to Risa. "Do you understand?"

Still clutching her donkey, she just stared into the dimly lit space.

"When I'm gone, you listen to your mom, okay?" Colton said.

This time Risa nodded, once.

Colton continued into the room and grabbed a box of the MREs. He wasn't planning on being gone long, but he would take them just in case. He set the box outside the door, closed it, and then pushed the bookshelf back into place.

A few minutes later, they were loading his gear into the Jeep outside. Colton threw the rucksack on the passenger seat. Next came his rifles: an M14 and an AR-15. He kept one Colt .45 holstered and set the other on the seat.

"I love you both," Colton said after shutting the passenger door. "I'll see you in two days."

Risa hugged him around his waist and buried her head against his chest. Kelly kissed him, hugging both Colton and Risa tight. Something about the moment seemed final, like…

No, don't even start thinking like that, Marcus.

"I'll see you soon," Colton said. He jumped into the Jeep and waved as he backed out of the driveway. As soon as he pulled onto East Elkhorn Avenue, the questions and doubts in his mind vanished. He remembered the oaths he'd sworn to his country, his family, and his town. Sometimes an oath required a man to pick the safety of others over his own. Colton would protect Kelly, Risa, and all the other people of Estes Park, no matter the cost to himself.

He drove with a renewed sense of purpose and made good time to downtown. Colton spotted Lindsey and Don talking outside Bond Park. The patrol sergeant's presence at the refugee camp was a bad sign. Colton sped down the final stretch of street and then parked outside town hall. He

motioned for Lindsey and Don to come over to the Jeep.

Lindsey leaned down to the truck and said, “Thank God you’re here, Chief. We heard some crazy news. I’ll let Don tell it.”

Don pulled off his cowboy hat and scratched at his thinning hair. “I was finally able to reach someone at the Larimer County’s Sheriff’s Office with the radio,” he said. “Sheriff Gerrard was shot dead by raiders. Apparently one of his deputies, Mike Thompson, has taken over.”

“The UFC fighter?” Colton asked.

“Yeah, that’s the one. Real gunslinger with a killer instinct,” Don said, stepping up to the Jeep.

Colton tilted his head. “Sounds like he’s the guy I need to talk to, then. Do you know where he’s holed up at?”

“Fort Collins,” Don said.

“I guess that will be my second stop after the FEMA camp.” Colton paused to look Don in the eye. “The FEMA camp is all clear? The attack is over?”

A quick and firm nod from Don. “That’s right. You’re good to go, Chief.”

“Okay,” Colton said. “I’ll head inside now to listen to the broadcast and see if I can arrange a time to meet up with the new sheriff.”

Colton went to shut off his Jeep, but Don stopped him with his hand. “I heard from the station at Fort Collins that Thompson just left with several deputies. I’ll radio him and let him know you’re coming. It will save you some time.”

“Sounds good,” Colton said, anxious to get moving. “I better get going.”

“Good luck,” Don said. He spat chewing tobacco juice on the pavement and put his cowboy hat back on. Lindsey looked over her shoulder as he strode by Bond Park. She scowled as Don eyed the refugees with distaste.

“He said anything about my decision to let them stay yet?” Colton asked.

“Said you weren’t thinking with your head. I told Donnie he needs to try thinking more with his heart.”

Colton smiled. “Not sure he has one.”

“That prick should be the one going out there to meet with the sheriff,” Lindsey said with a snort. “Personally, I don’t trust Thompson. I heard he’s got a temper and has multiple pending cases against him for using excessive force.”

“Another reason I should be the one to meet him,” Colton said. “I wouldn’t trust Don to make us any friends.”

“Agreed.”

“Just keep things in line here and make sure Raven stays out of trouble,” Colton said. “Where is he, by the way?”

“He’s spending some time with Sandra and Allie at his place. We’re going to leave for Storm Mountain later today to see if we can get a meeting with John Kirkus and his men. Anything specific you’d like me to say or offer Kirkus?”

Colton paused to think, then said, “I’d like you to talk to John about establishing an outpost there to warn us of attack along Highway 34. If they say no, you’re authorized to offer them a few horses and some diesel for their generators. If they say no to that, tell them they can have all the access they want to the park to hunt in return for their help.”

“Roger that. What are you going to offer Sheriff Thompson for his help?”

“I’m honestly not sure yet, but I’ve got a good drive ahead of me to think about it.”

She patted the Jeep door, her gaze moving toward the front of the police station where Mayor Andrews and Tom Feagen were standing. Colton waved and then put the Jeep in gear. The last thing he wanted to do was talk to either of them.

“Good luck, Chief,” Lindsey said.

“You too, Detective.” Colton paused and glanced back at Lindsey. “One more thing. Tell Raven to keep his mouth shut on Storm Mountain. He’s there to protect you, and that’s it.”

She patted her gun and grinned. “More like I’ll be the one looking out for him.”

Colton smiled and waved goodbye. He glanced in the rearview mirror as he drove away, studying the crowd in Bond Park. Something told him he was going to have more problems on his hands when he came back…assuming he came back at all.

***

Fenix stood by the window of his cell looking out over the snowy forest, trying to figure out where the hell he was being held prisoner.

The good news was these guys weren’t military, but the bad news was they were going to hand him over to the military as soon as they could secure their ten million dollars in gold.

Fenix pounded the concrete wall with his palm.

In a single night, he'd lost most of his inner circle and was completely cut off from the rest of his network. They were probably out there looking for him right now, but if he didn't make it back in a few days, his power would transfer to Zach Horton, a former Army Sergeant that Fenix had known for over a decade. He liked Zach, but the man wasn't ready to lead the Sons of Liberty.

I have to get back to my men. I have to finish what I started.

"Let me out of here!" Fenix yelled at the top of his lungs.

The noise attracted the attention of one of the guards. The steel door creaked open, and a man with silver hair stepped in. Fenix recognized him as the bastard who'd shoved a gun in his face last night on the road. Two more men stood sentry in the hallway, all of them wearing fatigues. These men, whoever they were, didn't have any symbols or logos on their outfits. So who the hell were they?

"Shut your trap before I shut it for you," the guard said.

Fenix snarled. If it weren't for the cuffs on his wrists, he would have dropped this guy with a punch to the throat.

"Where the fuck am I?"

"You're in a prison cell."

Fenix clamped his jaw shut and managed his anger for a moment before replying. "You do realize my army is going to be coming after me, right?"

The man stared at him, sizing him up, and Fenix did the exact same thing in return. The guard stood at least six feet tall and had sharp features. His fatigues were tight enough that Fenix could see sculpted muscles beneath the fabric.

"You going to tell me your name?" Fenix asked.

"Hacker." He pulled the duty belt up around his waist, rattling two sheathed knives, a pair of pliers, and the hatchet he'd pulled out on the road the night before.

Fenix laughed when he made the connection. "Hacker, like you hack people up? That's fucking funny."

The guard smiled back. "I'm not worried about your racist, ignorant friends, to be honest. They didn't do very well against the United States military last night, now did they? Us on the other hand…well, you saw that helo go down in a hail of gunfire."

Fenix felt his face warm. Footfalls in the hallway distracted him

momentarily. They weren't the heavy echo of military boots, but rather the click of dress shoes. A man Fenix hadn't seen before rounded the corner, dressed in a pinstriped suit with a red pocket square in the breast pocket. Black leather shoes, polished to a shine, clacked on the floor. His long dark hair was combed back into a neat ponytail. Like Spears, he seemed to be some kind of Indian. Fenix couldn't be bothered to guess what type. They were all the same, anyway.

"That will be all, Hacker. I'll take over now," the man said.

With a nod, Hacker moved out of his boss's way.

"I've met Hacker, so what the fuck is your nickname? Crazy Horse?" Fenix asked.

Hacker stepped forward, drawing a buck knife, but the well-dressed man held up a hand. "Hacker's been instrumental in collecting many debts over the years for me. I really don't think you want to see how good he is with his tools."

"Yeah, I get the point, but that's a pretty stupid name if you ask me," Fenix said.

Hacker twirled the knife and said, "Please give me a few minutes with this asshole, sir."

The man in the suit raised a hand to silence his subordinate. Hacker backed off immediately, and Fenix felt the first trickle of fear. Whoever this guy was, even the knife-toting psycho respected him.

"So who the hell are you?" Fenix asked with furrowed brows.

Tightening his tie, the man directed his cold, bottomless gaze at Fenix. "You can call me Mr. Redford."

***

Sandra sat on the swing on Raven's porch. His land was on the edge of Rocky Mountain National Park. Aspen and ponderosa trees formed a natural fence around the yard. A creek meandered along the foothills. She listened to the trickle of water and the whispering wind as it worked its way through the canopy of trees.

Allie giggled as she chased Creek across the yard. The dog left tracks behind in the thin carpet of snow. It was getting colder by the day, and soon Sandra would be getting out her winter jacket and gloves. The thought of

winter made her shiver, and she folded her arms across her fleece jacket.

A creaking sounded behind her as the front door swung open. Raven stepped out holding a jar of tea and a plate of crackers and elk jerky. He placed them both on the table within reach of the porch swing and then took a seat next to Sandra, letting out a relaxed sigh. She tried not to look at his battered hands. Sandra suspected that he'd busted his knuckles open interrogating the man who'd shot him. Still, the nurse in her reached out to check them.

"What am I going to do with you, Sam?" she asked.

Raven pulled his hand back and brought his fingers up to his sheared-off ear.

"Don't touch it," Sandra said. "If you get an infection, you're going to lose the entire thing. Listen to my advice for once in your life."

He lowered his hand. "I never ignore your advice. I just choose to go my own path."

Sandra wagged her head and reached across Raven and plucked a couple of crackers off the plate. She popped one into her mouth. They were stale, but she didn't care. They couldn't afford to be picky about food these days.

"You're going to get yourself killed, and then what are Allie and I going to do?"

"I've proven I can take care of myself," he said.

"You've proven you're tough as hell, but a man can only sustain so many broken bones and bruises before he ends up in a grave. How are your ribs, by the way?"

He patted his chest gently and shrugged. Then he hollered at Allie and Creek.

"You guys want something to eat?"

Sandra tried not to let her frustration bleed through, but every time her brother went on a scouting mission, she wondered if it was the last time she would see him. Now, more than ever, they needed to stick together. That's what families did when times got tough.

Allie and Creek joined them on the porch, and for the first time in days, they sat sharing a meal and listening to the sounds of nature. Sandra decided to give up on talking to Raven about his Rambo antics and just enjoy the moment.

The sense of peace didn't last.

A memory of the conversation with Teddy and Allie back in the hospital

surfaced in her mind. She felt helpless to protect Allie from the death surrounding them. The wave of violence heading their way wasn't going to stop, and Raven couldn't protect them forever.

"Can we go play more?" Allie asked after a few minutes.

Sandra nodded. Grabbing a few more pieces of jerky, Allie then ran back out into the yard with Creek. Sandra and Raven sat in silence, watching the little girl and the dog, impossibly gentle no matter what Allie did.

"What do you plan to do next?" she asked after a while.

Raven rubbed at his eyes and stifled a yawn.

"I'm going to head up to Storm Mountain with Lindsey to see if we can get John Kirkus and his boys to form some sort of alliance or something."

"And then what?" Sandra asked.

Raven glanced over at her. "We identify our weak points, secure our borders, make some friends, and prepare for what comes next."

"Which is what?"

"War," he said. "We have enemies on all sides. Estes Park is doing well, relatively speaking, and there's a lot of people faring way worse than our town. I'm surprised we haven't seen more refugees, to be honest."

Sandra zipped her fleece jacket up to her chin, suddenly freezing. Her final question was the one she had been dreading to ask, but she had to know.

"Do you still plan on going after Nile Redford and that Nazi asshole?"

Raven leaned back on the swing, the wood creaking.

"My priority is to keep you and Allie safe."

Sandra smiled at his response. Maybe she could even convince Raven to give up his quest to kill Redford and Fenix. She hated Fenix for killing Nathan, but she couldn't bear the thought of losing her brother too.

Her heart broke all over again when she thought of the pilot. They'd never had a chance to find out whether they had a future together. He'd been a good man—one of the best she'd ever met. And Fenix had taken him from her, just like Brown Feather had tried to take her daughter and Redford had taken the town's supplies. There were too many men out there who took what they wanted without regard to the damage they did. If Raven kept going after them, he would end up dead, just like Nathan.

"What's wrong?" Raven asked, sensing her sadness.

"Nothing, I was just thinking."

Raven studied her for a moment, and then stood to stretch his back and arms. He stepped over to the porch stairs and looked back at her. "Now I

have a question for you, sis.”

“What’s that?”

Raven pulled the Glock out of his waistband and held it up. “Which one of us is going to teach Allie to protect herself?”

— 13 —

Albert slowed to look at their reflection in a Radio Shack window as he passed by with Sergeant Flint, Corporal Van Dyke, and their new sidekick, Dave. Aside from the weapons the men carried, Albert and Flint looked like they were about to go on a Caribbean cruise. They were dressed in tight button-down shirts sporting palm trees and umbrellas. The only things missing were flip-flops and sunglasses. They were the only clothes Albert had found that actually fit him and the sergeant, and “fit” was not exactly the proper way to describe these jeans.

Albert loosened the belt another notch, but that didn’t help the fact the jeans were still several inches too short and far too tight in the legs, more like women’s Capri pants than anything. At least the shirt covered his body armor.

Thankfully Van Dyke had found something that didn’t look ridiculous. He wore an Under Armor shirt and cargo pants, and his backpack was stuffed full of their night vision goggles and extra magazines.

They were an odd-looking bunch, and Albert was starting to wonder if they wouldn’t have been better off wearing their fatigues or simply staying put until nightfall. Sergeant Flint however, had been adamant about getting back to the SC as soon as possible.

The group cut through alleyways, avoiding the roads on their way to the apartment building where Albert hoped to find his sister. He looked up at the gray sky, wondering what time it was. The team had already wasted time looking for more clothes and then another two hours avoiding the groups of civilians prowling through the streets. They’d had to stop several times to change Flint’s dressings. His wound was still bleeding, and the threat of infection had Albert worried.

A gunshot cracked in the distance, but none of the group, not even Dave, stopped to take cover. They were all used to the noise now.

“When do I get a gun?” Dave asked.

“Frodo had a sword, not a gun,” Albert replied. Dave had already decided he was the Hobbit hero of the group, since he was the shortest.

“Okay, then I want a sword.”

Flint and Van Dyke both chuckled, but Albert stopped and turned to Dave. He reached into his backpack and pulled out his tactical knife. Dave’s eyes widened and his lips curled into a grin that showed off his missing teeth.

“Can I have it? Does it glow when bad guys are around?” Dave asked.

“No, it doesn’t glow,” Albert said when he realized Dave was serious. “Don’t take it out of the sheath unless I tell you.”

Dave picked up the knife, holding it aloft in both hands reverently, like it was a holy relic. “Thank you, Mr. Big Al.”

“Come on,” Flint said.

They continued onward, walking casually but cautiously. Flint and Van Dyke avoided flashing hand signals or talking in military lingo. Instead, the sergeant and corporal played the part of lost tourists trying to make their way out of the city, something they had discussed before leaving the apartment earlier.

So far it was working.

The people on the street paid them little attention. The only thing that could possibly give them away was their rifles, but pretty much everyone was armed out here. Only a few civilians looked in their direction. From the conversations they overheard, it seemed like the majority of people were heading toward the SC or out of the city.

“They were giving out food last night,” Albert heard a woman say as they passed her. The dark-skinned woman had two small children with her, a boy and a girl, their hands gripped tightly in hers. “They might do it again today, so we’ve got to go see.”

“But we have to wait for daddy,” the girl said.

The woman didn’t respond as she hurried down the sidewalk away from Albert and his team. He considered warning her against going to the SC, but they were so close to his sister’s apartment and he had his hands full with Dave. The kid had stopped to look at a pile of trash on the side of the street, bending down to examine something while the soldiers continued down the sidewalk.

“Let’s go,” Albert said.

Dave looked up with his fingers clamped on his nose. “It smells out here.”

“So stop sniffing everything like a dog,” Flint said. He waved them toward the street corner that Van Dyke was already approaching.

Two Caucasian men and a woman were hanging out on the patio at the abandoned Starbucks. Albert, in police mode, scanned them for weapons, but he didn’t see any on them or in the bags they had stowed under the metal tables. The trio looked in his direction briefly, but then went back to talking.

A skirt of glass surrounded the front entrance where someone had thrown a chair through the window. From a quick glance, Albert could see the coffee shop had been raided weeks earlier. Another group of civilians caught his attention across the street. The man leading the group held a shotgun, and one of the women had a pistol tucked in her waistband. The man dipped his head at Albert, and Albert returned the respectful but wary gesture.

In some ways, trekking through Charlotte was like being in the Wild West, where everyone was packing heat and no one knew who they could trust.

Albert looked back at the people sitting outside Starbucks. He gripped his own carbine tighter and looked for weapons again, even more suspicious now that he didn’t see any. One of them was smoking a joint, filling the air with the scent of marijuana.

Dave skipped alongside them, clutching the sheathed blade in both hands, oblivious to all the possible threats around them. He no longer seemed to care that Albert and the soldiers had taken his dad’s clothing. He’d retreated into his own little fantasy world and seemed to be enjoying his role as an adventurer for now. But the kid was going to crash eventually, especially when it sank in that his parents weren’t coming home.

“We’re hobbits, Mr. Big Al,” Dave was saying. “Hobbits need a second breakfast, and I’m hungry. Can we stop for some taters?”

Flint glared over his shoulder. “Shut up, kid. You’re driving me crazy.”

“Yes, sir,” Dave said, halting to throw up a salute.

Flint pointed to the set of old apartment buildings at the end of the next block. They were at least five decades older than the more modern construction around the area. Albert’s twin sister had always enjoyed older things—books, architecture, hot rods…men.

“That’s our target,” Flint said.

“Just a little bit farther until we’re home,” said the corporal loudly, playing the part of civilians in case anyone was listening.

Dave stopped next to Albert and looked up at him. “We’re adding your sister to the fellowship now?” he asked curiously.

“I sure hope so, buddy.”

“Well, what are we waiting for?” Dave said, his brown eyes lighting up with excitement. “Lady Big Al needs rescuing!”

Albert smiled. He was really starting to like Dave.

They continued down the sidewalk, approaching the intersection.

“Those are some nice machine guns,” said one of the men sitting on the Starbucks patio.

Flint and Van Dyke stopped in the intersection while Albert hung back with Dave on the sidewalk. The two men and the woman stood and blocked the path in front of them, but their attention was on Van Dyke and Flint.

“What’s in the bags?” asked the woman. He guessed she was in her twenties, but too much tanning and substance abuse had added an extra ten years to her appearance.

“None of your business,” Flint said.

The two men grinned. Albert scanned them again, but they wore long sleeves and pants that hid any potential gang tattoos. The guy on the left had a black stocking cap on, and the one on the right wore a Panthers hat.

“Those automatic rifles?” asked the guy with the stocking cap.

“Sure looks like ’em, Johnny,” said Panthers hat.

“Military-issue M4s with suppressors,” Johnny said. “Where’d y’all get those, if you don’t mind me asking?”

“I said it’s none of your business,” Flint said. He waved at Albert. “Come on, man.”

The two men and their female friend turned to look at Albert and Dave.

“Oh, you got one of them fancy guns, too,” the woman said.

Van Dyke and Flint both raised their rifles, and Flint jerked his chin at Albert, a sign that said, *Get your ass moving*.

“Stay behind me,” Albert whispered to Dave.

Instead of keeping back and silent, Dave waved and held up his knife in the other hand. “Do you like my sword? I’m gonna use it to slay Orcs!”

The trio blocking the sidewalk all burst out laughing. Flint shook his head and shot Albert a glare, but Albert’s focus flitted to the woman, who was reaching for something in her backpack. Van Dyke saw it at the same moment.

“Don’t fucking move!” yelled the corporal.

She slowly withdrew her hand and said, “You’re them soldiers the Latin Kings are looking for, aren’t ya?”

Flint and Van Dyke trained their guns on her.

“Step away from your bag, ma’am,” Flint said.

“You sound like a soldier or a cop,” she replied. “We don’t like either.”

Her two companions both took a step forward, and Albert moved his finger to the trigger guard of his rifle. He quickly searched the area. The African-American man with a shotgun that they had passed earlier was looking in their direction.

Potential combatants on all sides, Albert thought.

There were more civilians down the street, and several of them were armed. Only a block separated him from the building where he hoped to find his sister, and he had a feeling all hell was about to break loose.

“Those guys you killed have powerful friends, and they put a nice price tag on your heads,” said the guy with the Panthers hat.

The woman snickered. “They’re going to skin you alive when they find you. Then they’re going to hang you.”

Johnny wagged his finger twice. “Or burn you alive.”

Van Dyke backpedaled, trying to put distance between himself and the trio. Flint motioned for Albert with one hand, but kept his other on his carbine.

“We didn’t kill anyone,” Van Dyke said. “We’re just trying to get home.”

“Right,” replied the woman. “Well, you better be on your way then.”

Johnny clicked his tongue like a handler would to a horse. “Go on and get outta here.”

Van Dyke and Flint continued to move away slowly, but as soon as Flint turned, Panthers hat suddenly reached behind his back, earning himself a three-round burst to the chest from Van Dyke’s rifle that sent the guy crashing into the metal tables.

“No!” the woman screamed. She pulled a knife from her bag and lunged at Flint, who dropped her with a single shot to the skull. Johnny managed to pull out a Glock before Albert took him down with a burst to the chest.

He fell to his knees, gasping for air, his eyes locked on Albert.

“You…” he wheezed.

Albert didn’t let him finish the sentence. He squeezed the trigger again, firing a round into the center of his stocking cap that sent him crashing backward. The shock of seeing his brains on the ground made Albert freeze.

Dave stood paralyzed too, mouth agape. A stream of piss trickled down his

jeans. Somehow, he'd kept hold of the knife, but it hung loosely by his side.

"Move it, Randall!" Flint shouted.

Albert snapped out of the trance, grabbed the boy, and pulled him past the carnage. The other soldiers ran from the intersection with their rifles shouldered. Shouts and screams rang out from all directions as they bolted around stalled cars.

Looking over his shoulder, Albert searched for other hostiles. His gaze found the man with the shotgun. For a second, Albert thought the guy was going to raise the gun and fire at them, but instead the man simply dipped his head again and then corralled his family in the opposite direction.

There were still good people out here, people that just wanted to protect their kin. The end of the world drove some folks crazy, and Albert hoped he would never stop being sickened and disturbed by the evil that some people did in the absence of law and order. But the killing was starting to get easier and easier each time he pulled the trigger, and part of Albert wasn't sure if his soul would survive this new world.

"Contacts!" Flint shouted.

Albert looked to the left side of the street and saw several men with rifles flooding out of a building. Bullets whizzed in his direction.

"Run!" Van Dyke shouted. "RUN!"

***

Charlize sat in the cafeteria watching her son eat lunch. She was still exhausted even after sleeping for five hours straight, but being able to sit and have a meal with Ty reminded her how lucky they were to have a roof over their heads, plenty of food, and electricity. Over ninety-nine percent of Americans were fighting for basic survival.

But if she was so damned lucky, then why did she feel so terrible?

Ty scooped a spoonful of vegetables into his mouth and looked across the room at Melinda Collins, the resident teacher at Constellation. Ten kids his age sat around a white table with her.

"You sure you don't want to eat with your friends?" Charlize asked.

"Maybe tomorrow." Ty picked at his food, eyes downcast.

Charlize knew how important it was for Ty to be around other kids his age, but selfishly she was glad he wanted to eat with her. She had tried to give him

space and not press him on what had happened at the Castle. Seeing him like this made her wonder what horrors he'd witnessed. Ty had been too young to clearly remember the car wreck that had killed his father and left him paralyzed, but he'd been right there when Fenix executed Nathan. It was too much for anyone to bear, and she wished he would talk to her.

Glancing up from his food, Ty asked, "Do you have to work tonight?"

"Some, but I promise I'll read to you tonight, okay?"

Ty picked up a carrot, dropped it, and then took a bite of his peanut butter and jelly sandwich instead.

Charlize finished her chicken salad and washed it down with a Red Bull. She knew it wasn't good for her, but she needed the caffeine. Boots clicking on the tiled floor commanded her attention, and she turned to see Colonel Raymond crossing the room. He stopped at their table.

"Sorry to interrupt your lunch, Secretary Montgomery, but General Thor would like to speak with you in the situation room. President Diego will join later to brief you on another situation."

Ty finished chewing and politely said, "May I come?"

"Not this time, sweetie," Charlize said. "You have to go back to class with Miss Collins."

The teacher was already corralling the other kids out of the dining hall.

"But Mom…" Ty began.

"I'll be right there, Colonel," Charlize said.

"Sounds good, ma'am, I'll be waiting in the hallway."

"Do you think General Thor found him?" Ty asked.

Charlize stood and grabbed the handles on his wheelchair. "I sure hope so."

He was quiet for a moment, and then twisted around to look at her, his face solemn. "Mom?"

"Yeah?"

"I'm sorry."

She brushed her hand over his hair. "Sorry for what, sweetie?"

"I'm scared. I know I shouldn't be, but I'm scared all the time," he said.

"Don't apologize. You should never be afraid to be afraid. Real men get scared, and anyone that says otherwise is not being honest."

"I know, but I'm scared to be alone. I keep having these dreams where *he* comes for me. Sometimes, when I wake up and you're not there, I think I'm still at the Castle."

Charlize's heart shattered into pieces. "Oh, Ty. I'm the one who should be sorry. The president needs my help for a little while, but I will come back. In the meantime, why don't you spend some time with the other kids? Miss Collins will keep an eye on you. Maybe you'll even make a new friend."

Ty nodded his head several times. "Okay," he said. "Okay, I'll try."

She kissed him on the cheek and watched him wheel across the room to Miss Collins and the children.

Exhausted but anxious for news about Fenix, Charlize followed Colonel Raymond back to Command. The room was bustling as usual. General Thor was waiting for her in the situation room. Colonel Raymond shut the door behind them.

"The remains of Sierra Team have been recovered," he said as soon as she took a seat. "Their helicopter was shot down over a country road on the west side of Apache Peak."

"Do we have any new leads on Fenix?" Charlize asked. A nice lunch with Ty and several hours of sleep had helped refill her depleted energy reserves, but her patience was already slipping away. Why couldn't these men ever get to the point?

"Negative, ma'am," Thor said. "We recalled our second Black Hawk to Buckley and are waiting for new intel."

Charlize took a breath before answering. "I understand, General. Do not send out anyone else until we can confirm his whereabouts. We can't afford to lose more good men and women."

"Understood," Thor replied.

"Anything else to report?"

"No, ma'am."

Charlize wondered if this five-minute briefing was worth cutting her lunch short for, but she said nothing. Thor gathered his folder and walked out of the room with Raymond on his heels.

"The president will be in shortly," Raymond said before closing the door.

Charlize sat alone in the room, mind racing. It wasn't often that President Diego requested a one-on-one meeting, and her gut told her this wasn't going to be about anything good. A few minutes later, the president walked into the room, offering a quick nod but no smile. Dressed in a suit with his dark hair slicked back, he looked more like a mobster than a politician. General Thor returned to the room with him. Next came Doctor Peter Lundy, the head scientist at Constellation.

So much for this being a one-on-one.

“Good afternoon, Mr. President,” she said, standing.

He nodded and dropped a folder on the table. Thor and Lundy took a seat across from Charlize, and Diego sat at the head of the table. He passed over a confidential folder to Charlize, and she quickly broke the seal.

“Read the first page. Then I’ll go into more details,” Diego said.

Charlize thumbed to the opening of the memo, anxious to see what had the president on edge. It only took her a few moments to read the front page, and she quickly realized his bad mood wasn’t from some disaster at a SC or the further spread of cholera like she feared—it was due to a major development in foreign aid.

“The People’s Republic of China is offering us quite the deal,” Diego said. “Five hundred ships full of heavy duty machinery and enough supplies to help us rebuild our power grid. They’re even including some new locomotives and equipment to help us get our rail system back up and running.”

Impressive, Charlize thought to herself. If anyone had asked her before the attack whether China would end up being one of their biggest allies and benefactors, she would have been skeptical at best.

“I’m sure you’re thinking the same thing I’ve been thinking since I saw this come in over the wires,” Diego said.

“That there’s a catch? That maybe China did have something to do with the North Korean attack?” she said.

The president ran his uninjured hand through his hair. “I’m not sure about the latter, although I’ve wondered. Thing is, why would China want our country to collapse? It hurts their economy. It would make no sense to aid North Korea in an attack that would devastate the world market.”

“True, but an attack would also open the door for the Chinese to become the most powerful nation in the world,” Charlize said.

Lundy nodded. “She’s right. They stand to make trillions off helping us rebuild. But what choice do we have?” He looked to President Diego. “Sir, as you know, I’ve been tasked with helping get the power back on, but I simply don’t have the resources or logistics to do that on a wide scale right now. I was optimistic two weeks ago, but we’re running into so many unforeseen issues, especially the extreme violence on the highways and in the cities. Simply put, we need help.”

“That’s why we need to get our railways working again,” Charlize said.

“It’s not enough, Charlize, and we don’t have the time or resources or the soldiers to guard the rails,” Diego quickly said, cutting her off.

Lundy nodded. “It’s a great idea, but the President is correct.”

Diego looked down at his folder before talking. He might look like a low-level gangster gone to seed, but behind that façade was one of the smartest men Charlize had ever worked with. “The Chinese have promised to help us with our logistics safety issue,” Diego said at last. “Turn to page three.”

Charlize thumbed through the document and then bit her lip when she saw what was written on page three. Now the truth was starting to surface. In addition to sending material goods, the Chinese were also proposing to send fifty thousand workers to help repair the grid—and twenty-five thousand troops to support their crews.

“I want your honest thoughts,” Diego said. “Do you think they had something to do with the attack? Because if they did, and we open the floodgates to twenty-five thousand Chinese troops, then you can kiss our recovery efforts goodbye. We’ll be at war.”

Charlize looked at the ceiling, trying to digest the information. After a few seconds she shook her head, unsure. “I want to believe the Chinese are simply trying to help us, but I’m with you, sir, and I’m not ready to agree to a military occupation. It’s one thing to have British and French soldiers working alongside our own troops, but what are people going to do when they see Chinese soldiers on our soil?”

Diego folded his hands and leaned back in his leather chair, heaving a sigh. “I agree, but we can’t get the grid back up on our own. I’m afraid we might not have a choice. If we let the Chinese construction crews into the country, we could save millions of lives. At this point, I’m not sure we can say no.”

— 14 —

Boulders sheeted with moss and snow covered the side of Highway 34. Raven rode Willow, while Lindsey rode Colton's horse, Obsidian. The beasts didn't seem to mind the cold, but Raven did. And he really didn't like the idea of sneaking up on John Kirkus at night, either. The preppers living up on Storm Mountain were a mixture of millionaires and backwoods rednecks, but they were all paranoid and armed to the teeth. Raven had a feeling they weren't going to like a cop and a Native American popping into their neck of the woods at this hour.

Raven zipped his coat up to his chin and tightened the Shemagh scarf around his neck. Lindsey wore a fleece-lined hunter's cap, scarf, and her Estes Park police all-weather coat. At least they were both prepared for the cold.

The only good thing about this mission was spending time with Lindsey. He had jumped at the chance to tag along, thinking that he might finally be able to charm her into agreeing to that drink. But tonight they weren't joking around like usual.

Willow rounded a bend and the final roadblock along Highway 34 came into view. Several men and a woman Raven didn't know were manning the post, rifles angled east toward the canyon walls. The roar of Big Thompson River rose over the click-clack of horse hooves on the asphalt shoulder of the road.

"I still think we should have waited until morning," Raven said.

Lindsey didn't bother turning in her saddle, but Creek looked up at the sound of Raven's voice. He had stopped to mark yet another bush, painting it with piss before trotting onward.

"We don't have time to waste," Lindsey said. "Tomorrow we're going to

be needed in Estes Park, so tonight we need to secure a deal with Kirkus and his men to help protect this side of the valley from raiders. We can't wait any longer."

"Well, we could have at least had Colton drop us off. Save us the long trip."

This time she did twist in the saddle to glare at him. "It's only another three miles from here, Raven. I could run that far. We'll be there by nine, and I'll have you home before bedtime, I promise."

Raven chuckled, possible innuendoes swirling through his brain. "Has anyone even been up to Storm Mountain lately?" he asked instead.

"Colton sent a volunteer to warn them of potential fallout right after the bombs. I think Don's been up there a few times to scope things out, but Kirkus and his boys don't really like visitors."

"So I've heard."

A bitter wind bit into Raven, and he hunched down as their horses slowed to a stop at the roadblock. Creek sat on his haunches, tongue lolling.

"Where are you two headed?" asked a thin, bearded man wearing a heavy coat. He looked familiar, but Raven couldn't think of his name.

"We're on our way up Storm Mountain, on orders from Chief Colton," Lindsey said.

The other three people at the roadblock were wearing scarves or bandanas to cover their faces, something that made Raven uneasy. Hiding your face was never a good thing; it meant you were doing stuff you didn't want to be seen doing—in this case, turning away refugees or shooting at people that might come back hell-bent on revenge.

The thin man scratched his beard and then looked back down the road. "It's dangerous out there, ma'am, especially for a woman."

"I'm well aware," Lindsey replied.

The woman at the roadblock pulled her scarf down. "Mitch is right. We've heard some pretty atrocious things are happening in Loveland and Fort Collins."

"She's capable of taking care of herself," Raven chimed in. He shrugged a shoulder. "Besides, she's got me to watch after her."

Lindsey rolled her eyes. "I'd rather rely on the dog. Let us through, Mitch."

Raven remembered the guy with the beard now. He was a high school teacher with a drinking problem. They had spent the night in jail together a

year ago. Raven hardly recognized him with the beard, though. He'd also lost about twenty pounds in the past month.

Creek was the first one around the concrete barriers. Raven used the reins to direct Willow through the gap after his dog. Every gaze focused on him and Lindsey as the horses trotted out into no man's land. The golden glow of a gorgeous sunset divided the bluffs of the valley ahead, bathing part of the land in light and shrouding everything below the rocky cliffs with shadows. Raven wanted to be off the road before it got dark.

"Where's the trail?" Lindsey asked.

"It's a Jeep path about a mile before we get to Drake. Should be there in about fifteen minutes at this pace."

"So let's pick it up," Lindsey said with a grin. "Come on, I'll race you."

Before Raven could reply, she grabbed the reins and gave Obsidian a good kick. The horse broke into a lope that quickly turned into a run. Lindsey bobbed up and down with her AR-15 slung over her shoulders.

Raven shook his head and whistled at Creek. The wind rustled Raven's hair, which was hanging out below his cap, and stung his injured ear as Willow increased her pace.

"Let's go, lady," he said.

The horse fell into a trot. By the time she was running, Obsidian was a good two hundred feet ahead of them. Lindsey shot him a glance over her shoulder and grinned.

Raven hollered after her. "Slow down!"

It was too dangerous to be playing games on the open road. Willow snorted into the cold wind while Raven scanned the road for any sign of hostiles or refugees. The way was clear, and Lindsey continued to ride Obsidian into the waning light at a breakneck pace. The river bubbled on the right side of the highway, clear water churning through the canyon. Raven loved that sound, along with the clean scent of cedar, but he was too on edge to enjoy it tonight.

The road turned ahead, providing a view of the minivan that he remembered seeing the night of the bombs when he had driven Sandra to Loveland to pick up Allie. The mountains swallowed the retreating sun, casting shadows over the entire valley. Raven made a clicking sound and pressed his heels to Willow.

You want to race, fine.

He sat up straight in the saddle, kept his heels down, pelvis tilted forward,

and his butt relaxed as she picked up speed. In moments, the horse was moving at an all-out gallop on the side of the road along the river's edge. Creek wouldn't be able to keep up for long, but they weren't going much farther. The road continued to twist, and the trees along the shoulder blocked his view around the bend. Lindsey moved out onto the asphalt and rounded the corner, vanishing from sight.

What the hell? Is she trying to impress me, or has she lost her mind?

He gave Willow her head, riding low over her neck. The mare was fast, but Obsidian was faster. The freezing wind bit Raven's exposed skin and worked its way into his ear. Now he was just mad.

"Goddammit, Lindsey," he cursed.

Willow tore around the trees and onto the road, hooves clicking on the concrete. By the time Raven saw Lindsey, she had brought Obsidian to a halt on the side of the road under an umbrella of pine trees, a wide grin on her freckled face.

"I thought you'd put up more of a fight," she said as Willow slowed to a trot. Then she pointed at a gated trail to the left of the road. "That's the way up, right?"

Raven settled back in his saddle. "Yeah, that's it."

He took a moment to scan his surroundings. The dog caught up a few minutes later, tongue hanging out and panting in the cold air.

"Sorry, boy. Lindsey thought it would be fun to race."

"It was. I had my eyes on the road the entire time, Sam. You worry too much."

"I thought I didn't worry enough. But in this case, you got me a bit riled up."

Lindsey's smile vanished, her cheeks flaring as red as a tomato. "I'm sorry." She paused for a moment to stroke Obsidian's mane. "You know, I've been giving that drink some thought. Since you saved my life twice now, I'm considering it."

Raven perked at that. "Well, uh, I guess I do deserve…"

Creek looked up at Raven, then to Lindsey. The dog sneezed, shook himself, and trotted away, uninterested. The Akita wasn't used to sharing Raven's attention with anyone, but Creek quickly found something else to occupy his time. He chased a rabbit through the snow and under a bush.

Lindsey took a sip from her water bottle and then screwed the cap back on.

"You going to let him wander off?" she asked. "We need to get moving

again.”

“Creek?” Raven asked. “He’ll catch up with us in a bit. Likes his independence. Sometimes I think he’s more cat than dog. Besides, dog food is hard to come by and everyone’s got to eat.”

“True,” Lindsey wiped her lips. “I’m not a fan of cats, by the way.”

“Me neither. Guess that’s something else we got in common.”

“I was kidding. I like cats.”

Raven narrowed his eyes.

“I’m just joking around, Sam!” Lindsey grinned again. “Come on, let’s—”

The sound of a vehicle cut her off. Raven unslung his crossbow and Lindsey grabbed her AR-15. They dismounted from the horses and shooed the beasts away from the road.

“Creek!” Raven yelled.

The dog was nowhere in sight.

“Come on,” Lindsey said.

Raven followed her to cover behind a pair of pine trees. The rattle of the engine filled the air again, but this time it seemed to be coming from all directions, an effect of the canyon.

Lindsey checked her rifle while Raven loaded an arrow into his bow. A moment later, headlights flooded the road, hitting the two from behind. The vehicle was coming from Estes Park, not Loveland.

“Who the hell could that be?” Lindsey said.

She strode out into the road, her rifle lowered. Raven slowly followed her out with his crossbow cradled over his chest. The Estes Park Police Department’s Volkswagen Beetle putted around the corner, and Raven raised a hand to shield his face from the beams.

“Shut off the lights,” Lindsey said in a voice just shy of a shout. She walked a few steps toward the vehicle. The driver kept the engine running while the passenger stepped onto the pavement.

To Raven’s surprise, it was Don and Officer Sam Hines. The sergeant gestured for Raven and Lindsey. Hines, his right arm in a sling, eyed the crossbow suspiciously as if he thought Raven might shoot him again.

“What the hell is going on?” Lindsey asked.

“Raiders, more of them from the south,” Don said. “We need Raven’s help tracking them.”

Raven looked at the horses. “It’ll take time to ride back.”

“Tie them to a tree and jump in with us,” Don said. “Got no time. I’ll send

someone for them later.”

Lindsey slung her rifle over her back, and Raven did the same thing with his bow. They hurried to Willow and Obsidian. Heart pounding, Raven grabbed the reins and looped them around a thick ponderosa.

“You’ll be okay here,” he whispered to the horse. Willow let out a snort.

“What are you doing?” Lindsey said.

Raven thought she was talking to him, but when he turned, he saw two guns pointed in his direction. Don spat tobacco juice on the ground and pumped his shotgun.

“What the hell is this?” Raven said.

Hines raised a Colt .45 at Raven’s forehead, the hammer already pulled back.

“It’s time to clear the shit out of Estes Park,” Don said. “No more refugees, and no more Raven Spears.” He glanced at Lindsey. “Sorry, Plymouth, but you’ve got to disappear to make this work.”

“You son of a bitch,” Lindsey growled. “You can’t do this!”

Don moved the shotgun toward her as she took a step forward.

“Listen,” he said calmly. “I tried to do things the easy way. Redford’s boys were supposed to kill Raven and burn the refugees out of the Stanley. But then Raven had to complicate things by getting the government involved. Now that Colton’s chief again, I had to take matters into my own hands—and this time it requires blood.”

Raven took another step forward, his fists clenched.

“Go ahead and try it,” Don said, moving the barrel of his shotgun toward Raven’s belly. “I’ll blow your guts all over the road, and then I’ll make sure Sandra and Allie suffer.” After a pause, he added, “Or if you don’t resist, they can continue living their lives.”

“You’re going to kill us in cold blood?” Lindsey snapped. “You’re supposed to be a police officer!”

“These are different times,” Don said without moving his eyes off Raven. “Turn around and start walking.”

Raven considered his options. He could charge the cops, but doing so would earn him a bullet or blast from the shotgun. He had to be smart. If they were going to execute him in the woods, he would make his move then. Plus, Creek was likely watching and waiting for an opportunity to strike.

“Colton won’t let you get away with this,” Lindsey said.

Don laughed. “Colton isn’t coming back.”

“What do you mean?” Lindsey said.

“I said start walking,” Don replied, jerking the barrel of his shotgun at the Jeep path across the road.

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“We can’t go back out there. It’s not safe,” Van Dyke said. “We’re lucky we didn’t get shot up on the road.”

Albert stared out the second story window of the office building. His sister’s apartment was still two blocks away, but this section of the city had turned into a warzone. The violence outside the Starbucks had set off a chain of events that had led to several groups engaging in a firefight.

He stepped away from the window to scan the offices that were furnished with about a dozen desks, and a conference table. A single locked door led to an outside hallway, restrooms, and a staircase to the first floor. Van Dyke waited at the door, listening for anyone that might be sneaking into the building.

“We’re screwed,” Van Dyke muttered every few minutes. The others ignored him.

Flint paced, gripping his injured side. Dave remained hiding under a desk. Albert wasn’t sure he would be able to get the boy to move anytime soon.

“I’ll go out there alone and sneak into my sister’s building,” Albert said. “You guys stay here with Dave. If I’m not back in three hours, take him to the SC.”

Flint and Van Dyke exchanged a glance.

“I know our mission was to find your sister, man, but it’s way too fucking dangerous right now,” Flint said.

The pop of gunfire echoed from the street, and a round punched into the side of the building, punctuating his statement. Dave let out a cry, and Albert bent down to calm him. The boy sat under the table, knees to his chest, rocking back and forth.

“It’s okay, buddy,” Albert said soothingly. Dave didn’t seem to hear him.

He stood and moved back to the windows, keeping to the side to look for contacts. Across the street, three men with rifles strode down the sidewalk. The leader, an Asian man with a ponytail, stopped and squeezed off several shots. Return fire hit the sidewalk, and the trio took off running for cover.

“Man, this is crazy,” Albert whispered more to himself than anyone.

He retreated back to the desks. “I need to get my sister to the SC before this entire area falls into anarchy. She’s not good at looking after herself.”

“Too late for that,” Van Dyke said. He moved away from the door. “Charlotte is toast. There’s no coming back from this. I doubt the SC will hold much longer, either.”

“Don’t say that,” Flint snapped.

Van Dyke shrugged. “Sorry, Sarge, it’s just… I want to get home. I’m worried about my wife and daughter.”

It was the first Albert had heard Van Dyke speak of a family. He wasn’t the most likeable man in the world, but Albert did appreciate Van Dyke coming out here, especially when he had his own family to worry about. It was yet another reason Albert needed to go on his own. He checked his gear and prepared his weapon while the two soldiers argued.

“We all have families, but we also have a job to do,” Flint said. “Don’t forget that, Corporal. I need you to stay focused. It’s the only way we’re getting home.”

Van Dyke sank to the carpet near the door, resting his back against the wall. He took in several deep breaths. “I know, man, I’m sorry. I just miss Margo and Penny.”

“You’ll see them again,” Albert said. He grabbed his gear and walked toward the door.

Flint held up a hand. “I’ll come with you. Van Dyke, you stay here and look after Dave.”

Van Dyke pushed himself up. “You serious, Sarge?”

Dave slowly crawled out from under the table. “You’re leaving, Mr. Big Al?”

“Just for a little while,” Albert said. “Remember when the Fellowship split up?”

A slow nod. “Yeah.”

“It’s just like that,” Albert assured Dave.

“Okay.” The boy retreated back into the darkness. “Don’t let the Orcs catch you,” he said from under the table.

Albert grabbed his M4 and met Flint’s gaze.

“I think I should go on my own,” Albert said. “You’re injured, and I don’t like leaving Dave here with Van Dyke.”

The corporal shot Albert a glare, but he shrugged. “You’re not very good

with kids, Corporal.”

Flint scratched at his face, thinking. “I could stay here and send Van Dyke with you instead.”

“Hell no! That’s worse than babysitting,” Van Dyke protested.

“I’m better off on my own,” Albert said.

“Fine,” Flint finally replied. He unzipped his backpack, pulled out a radio, and handed it to Albert.

“Where did you get that?” Albert asked.

“Harris gave us two of them just in case we ran into any problems. We’re not supposed to use it unless absolutely necessary,” Flint said. “Go on, take it. This way you can stay in contact with me if anything happens.”

Albert grabbed the radio and tucked it into his own backpack.

“Good luck,” Flint said.

“Stay safe, and don’t take your eyes off Dave.”

A few minutes later Albert was working his way through the offices on the first floor. The street outside appeared empty, but it was draped in shadow. Then he saw the body.

The small figure lying on the sidewalk across the street was just a kid, not much older than Dave. Albert took a deep breath, looked to the left and right side of the street for contacts, then moved out. He darted across the street and crouched by the boy lying face down on the concrete. Using the utmost care, Albert slowly rolled him over, revealing three small bloodstains on the front of the kid’s shirt, and a pistol gripped in his hand.

The boy was maybe ten years old, and he had been forced to fight for his life.

Albert reached down and closed the kid’s eyes. Then he glanced over his shoulder to look up at the office building. Flint was standing at the window, but the sergeant couldn’t see Albert from this angle.

He dragged the boy off the street and positioned his body under a tree. There wasn’t time to bury him right now, but perhaps someone else would take the time after the sun came up. At least he wasn’t sprawled on the street like roadkill anymore. Albert closed his eyes and muttered a prayer for the child.

During his training and his career with the Capitol police, Albert had seen some terrible things, but nothing compared to this nightmare—and it was only going to get worse.

The next street was free of contacts at first glance, but Albert remained

behind a brick building for several minutes to listen for sounds: footsteps, gunshots, voices, or anything else that meant potential hostiles. Hearing nothing, he moved around the corner and hugged the side of the shops to the right of the street. Several cars blocked the road, providing perfect ambush points.

Gunfire erupted just outside the Starbucks where Albert had taken a life several hours earlier. He ducked behind a car and peered around the bumper. The Asian man and his two friends were back, firing at contacts in the courtyard of his sister's apartment building.

Albert took off running, moving toward the courtyard in the shadows of the building. The three men firing from the Starbucks had their backs turned to his position. If he could just get around them, he would be able to take a back route into the apartment complex.

A scream rang out just as he was about to slip into an alleyway. Shots tore into the hedge in front of him, and a bullet streaked by his head. Another round splintered the bark of a large tree ahead. He took cover behind the wide trunk, counted to three, then bolted for the alley between a fence and a long two-story office building.

Trash swirled in the narrow space from the gusting wind. He ran as hard as he could down the passage, his muscles moving almost as fast as they used to when he'd been running down a football field. But this wasn't a game. All around him the sound of gunfire echoed through the city.

He could see his sister's building in the waning sunlight at the end of the alley. A gate was the only thing separating him from the courtyard outside the apartments. He barreled into the three-foot gate, slamming it open. Shouts came from the street he'd left behind, and another bullet whizzed past him, closer this time. He continued through the weeds and overgrown grass filling the courtyard.

Two large oak trees provided a canopy of red and brown leaves overhead. Several fluttered in his path. He looked over his shoulder at the Starbucks, but the three men were gone, probably headed down the alley to flank him. Albert ran for the side entrance to the apartment building, sucking in air. He stopped and raised his rifle at the alley when he was halfway across, squeezing off a three-round burst that hit the gate.

The men remained out of sight, and he used the opportunity to run to the side entrance of the building. A white door hung half open. Albert slipped inside and quickly cleared the hallway. Then he shut the door and bolted for

the staircase at the other end of the passage. He knew his sister lived on the second floor, but he wasn't sure at what end of the building.

Once he reached the second floor, he stopped to listen for anyone that might be following him, but all he heard was his own labored breathing. He moved slower now, carefully clearing each stretch of hallway, and followed the signs pointing to apartments 250-300. He jogged down another corridor, cleared it, and finally stopped when he reached a door marked *291*. Instead of knocking, he reached for the doorknob and twisted. It clicked, locked.

"Jacqueline," Albert said in a voice not much louder than a whisper. His heart was beating so loudly that he was afraid he wouldn't be able to hear a reply.

When no one answered, Albert kicked the door open and strode into the apartment. The living room was sparsely furnished with a single table and a raggedy couch. He checked the kitchen to the right, but it too was empty.

Turning, he shut the door and used the chain lock to secure it now that the bolt lock was destroyed. Then he made his way deeper into the apartment.

"Jacqueline, it's your brother, Albert."

He passed the bathroom, stopped, and took a step back.

A foot was hanging over the side of the bathtub, but a curtain blocked his view of whoever was inside the tub. Heart firing like an automatic weapon, Albert crept into the bathroom and pulled back the curtain.

His sister lay there, eyes closed, chin slumped to her chest.

"Oh God, Jackie," Albert said. "Oh Jesus, no."

He didn't need lights to see the track marks on her arms or the needle in her left hand. She had been using again, and it looked like the addiction had finally gotten the best of her.

He gently set his rifle down and knelt next to the bathtub. The stench of body odor and human waste was almost unbearable, burning his nostrils and filling his lungs. He reached out to feel for a pulse. Her bony wrist was so light in his massive grip.

There was something there…or had he imagined it?

"Jackie," he repeated, tapping his fingers against her cheek. "Jackie, wake up."

"Who da fuck?" mumbled a voice behind him.

Albert whirled toward a man standing outside the doorway. The barrel of his rifle was directed at the face of a sinewy African-American man with gray hair wearing nothing but a pair of white briefs.

Instead of being afraid, the guy swatted at the barrel clumsily. He stumbled to the side and then righted himself, eyes wide as he ran a hand over his matted hair.

“Get back,” Albert said. He directed the man into the living room, leaving his sister for a moment to deal with this new threat, and made him take a seat on the couch.

“Who are you?” Albert asked.

“I’m motherfucking Santa Claus. Who da fuck are you?” the guy growled, spit dripping off his lips.

Albert slowly lowered the rifle, seeing the only threat this guy posed was to himself.

“I’m Albert,” he said. “Jacqueline’s brother.”

That seemed to get the man’s attention. He looked up, narrowed his unfocused eyes, and tilted his head.

“Jackie has a brother?” he slurred. “She never said nothin’ ’bout you before.”

— 15 —

Colton didn’t like driving at night, but it was far less dangerous than driving during the day. He kept both of his Colt .45s on the seat next to him and his M14 rifle and AR-15 propped up against the passenger seat. In the place of his uniform, he wore a black Estes Park sweatshirt over a ballistic vest, gray cargo pants, and hybrid trail running shoes. It was his attempt to not look like a cop.

For the past hour he’d been parked behind an old shed, scoping out the area for contacts, but everything west of Loveland was pretty well abandoned. The action seemed to be in the east, where he could make out the glow of fires from the FEMA camp. More plumes rose to the north, but these were too thick to be coming from campfires or chimneys. A fire was raging somewhere in Fort Collins, and it looked massive.

So far the trip had gone flawlessly. He’d met only a few contacts on the road, and none of them had tried to attack him. But the sun had receded over the mountains, and he feared the darkness would bring out the real threats. The gangs, especially the Russians that had moved into the area around Fort Collins to benefit from the legalization of marijuana, were well-organized, well-armed, and extremely violent. His gut told him some of the raiders were affiliated with the Russian Mafia.

A year back Colton had worked jointly with Sheriff Gerrard on a homicide that left three Russian mobsters dead, mutilated, and buried in shallow graves just outside Rocky Mountain National Park. Those murders were some of the worst Colton had ever seen. But he had a feeling he was going to be seeing more atrocities—and, like in Afghanistan, he wasn’t sure if he would be able to tell the enemy apart from the general population.

Colton’s experience in scanning for potential threats was nearly worthless

in this new, lawless landscape. Since he'd left the final roadblock outside Estes Park, he'd driven by two men walking along Highway 34 and several teenagers riding bicycles. Any of them might have fired at his Jeep. Since there was no way of knowing what he'd find at the FEMA camp, he decided to head out to meet with Sheriff Thompson first. The lawman and cage fighter would know better than anyone what the conditions were around here—and if Colton could hope to get any help from the Feds at the camp.

He took a drink of water, carefully placed the bottle back in the cup holder, and pulled away from the shed. To his left was Glade Road, a less-traveled route to Fort Collins. He kept the speed of the Jeep around twenty miles an hour. The light snow hadn't accumulated on the road, which meant no tracks. He hoped he'd be able to make it to Loveland without leaving a trail to follow.

You're getting paranoid, he chided himself. Except it wasn't really paranoia when anyone he met might be a hostile.

As soon as he was sure there wasn't anyone on the street, he pressed down on the pedal and continued into the darkness, using the full moon to guide him around the abandoned vehicles. Drab fields framed the road on both sides, and rolling hills rose above them. The arid terrain was far removed from the lush landscape in the Estes Valley.

Most people used Highway 287 to get to Fort Collins. This route would allow him to take the back way in, which was the reason he'd selected it in the first place. Still, the threat of snipers, raiders, and gangs had Colton on edge, and driving without headlights made it even worse. It wasn't much different than driving with his eyes closed, something he used to do as a teenager with his friends, daring each other to keep them shut for as long as they could.

Although he kept both hands on the wheel, his weapons were just a heartbeat away. He scanned the concrete and fields on both sides for any sign of a flashlight or movement, but Glade Road appeared to be empty.

This was worse than driving in Afghanistan on night missions. At least then he'd had Jake and his other brothers with him. It was every soldier's worst nightmare to be heading into potential battle alone.

An abandoned pickup truck blocked the road around the next turn, and Colton eased off the gas. With one hand on the wheel, he reached for his Colt .45. For several minutes he sat in the vehicle, eyes darting over the landscape for any sign of hostiles. Shadows seemed to move back and forth on the road.

He looked toward what appeared to be a person crouched in the field to the right, but saw it was just a bush.

Take it easy, Marcus. You're freaking yourself out.

He steered around the pickup truck. Once clear, he pushed down on the pedal, giving the engine plenty of gas to speed away. He passed the mailboxes of ranch homes with boarded up windows. *No trespassing* signs were raised in front yards, but nobody seemed to be home.

Glade Road turned into County Road 38 E, and Colton got his first glimpse of Horsetooth Reservoir, the water sparkling in the moonlight. Several abandoned cars dotted the road along the water's edge. He passed them on the right side, giving himself plenty of clearance.

A rocky overpass blocked the view of the city, making it a great place to scope out things to the east. He drove onto the shoulder, checked the road for contacts, and then shut off the engine. He grabbed both of his rifles and locked the Jeep.

The climb up the rocky hill only took him a few minutes. At the top, he set his rifles against a boulder and looked out over the flat terrain bordering the Rocky Mountains. A fire raged in the heart of the city. Aside from the wind, it was quiet—almost unnerving.

To the east, a wall of black clouds made it almost impossible to see anything. He brought up his rifle and zoomed in. They weren't clouds at all. The black wall was more smoke. Colton crouched there for several moments, breathing heavily at the sight. Had something else happened to the FEMA Camp? Don had said it was all clear. So why did it look like the entire area was on fire?

He pivoted back to the city of Fort Collins. Several headlights were moving down a street to the east. Deciding to risk using his flashlight, he pulled out his map and marked the roads that appeared blocked by barriers or vehicles. It didn't look like there were any good routes to the sheriff station.

After a few more moments studying the city, he picked up his weapons and headed back to the Jeep. When he got to the vehicle, he crouched once more and searched for any hostiles, but the road still looked empty. He loaded the rifles and fired up the Jeep.

This time he drove with both hands on the wheel and the Colt .45 on the dashboard. A fence of trees lined the road to his right. He kept to the left and prepared to gun the engine down what appeared to be an open stretch. Just as his foot pushed down, a silhouette burst from the wall of pine trees.

More massive shapes powered through bushes and around trees a moment later to move into the street. Flashlights flickered on all around, painting the Jeep with bright beams. In the glow, he saw a dozen horses, all mounted by armed men directing rifles at the windshield of his Jeep.

He slammed on his brakes and then put the vehicle in reverse. Looking over his shoulder, he saw more men on horses flanking the Jeep.

Colton pulled to the left side of the road, but that earned several warning shots that came dangerously close to the hood. He pushed down on the brakes again, coming to a stop with the front of the truck angled downward into a ditch. With nowhere to run, he put both hands on the steering wheel, knowing it was his only chance to get out of this alive.

A man wearing a bandana dismounted and walked over with a shotgun. Three other men followed, all of them carrying rifles. Colton kept his breathing steady and his hands in sight. The guy with the shotgun used the barrel to tap the window lightly.

“Roll down your window and then shut off the vehicle,” the man said.

Colton obeyed the order and cool air rushed into the vehicle. He caught a scent of something else too—something burning.

“Evenin’,” the man said, leaning down. Colton got a good look at him then—forty or so, dark eyes and hair, and a handlebar mustache. “What brings you to Fort Collins?”

“Got a meeting with Sheriff Thompson,” Colton said. He decided to give his name after a brief pause. “I’m Estes Park Police Chief Marcus Colton.”

The man turned and looked up to the road. “You hear that, boys? This here is a police chief all the way from Estes Park, and he’s here to see Sheriff Thompson.”

Someone laughed. Colton felt as though he were missing something. The men weren’t threatening him—they were *mocking* him. But why?

“So that’s what you guys are calling Thompson, eh?” the man said.

“I was told Sheriff Gerrard was killed by raiders and Thompson replaced him,” Colton said.

“Second part is true,” the man said.

Colton narrowed his eyes. “My patrol sergeant said…”

His words trailed off when he realized that no one had confirmed Don’s story. Colton cursed himself again for driving out here without doing more research. He had made a rash decision, and this time he feared it would get him killed.

“On second thought, I think I should be getting back to Estes Park,” Colton said. “Would you men be kind enough to let me through?”

The guy propped his shotgun up on his shoulder and grinned, revealing a gap between his front teeth. “You just got here, Chief, and now you already want to go home?”

“Yes, sir,” Colton said.

“Well, that ain’t very polite of you. How about you get out of the Jeep? We’ll take your guns, and then we’ll take you to meet ‘Sheriff’ Thompson.”

***

Fenix had yet to see Nile Redford smile. Talking to him was like talking to a carved block of cedar—albeit one with a very large vocabulary. But this was only their second conversation, and Fenix was going to do everything in his power to get his ass out of here, even it meant joking with a damn redskin.

“What if I told you I could make you a better offer than ten million in gold?” Fenix said.

“I’m a businessman first and foremost,” Redford said. “Usually I wouldn’t listen to anything a racist prick like you had to say, but these are challenging times. I’m willing to give your misguided views a pass if you can do something for me.”

Redford sat in a red leather chair behind a fancy wood desk. Weapons, including several spears and bows, hung on the wall. Pictures featuring Redford and celebrities like Benjamin Bratt, Mike Tyson, and Angie Harmon were displayed between the weapons.

“Impressive place,” Fenix said.

Redford opened his desk drawer and pulled out a tobacco pipe. He lit it and took a puff, blowing out the smoke in Fenix’s face. It took everything in his power not to reach out, grab the pipe, and jam it down Redford’s throat.

Instead, Fenix glanced out the second-floor window, which overlooked a town he didn’t recognize. It was Colorado, had to be. But where, he wasn’t sure.

“I’m also a man that doesn’t like to waste time,” Redford said after taking another drag off his pipe.

“Nor do I,” Fenix replied. He coughed, and raised his handcuffs. He tried his best to hide his anger and disgust, reminding himself that at one point the

United States military fought alongside some redskin tribes in the battle for the American West. Fenix was willing to do the same thing now if it meant achieving his end goal.

"I have over five hundred soldiers spread throughout Colorado," Fenix said. "Men that have been preparing for this for years. We have weapons, supplies, vehicles, and communication equipment that is far more valuable than gold."

Redford leaned back slightly in his chair. He took another hit of the pipe, blew the smoke into Fenix's face, and gestured for him to continue.

Fenix coughed a second time and then gave Redford his best smile.

"The Feds 'might' give you ten million in gold bars for catching me," he continued, tracing quotation marks in the air with his cuffed hands. "But what if they don't? Judging by the looks of this place, and the fact you got a dude named Hacker working for you, I'm willing to guess you're some sort of high-level loan shark at best and organized crime boss at worst."

That got Redford's attention. He straightened in his chair and narrowed his dark eyes.

"So my question, again, is, what makes you think that Montgomery bitch is going to give you shit for handing me over?" Fenix paused for a moment. "I, on the other hand, can ensure you make out real good if you get me back to my men."

Redford finally smiled, just a quick flash of the whitest teeth Fenix had ever seen.

"And what makes *you* think I would trust a Nazi asshole like yourself?" Redford asked, leaning forward. He set the pipe down on his desk. "Hacker thinks we should cut your balls off, scalp you, and then tell the Feds which tree we hung you from. I'm inclined to agree."

Fenix chuckled. "I like how he thinks, but I promise that would be a very bad idea."

"Oh?" Redford relaxed back in his chair and folded his hands together. "And why is that?"

"Because those five hundred soldiers I told you about? Well, they're out there looking for me," Fenix said. He swallowed, hoping Redford couldn't see his bluff. In reality, he had only half that many men, and he doubted they were mounting some sort of SEAL Team Six-style rescue mission.

Fenix placed his cuffed hands back in his lap. "Join up with me and my men, and let's take over Colorado. You'll have hundreds of millions of

dollars' worth of loot. Maybe more."

"I do that, and I'll have the government coming after me," Redford said. "I'm a very rich man, partly because I like to keep a low profile."

He stood behind his desk and sighed. "I thought you had something real to offer me. Instead you've wasted my precious time."

Fenix wasn't the type of man to beg—and it pained him to even be negotiating with an Indian—but the alternative was ending up in a dark prison cell for a few months before the Feds gave him the gas chamber. That was, if Hacker didn't cut his nuts off first.

"Hold on, now. Don't be hasty. There's something else I haven't told you yet." He waited for Redford to take a seat. When the man had settled back into his plush leather chair, Fenix brought out the big guns. "I've got more than ten million in gold, silver, and weapons stowed away. You let me go and I'll have it delivered to a place of your choosing. The government doesn't have to know you ever met me."

Redford stared at Fenix like a poker player trying to get a read on his opponent. Fenix tried not to let the fact that he was lying show on his face.

"That does sound tempting, but before I agree to anything, I think we need to have a little test. There's something else I want. I heard you want it as well, which should make this mutually beneficial," Redford said. "I want Raven Spears."

Fenix cursed. The goddamn injun again.

"I understand Mr. Spears ambushed and slaughtered at least a dozen of your men," Redford said. "Word travels fast over the radio channels that still work, and my men intercepted a transmission."

"Yeah," Fenix replied. He wasn't sure if Redford was a friend of Raven's or not, so he kept his answer simple.

Redford walked over to the pictures hanging on the wall of his office. He stopped to look at one.

"Raven killed one of my best enforcers and sent my cousin to jail. I retrieved Theo, and I've made Estes Park pay for their error in judgment. But frankly, I've taken a liking to the town. I want Raven captured and the way cleared for me to take over Estes Park. Do you think your men can handle that?"

Fenix nearly licked his lips at what sounded a lot like a proposition. "We'd be happy to help. Hell, I had similar plans, to be honest."

Redford clasped his hands behind his back. It wasn't the handshake Fenix

was hoping for, but a quick nod from the well-dressed man told him that maybe this partnership wasn't going to be such a bad thing after all.

***

Charlize was half asleep when she heard a knock on her apartment door. Ty heard it too. He sat up in bed and looked over at her with rumpled hair and squinty eyes.

"Mom, someone's here," he mumbled.

"I know. Go back to bed, sweetie."

Ty remained sitting up as Charlize left the room. She threw on a large t-shirt and opened the door. Colonel Raymond stood in the hallway.

"Ma'am, I'm very sorry to bother you, but we just got word from Charlotte. I thought you would like to know immediately."

"What is it? Is Al okay?"

"Albert Randall has located his sister, but his team is trapped. They encountered more resistance than expected."

"I'll come to the Command Center and monitor the situation myself," she said. "Just give me a few minutes."

Raymond held up a hand. "Ma'am, there's something else."

She hesitated, the door half closed.

"The SC in Charlotte is under a major attack," he added. "It's not random, either."

"What do you mean?"

Raymond took a moment to think, or perhaps to choose the right words. "It appears to be a coordinated attack by several gangs. Captain Harris is requesting reinforcements."

Charlize hesitated, recalling what had happened on her flyover. If she authorized aircraft to transport more troops, they could be shot down. A single crash would kill hundreds, if not more, in the teeming crowds surrounding the SC.

Charlize stood in the doorway. So much was happening, and it was all happening so fast. "We can't let that SC fall," she said.

"Yes, ma'am," Raymond replied, apparently just now noticing her baggy t-shirt and shorts. Charlize had never been vain, but the look of mingled pity and horror on his face when he noticed her burn scars made her want to cover

up. She made her way back into the bedroom and kissed Ty on his forehead. He was wide awake now.

“What’s going on, Mom? Did something happen to Big Al?”

Charlize shook her head and ran her hand through Ty’s thick hair. “Big Al is just fine. I’m going to go see if I can help him to get home, okay?”

Ty nodded. “Okay. Tell him I said hi.”

A few minutes later and Charlize was back in the situation room. It was quiet compared to the usual bustle, but several officers and General Thor sat with laptops and satellite phones. The clock read 0100 hours, but Charlize didn’t feel tired.

“Who’s got a SITREP on the situation in Charlotte?” she said as soon as she entered the room.

Thor stood. “Good eveni—morning,” he corrected himself. “I’m afraid I’ve got some bad news.”

Charlize remained standing. “Yes?”

“The east wall of the SC just came down, and people are pouring in. Captain Harris has ordered everyone to fall back. I doubt they will be able to hold the line through the night.”

“Recommendations?” Charlize asked.

“It’s a charnel house there, but there’s nothing we can do to stop it at this point,” Thor said. “I would highly recommend not sending any troops until the sun comes up. It will only escalate the violence.”

Raymond nodded. “I’m afraid Captain Harris and the others are on their own for now.”

“No,” Charlize said. “We can’t abandon them. Where’s the closest base?”

Thor looked to Raymond. The colonel stepped over to a map and pointed.

“We have several birds on a carrier off the coast, here.”

“Fire them up and send them to support Harris,” Charlize said.

Charlize looked around the half-empty Command Center. She could almost picture the figures of all those she had failed to save. Her colleagues from the Senate, Lieutenant Dupree’s fire team, the children at the Easterseals camp. Every room she walked into was full of ghosts these days. Nathan was always there, front and center, his face solemn. If she failed to hold the SCs, hundreds of thousands of deaths would be on her. She couldn’t live with herself if that happened—and more importantly, her country wouldn’t survive it.

She squared her shoulders and turned to Raymond. “Have one of the

staffers put on a fresh pot of coffee. It’s going to be a long night. We have to save as many lives as we can.”

— 16 —

This wasn't the first time Raven had a gun at his back, but he was starting to think this was going to be the last.

Don kept a shotgun leveled at him and Lindsey from behind, and Hines carried a Colt .45. The gun made him think of Colton, and Raven wondered how the chief was faring. It sounded like Don had sent him into a trap.

The march continued onto a narrow path off the Jeep trail. Raven searched the forest ahead of them, hoping to see a glimpse of Creek's tail. Don believed the dog was back in town with Sandra and Allie, but Raven kept hoping his furry friend would pop out and save them. The Akita was pretty much their only hope at this point.

"Keep moving. We're almost there," Don said.

Lindsey shot a glance over her shoulder. "It's not too late to change your mind. I promise—"

"Shut up for once in your life," Don said. He jammed the barrel of the shotgun hard into the small of Lindsey's back, and she cried out in pain.

Raven gritted his teeth. He was going to tear Don's throat out as soon as he had the chance. But first he had to figure a way to get out of his restraints. He searched the forest in his peripheral vision again for Creek. Had something happened to him, or was the dog just waiting for a chance to strike?

You better hurry up, pal.

They continued up a narrow trail fenced on each side by aspen trees. Ponderosas towered overhead, their branches weighed down by snow. To the left, a ridgeline looked over a valley. A stream churned a hundred feet below. Raven had a feeling he knew where Don was taking them.

"Look, I'm sorry about your shoulder, Hines," Raven said, doing his best to sound sincere. In truth, he was wishing he'd aimed better last night.

“Just keep walking,” Hines said.

Lindsey almost tripped over a root. Raven wanted to reach out to steady her, but he couldn’t with his hands bound. They were nearing the crest of the hill, and he could see the rocky platform where Don no doubt planned to push them both to their deaths. It was easier than digging graves, and it might look like an accident if anyone found their corpses. Raven used to take tourists up here sometimes; it was a breathtaking overlook. Now it seemed like it might be the last thing he ever saw.

Oddly, all he could think about in this moment was how much he loved it out here. The scent of cedar, sound of the river, whistle of the wind. Nature set Raven free, and if he was going to die, at least he would die in the heart of one of the most beautiful places on earth.

He stopped at the edge of the path where the dirt met the surface of the rocky ledge. Below, the clear water rushed over the rocks. It was a three-hundred foot drop.

“Move it, Spears,” Don said. He followed Lindsey onto the rock platform, her red hair whipping in the wind like a wildfire.

“Please, don’t do this,” she pleaded.

It was the first time Raven had ever heard Lindsey beg. The tone of her voice broke his heart, and then it pissed him off.

“Cut their restraints,” Don said.

Hines walked forward and sliced through the rope binding Lindsey’s hands, and then the rope binding Raven’s. He considered making a move, but Don had the shotgun barrel aimed at his back.

“Keep walking,” Don said, flicking the barrel. Hines sheathed his knife, and pulled his pistol out. He pointed the gun at the back of Lindsey’s head.

“Sorry, but it has to be this way,” Hines said.

Side by side, Raven and Lindsey walked out onto the ledge. She was shaking, and a tear streaked down her cheek.

“I’m sorry,” Raven whispered. “I’m sorry I got you into this mess.”

A click sounded as Hines pulled the hammer back on his pistol.

“Any last words?” Don asked.

The forest seemed to freeze in that moment. Raven’s eyes flitted to the churning water below. The stones, which had been smoothed by thousands of years of water rushing over them, seemed to sparkle in the moonlight. In a few seconds his bones would crack on those polished rocks as he bled out into the gushing water.

His mind jumped to his family. Sandra, Allie, and Creek were out there, waiting for him to come home. Raven had made them promises. If he didn't return, they would suffer. A storm was coming. That's what Jason Cole had said. Bad people were headed toward Estes Park, and Raven couldn't leave his family alone. He had to do something, and he had to do it soon.

"Nothing? Then go ahead and jump," Don said.

Hines remained silent. So did Lindsey. She held her head up high and glanced over at Raven. There was nothing either of them could do now. He should have made his move earlier, but he had been waiting for Creek.

Where the hell are you, boy?

Raven leaned over the edge and looked down. There were several dirt ledges fifty feet down. Maybe, if he jumped, he could land on one of those…

No, that's crazy.

The mind did crazy things when faced with death. This wasn't the first time Raven had been in a situation where he thought he was going to die, but this time he didn't see any way out of it.

"Jump," Don said. "If you jump, it'll look like an accident. Raven Spears will die a hero. Otherwise…well, I'm sure everyone would believe that you murdered dear Detective Plymouth after she turned down your advances, and that I was forced to shoot you in self-defense when you resisted arrest. Which story do you think your family will like better?"

An eerie, deep-throated howl answered him. Raven turned just as Don and Hines did. There was a flash of snow-colored fur amidst the dark trees. Then Creek was there, his powerful jaws latched onto Don's arm. The patrol sergeant shook him off and aimed a kick at the dog's side.

"Run!" Raven yelled at Lindsey.

Neither of them wasted any time. She vaulted onto the dirt path and took off running. The boom of the shotgun broke the silence of the night, and the crack of the .45 followed. A yelp sounded.

Creek was hurt.

Raven roared, ducking as Hines turned to fire at him. Two bullets streaked by Raven's head. Hines then turned the gun on Lindsey, who barreled into him. She didn't weigh much, but she was moving fast and low. She threw Hines off-balance, and they both went down.

Creek limped away from Don, who was holding his arm. The shotgun had fallen several feet away. Raven ran toward the gun, but just as he was about to kick it away, Don threw a right hook that hit Raven square in the nose.

Pain lanced up his sinuses. He staggered backward several steps. Warm blood flowed from his nose. He held up his hands to fend off the continuing barrage of punches from Don. One of them hit Raven's wounded ear.

He glimpsed Hines and Lindsey wrestling on the ground about ten feet away. Hines screamed out in pain as she hit his injured shoulder. Lindsey dug her thumb into the wound.

Don landed another hit to Raven's head. His brain rattled inside his skull. He'd always thought of himself as a tough bastard, but his body had taken major punishment over the past month. The officer ran at him again, plowing his shoulder into Raven's chest. He fell onto a boulder, cracking the back of his head on the moss-covered stone.

Creek yelped again in the distance.

The sound of his dog's pain snapped Raven into focus. He had to save Creek and Lindsey. He fought his way upright and head-butted Don in the face. The blow shattered the officer's nose with a satisfying crunch.

Don rolled off him and Raven pushed himself up, placing one hand on his pounding head. He looked over at Lindsey and Hines. She was on the bottom of the pile now, and Hines had his hands around her throat. Creek was slumped in front of a tree, but Raven saw his head move, which told him his dog was still alive, at least. It hurt his heart, but there wasn't anything he could do for his best friend until he took down Don and Hines.

Raven kicked Don in the gut while the patrol sergeant was still down and then reached down to grab the blade on his duty belt. Don grabbed Raven's wrist before he could pull the knife, and then kicked Raven's leg out from under him. He fell to the dirt and Don scrambled away.

A guttural choking sounded, and Raven looked to his right as he pushed himself up. Lindsey had stripped Hines of his knife and plunged it into the bottom of his chin. She held the grip steady, a look of fury on her face, until Hines stopped kicking.

The sound of a shotgun shell being pumped sent a chill through Raven. Don had found his gun.

"I've been waiting for this, Spears," Don said, his voice thick. Blood sluiced down his face. He aimed the barrel at Raven's heart and used his shoulder to wipe the blood away from his lips.

A flash of motion came from the side as Don pulled the trigger, knocking the gun to the side. Lindsey shouted a wordless cry like a bird of prey as she smashed into Don, sending them both stumbling toward the ledge. They

grappled for a moment before teetering over the edge. Raven flailed for Lindsey's leg, but it was too late. She vanished over the side with Don.

"No!" Raven yelled.

He scrambled over and looked down. At first he didn't see anything besides the rocks below. But as he leaned farther out, he saw a face looking up at him.

"Help!" Don yelled. He was holding onto the roots of a tree growing out of the side of the slope. "I'm sorry, Sam. I'll let you go, just help me up!"

Lindsey was hanging onto a limb a few feet away. She kicked Don in the side, once, twice, then a third time.

"You little bitch," Don growled.

Raven reached down for her hand. "Grab it!" he shouted.

Lindsey reached up, but Don latched onto her. "If I go, she goes with me!"

Raven drew back. Just to his left, the shotgun lay in the dirt where Don had dropped it. He made sure Don couldn't see what he was doing, and when he had the gun in his hands, Raven brought it up to his shoulder and aimed it at the patrol sergeant's face.

"No, please, don't!" Don shouted.

Raven pulled the trigger without hesitation. The blast caught Don in his already broken nose, erasing his features in a spray of blood, bone, and gore.

His body fell away from the cliff, plummeting into the valley below. Raven checked the shotgun chamber for another shell, and when he found it was empty, lowered the gun down to Lindsey. She grabbed the stock, and he pulled her to safety.

For a moment, he held her against his chest. They were both breathing hard, and the scent of her hair filled his nostrils as he inhaled.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

"I think so. Thank you, Sam. Thanks for saving my ass."

Lindsey's shoulders twitched and he let her go and turned to look for Creek. The dog looked up as Raven called out, one of his eyes a bloody mess and his coat spotted with blood. The sight took Raven's breath away. He hardly managed to choke out, "Creek."

Raven crouched down to check his best friend's wounds. The shotgun blast had sprayed the dog with multiple tiny projectiles. One had hit his eye, and several others were embedded in his shoulder. If Raven could get him back to town, they might be able to save him.

"You're going to be okay, buddy," Raven said. The dog whined as Raven

picked him up gently.

Lindsey joined him, her eyes wide when she saw how badly Creek was hurt. Raven looked over at Officer Hines's still body and decided to leave him for the wild animals.

"I'll gather their guns and ammo," she said.

"No, we'll come back for it later, we have to get Creek help."

She nodded and followed Raven back to the path.

"I never saw this coming," she said, still panting. "Hines wasn't a bad man; he was just a dumb one."

Raven didn't reply. He moved down the trail as quickly as he could without jostling Creek too much. The dog whimpered in his arms and tried to lick Raven's hand.

"Just hang on," Raven whispered.

After they'd been walking for a few minutes, a dozen flashlights emerged from the woods, carving up the darkness with high-powered beams. Raven and Lindsey froze. They waited to see who these newcomers were in silence. As they approached, Raven saw they were all armed, and most of them were on horseback.

A large man with a white mustache and an expensive white cowboy hat to match moved into view. He sat astride a massive black horse that rivaled Obsidian in size.

"That's John Kirkus," Lindsey said.

She stepped out from behind a tree and said, "Hold your fire."

Several guns pointed in her direction, and then Raven's, as he stepped out, still holding Creek.

"Detective Plymouth, is that you?" Kirkus asked.

"Hi, John," she said.

"We heard gunfire," he said. "You want to explain what the hell is going on out here?"

Lindsey nodded. "Yeah, but we need to get Raven's dog to a doctor first."

Kirkus's eyes flitted to Raven and then to Creek. Something in his stern expression softened when he saw the dog.

"Follow me," he said.

***

Colton sat in a cramped holding cell in the Larimer County Jail, cursing his luck. He never should have come here. That's what desperation did to a man; it pushed him to make poor decisions.

At least he was still alive. For now.

"Hey. Hey you, over there," whispered a voice.

Colton made his way over to the bars of his cell. Across the hallway was a man in a larger cell, what some cops referred to as the "drunk tank." A single candle burned from a wall mount, providing enough light for Colton to make out the swollen face of a guy looking through the bars at him.

"I heard you're a cop," the guy said. "That right? Did you come to help us?"

When Colton didn't reply, the man raised his voice and continued, "Hey man, don't ignore me. You gotta…" His voice trailed off and fell silent at the sound of footfalls at the opposite end of the hallway.

"Shut your trap or I'll stomp it shut," said a guard Colton couldn't see.

Colton sat down on the cot in his cell. He'd always wondered what it was like to be on the other side of bars. It was worse than he'd imagined. With no idea what the hell was going on, there was nothing to do but wait until someone came to talk to him. Had Don set him up, or was this some sort of mistake? Colton's gut said it had been treachery.

The door at the other end of the hallway opened and then clicked shut as the guard left. The man with the bruised face wasted no time in resuming his one-sided conversation.

"Hey man, talk to me. I'm a friend."

Colton stood again and walked over to the bars. The man across the hall wore a flannel shirt, jeans, and a tattered Colorado Rockies baseball hat. Someone had given him a good beating. Several of his teeth were missing.

"Who are you?" Colton asked.

"I'm Clint Bailey. Own a small chicken farm a few miles outside town. They took it from me when I wouldn't give them all my birds. They killed one of my workers, too, and they…they…" Clint reached up and put his hand over his eyes, a sob wracking in his chest. "They raped my wife and…"

Colton put a finger to his lips. "Quiet. I'm sorry about your wife, but—"

The door at the other end of the hallway opened again. Footfalls clicked on the floor and Clint scooted away from the bars. Colton took a step backward and waited.

Three men walked into view, their faces illuminated by the candlelight.

Two of them stopped and held sentry, but the third man dressed in a sheriff's uniform made his way over to Colton's cell. He was young, maybe thirty-five, with a five o'clock shadow hugging a square jawline. Colton noticed that his ears were deformed, bulging from the fluid that caused cauliflower ear, which told Colton this was the cage-fighting sheriff himself, Mike Thompson.

"Chief Colton, sorry to keep you waiting," the man said with surprising politeness. He pulled out a ring of keys and opened the jail cell. "I've been out and just got back."

Colton stepped away from the barred door, watching Thompson warily.

"My men operate on the policy of better safe than sorry," he said. "If I had been here, I would never have thrown you in a cell."

Thompson offered his hand. "I'm Mike Thompson. I haven't been the sheriff long, so you might know me better as Spartan. That's the name I used in the cage."

Colton shook the man's hand. Thompson certainly had the grip of a Spartan warrior.

"So what brings you to Fort Collins?" Thompson asked.

"Sergeant Aragon with the Estes Park police said he spoke with you over the radio. I'm here to talk about forming an alliance. We've been hit by raiders, and I don't have enough men to defend our borders. I was hoping we could help each other."

Thompson scratched at the back of his ear, turning slightly. "Sergeant Don Aragon? Doesn't ring a bell. You sure he said he talked to me?"

Colton nodded. "That's right."

A shrug from Thompson. "I can't say I remember any such conversation."

"Must have been a misunderstanding, then."

Clint looked up at Colton across the hallway and slowly shook his head, tears still flowing down his face. He seemed to be trying to warn Colton. Thompson seemed nice, but something didn't add up. Actually, nothing added up. Still, Colton had only one hand to play, and it was the same hand he came here with.

"But either way, I'm here to talk to you. I've heard you're having problems with raiders on this side of the Rockies. A single attack killed seven of my people. We captured one of the men, a guy named Cole, and from what he told us, things are getting even worse out here. I'm here to discuss an alliance between Fort Collins and Estes Park."

Thompson watched Colton in the flickering candlelight, sizing him up like he would an opponent before getting into the octagon. Colton used to do the same thing before a boxing match, and what he saw in Thompson's eyes scared him.

"I'm also planning to visit the FEMA camp and try to work something out with the National Guard stationed there," Colton continued when Thompson didn't respond. "Estes Park has resources Fort Collins might need, and I'm willing to offer supplies, food, water, and weapons."

"Chief, I think you misunderstand the situation," Thompson said at last.

"Oh?" Colton said, lifting a brow. Although he kept his tone light, he was tensing up as if his body expected a fight at any moment.

"We have things well under control here, but I'm afraid you'll be a bit disappointed by the FEMA camp," Thompson said. "Follow me—I'll let you see for yourself."

***

Albert slipped the radio into his backpack after reporting in to Flint, and leaned down next to his sister. She lay on the couch, eyelids cracked open halfway. He tipped her head up and helped her take another sip of water from his bottle.

"Jackie, can you hear me?" he asked.

Wayne, his sister's boyfriend—or the man that claimed to be her boyfriend—paced near the doorway behind them.

"You gonna get us the hell out of here or what?" he kept asking.

Albert was about ready to answer the question with a right hook, but he was honestly scared doing so would snap Wayne's neck. Both he and Jacqueline had wasted away during their bender, no doubt more interested in drugs than food. He focused back on his sister, trying to ignore her crazy lover.

"Jackie, please wake up. It's Albert."

She finally opened her eyes fully, and for the first time since he arrived at her apartment she looked at him—really looked at him.

"Al?" she whispered. Her lips cracked into a smile, revealing several broken, yellowed teeth.

Albert gripped her hand in his own. "Yeah, it's me. I'm here to rescue

you.”

She pulled out of his grip and her lips straightened into a line. Her features went back to the stone-cold look he remembered from their childhood.

“Rescue me from what? Why are you really here, Al?”

Albert had a hundred things he wanted to say to her, but they didn’t have time to rehash the past.

“Because I love you, and because I’m sorry,” he said.

“Yeah, yeah, we all love Jackie. Now give me some of that water,” Wayne said.

Albert glanced over his shoulder, firing an icy glare that made the man stop pacing.

“Yo, my brother, I just want a drink,” Wayne said.

“How long you been holed up here with my sister? You the one who’s been giving her those needles to stick in her arm?” Albert rose to his feet. He towered over Wayne.

Wayne took a step back. “Jackie, tell him that shit ain’t true. I didn’t make you take any of that candy.”

Jacqueline sat up on the couch. She rubbed at her eyes and then scratched her right arm. The track marks were in plain view.

“What do you call those?” Albert asked, pointing.

When he turned back to Wayne, the man had drawn a knife. He held it in a shaky hand. Albert didn’t have time to regret the fact he hadn’t patted Wayne down earlier. The man jabbed the blade at Albert’s face, slicing his cheek wide open. He cried out in pain and backed away.

“I’ll kill you!” Wayne shouted. He thrust the knife at Albert’s chest, but Albert jumped back.

“Stop it!” Jacqueline yelled, her voice raspy. She tried to stand up, but her legs gave out. She landed on the filthy carpet with a yelp.

Albert planted his feet and waited, warm blood rushing down his cheek. He could tell the cut was bad and would probably require stitches. Definitely antibiotics; who knew where that knife had been? Wayne’s wild eyes locked onto Albert’s. His frail body trembled, and his face twitched.

“Get out of here!” he yelled. “Jackie’s mine. I take care of her. She don’t want you here!”

“Stop it, Wayne,” Jacqueline said from the floor. She struggled to push herself up.

“Put the knife down,” Albert said calmly. “I don’t want to hurt you, but I

will.”

“Stop!” Jacqueline shouted. “Both of you, stop it.”

Wayne looked over at her. “Shut up, whore!”

The insult sent Albert over the edge. He lunged like his days on the football field after a snap. Wayne didn’t have time to react before Albert barreled into him and picked him off the ground. He crushed the smaller man against the wall, and the knife clanked onto the floor. Albert backed away, and Wayne’s sinewy frame crashed limply to the ground with a thud.

“No one talks to my sister like that,” Albert said.

Jacqueline managed to stand and walk over with tears welling in her eyes. She stared at Wayne’s prone form for a long moment before looking up at Albert.

“You never did know how to pick ’em,” Albert said.

— 17 —

The settlement on Storm Mountain was even more impressive than Raven remembered. He carried Creek in his arms toward a twelve-foot cedar fence. Judging by the fresh scent, the fence was new.

Lindsey walked next to Raven, her eyes fixed on the walls built around the mansions beyond. Several guard towers stood along the perimeter, and each was manned with more men and women.

Through the opening gate, a bonfire burned in the middle of the street. Apparently Kirkus and his friends had been very busy since the bombs dropped. They had turned the neighborhood into a fortress.

“Almost there, buddy,” Raven whispered to Creek.

The Akita whimpered, and his flesh quivered beneath his fur. If Raven could have taken the dog’s pain, he would, but there wasn’t anything he could do for Creek besides rush him to someone who could help.

The massive gates continued to open, revealing several modern houses on a street ahead. John Kirkus dismounted from his horse and walked over to Raven and Lindsey.

“I’ll take you to the doc’s house first,” he said. “Then we can talk.”

Raven and Lindsey followed quickly after Kirkus and several other men to a white two-story house. A man in a leather coat stood on the front steps. He removed a pair of glasses and wiped them off on his shirt, then put them back on.

“Doc Meyers, this is Sam Spears and Detective Lindsey Plymouth from Estes Park. They were on their way to meet with us but were ambushed by two officers that were apparently working with outside forces to take over Estes Park.”

Despite his worries, Raven was impressed with how concisely Kirkus had

summed up their situation.

“I’d say I don’t believe it, but after this past month, I’ll believe about anything,” Meyers said with a huff.

“Creek here is hurt real bad,” Kirkus said.

Meyers nodded at Raven and Lindsey and then opened the door to his house. “Come on in.”

Raven hurried inside, talking as he did. “He was hit in the right eye and his right shoulder. I’ve stopped some of the bleeding, but I can’t tell how bad the wounds are.”

“Let’s take him into the kitchen,” Meyers said. He led them through a beautifully-decorated living room with vaulted ceilings. On the second floor, two kids and a woman looked over a balcony as Raven passed below. He entered a hallway and then a kitchen lit by oil lanterns and candles. Meyers pointed at a granite tabletop where Raven carefully set Creek down.

“Easy, boy,” Raven said soothingly. “You’re going to be feeling better really soon, I promise.”

The dog slowly moved his head toward the doctor, then to Lindsey, and then back at Raven. His tail thumped once against the table.

Meyers grabbed a box of supplies from a cupboard and walked back over to Creek’s side.

“Hold him down,” Meyers said.

Raven and Lindsey both carefully restrained Creek while Meyers checked his eye. A low growl came from Creek’s throat, but Raven calmed his dog by whispering in his ear.

“You’re with friends, buddy. Be good and I’ll give you a treat. Nice, tasty elk jerky. Maybe a rabbit, too.”

Creek’s muscles relaxed, responding to the tone of Raven’s voice more than the words, allowing Meyers to pull back the bloody fur covering his right eye. Raven glimpsed the wound for the first time in the light and felt his gut sink. It was destroyed.

“I’m going to need to perform surgery, but I can already tell you that I won’t be able to save his eye.”

Raven choked out a response. “Whatever it takes, Doc. I’ll pay you whatever you want.”

Lindsey put a hand on Raven’s shoulder. Creek’s left eye flitted from face to face, and he let out a low whine that broke Raven’s already shattered heart.

“I’ll sedate him first,” Meyers said. “Don’t worry, he won’t feel a thing.

He’s going to be okay.”

“Thank you,” Raven said. He bent down and kissed Creek on the forehead. “I love you, boy. Be brave.”

Raven and Lindsey stepped back outside, where John Kirkus had gathered with several of his men.

“How’s the dog?” Kirkus asked.

“Doctor Meyers says he’ll pull through, but he’s going to lose his eye,” Lindsey replied when Raven didn’t answer.

Kirkus dipped his cowboy hat. “Doc’s good. He’ll fix your hound up in no time.”

“Thank you,” Raven said.

“So tell me again what happened on that bluff,” he said. “Then we can talk about our other business.”

Raven let Lindsey tell the story, everything from Don working out a deal with Nile Redford that ended with the burning of the Stanley to sending Colton to Fort Collins to meet with Sheriff Thompson.

“He ain’t no sheriff,” Kirkus replied with a shake of his head. He looked at Lindsey. “With Colton gone and Captain Englewood and Sergeant Aragon dead, you may have just gotten a promotion, Detective.”

“What do you mean he isn’t a sheriff?” Raven asked.

“Thompson?” Kirkus said. He gestured toward the fence surrounding the mountain community. “That son of a bitch is the reason we built these walls.”

***

It was still dark in Fort Collins, and the moon rode high in the night sky. Colton sat in the passenger seat of Raven’s Jeep with the same guy that had captured him back on the road. His name was Jango, and he was irritatingly cheerful about having Colton along for the ride. The engine hummed as they idled outside the sheriff’s station.

“Where are we going?” Colton asked.

Jango massaged his handlebar mustache, running his fingers along the top and all the way down the sides. Two passes later, he said, “Wait till you see it.”

Colton raised a brow. “See what?”

“What the government has done,” Jango replied.

The side doors to the building opened, disgorging Thompson and a dozen other men, all armed to the teeth.

Jesus, they look like they are going to war, Colton mused.

“Here we go,” Jango said. He patted the steering wheel. “Nice Jeep, by the way. We can always use—”

The three trucks ahead pulled away, and the sound of engines drowned out Jango’s voice. Colton had a feeling he knew what he was going to say, but he didn’t respond. If they wanted to commandeer his ride, there was nothing he could do about it at the moment. For now, he was playing it cool until he knew exactly what the hell was happening in Fort Collins and the FEMA camp. Not that he had a choice. The men had taken every single one of his weapons, even his damn pocket knife.

The lead truck, an old Toyota, turned right. Jango followed the other two trucks down a road to the left. For several minutes they drove silently through the empty streets. No one was out, which struck Colton as odd. Back in Estes people would walk around at all hours, but Fort Collins looked like a ghost town. There must be a curfew here.

The headlights swept over several houses that were burned to charcoal. Half the city seemed to have burned over the past month, and the fire to the east continued raging.

“What is that?” Colton asked, pointing to the blaze.

“That? Oh, that’s a very unfortunate situation.”

Colton strained to get a better look as the convoy moved closer to the fire. Soon he glimpsed the stone façade of an old church. The burning steeple reached toward the moon like a flaming spear. Smoldering lumps littered the front lawn beneath a shattered stained-glass window. Colton tried to process the information his eyes were feeding his brain, but it couldn’t be real…

The Jeep turned slightly, and the headlights hit the double doors of the church. A chain and padlock had been looped around the handles, securing the entrance. That’s when Colton understood. The trapped people had clawed their way out the shattered windows, but had perished from the flames anyway.

“What the hell happened here?” Colton asked.

“Like I said, it’s an unfortunate situation.”

The convoy passed the front lawn, and Colton saw one of the smoldering bodies was still moving, crawling across the ground and reaching up with a burned hand.

Is this what Thompson wanted Colton to see?

The lead truck continued driving right past, the driver not even slowing at the sight of the dying person that was so badly burned Colton couldn't even tell the gender. He managed his breathing the best he could, but the horrendous sight made his heart kick. For the next thirty minutes he sat in silence. He considered opening the door and jumping out, but where the hell would he run?

The distant glow on the horizon continued to brighten, and Colton finally realized where the convoy was heading. Normally this would be the point where Colton would palm a magazine into his rifle. Weaponless, he felt almost naked. His thoughts shifted from Kelly and Risa to Raven and Lindsey and the rest of Estes Park. What the hell was Don up to, sending him out here to meet with Thompson on false pretenses? Was something happening back in the town?

Not only did he feel naked, he felt helpless, unable to defend his people. He'd come out here to build an alliance, but it seemed he'd left his friends and family in more danger.

The scent of charred wood and burning rubber filled the Jeep as they drove farther away from Fort Collins. The lead truck slowed on the next hill and shut off the headlights. Jango followed suit. The vehicles parked side by side on the crest of the hill. Doors opened and men jumped out of the beds onto the concrete, fanning out across the pavement.

Jango jerked his chin. "Let's go, *Chief*."

The first thing Colton did when he stepped out was scan the area just in case he was going to have to make a run for it, but there wasn't anywhere to go. Surrounded by rocky fields and rolling hills, the drab landscape provided little cover. The air was thick and heavy from the distant smoke, and the other men pulled up scarves and bandanas over their faces.

Thompson strode through the group and gestured for Colton. Jango followed them to the top of the hill, where Thompson put a muscular arm around Colton's shoulders. Colton was too busy staring at the view to pay much attention to the odd gesture.

Dozens of poles had been constructed on the shoulder of the highway, and a body was hanging from each of them. Several of the silhouetted figures seemed to be writhing, but Colton couldn't be sure they were still alive until a voice pleaded for help.

"You wanted to see the FEMA camp," Thompson said, pointing at a field

of charred tents, trailers, and small buildings about a mile past the poles. Fires continued to eat the structures, filling the sky with smoke.

Colton tried to speak, but nothing came out. The refugees were right; the FEMA camp was hell on earth.

“We had a good deal with Captain Moraine. The camp was supposed to give us a shipment of supplies every few days, but Sherriff Gerrard screwed things up. He found out what we were doing and tried to stop me.”

He raised his right hand and waved it back and forth. “Bullets started flying, and one thing led to another. Next thing you know, the entire place is burning.”

Jango chuckled behind them. “Serves ’em right.”

“Come on,” Thompson said after lowering his hand. “I want to show you something else.”

Colton followed Thompson and Jango down the hill toward the first of the poles. A darkened body hung from the wood about six feet down. The clothes were completely burned away, leaving behind raw flesh and bone.

The man had been dead for a while, judging by the scent. Colton brought his sleeve up to cover his nose.

“You came here to see if the Feds would help you, right?” Jango said, stopping right next to the body. He pulled out a knife and prodded the dead man on the pole. He’d been burned so badly that his skin looked like jerky.

“Sorry to break it to you, but Captain Moraine here won’t be providing you much help at all, nor will Sheriff Gerrard.” Thompson pointed the knife at the next pole, where a second body had been burned to a crisp.

After shrugging his muscular shoulders, Thompson sheathed his knife and jerked his chin back toward the trucks. He patted Colton on the back as they walked.

“I thought I’d give you the opportunity to see what happens to those that don’t follow the laws, Colton, since you seem to have broken one already,” Thompson said. He halted and moved in front of Colton so they were facing one another. “You do know what I mean, right?”

Colton waited for Thompson to explain, stony faced and sick to his stomach.

“That’s disappointing, Chief. You don’t remember capturing one of my men? You told me about it earlier.”

“Shit,” Colton muttered.

“There you go. You remember,” Thompson said, slapping Colton harder

on the shoulder. “Anyways, I’d like Jason Cole back. Once that happens, I’ll see if you and I can work out some sort of ‘alliance’ between Estes Park and Fort Collins. I’ve heard a rumor that you’ve got a nice cache of supplies to trade. Otherwise, I’ll ship you back home in several small boxes.”

***

Fenix awoke sometime in the middle of the night inside the cold jail cell. The bastards had only given him a shitty blanket and no pillow. He shivered on the hard floor, mind racing. Would Redford really give him a chance to take Estes Park? In a few hours, he would find out. In the morning Redford and his men would either lop off his nuts and hand his mutilated body over to the Feds or they would set out together to destroy a mutual enemy.

At some point Fenix finally drifted off to sleep, only to be awakened by a loud banging. The door to his cell creaked open, and Hacker stood there holding a lantern, illuminating the tools hanging from his duty belt.

“Get up, you pig fucker,” Hacker said.

Fenix slowly rose to his feet. Half asleep and furious, he considered throwing a double fisted punch, but Hacker didn’t give him the chance. He reached out and grabbed Fenix by his shirt to drag him from the cell.

“Let’s go,” he said. “Redford wants to see you.”

Hands still cuffed, there wasn’t much Fenix could do but follow. The lantern rocked back and forth as Hacker walked down the hall, shedding light on several other empty rooms. Fenix wasn’t sure where the man was leading him, but he followed like a good sheep, biding his time and hoping he wasn’t being led to slaughter.

A sour sensation worked its way through his gut, partly from the shit dinner they had fed him and partly from anxiety. He calmed his nerves by imagining all the ways he could kill Hacker. His favorite involved gouging out the man’s eyeballs and filling up the sockets with burning lamp oil.

Hacker led them down a concrete staircase several floors beneath the ground. A radiation sign hung over a steel door at the bottom.

“Where you taking me?” Fenix asked.

Hacker grabbed the door and pulled it open to reveal a wide room lit by more lanterns and candles. Several hard looking men sat around a poker table in the middle of the room. They looked up from their cards, their smiles all

folding into frowns when they saw Fenix.

“What the fuck is this racist sewer rat doing here?” said a guy with a red bandana tied around his head.

Fenix almost laughed at the stereotypical Rambo wannabe, but he kept his mouth shut and scrutinized the other men. Two of them appeared to be American Indians. They wore necklaces with feathers and bracelets made of bone. There were dozens of poker tables, roulette tables, and blackjack tables set up in the small underground casino.

Redford sat at the bar along one wall, still dressed in a colorful blue suit with a red pocket square. He turned and looked at Fenix, then said, “Finish your game later, boys.”

The men got up and started walking, their eyes all on Fenix.

“He doesn’t belong here,” said the guy with the bandana.

Fenix ignored them and crossed the room with Hacker at his back.

“In there,” Redford said when they got to the bar. He gestured at a red door on the adjacent wall. Hacker opened it and ushered them inside toward a desk stacked with radio equipment that looked older than dirt. The man sitting in front of the equipment pulled off headphones.

“I want you to radio your second in command and tell him about the attack on Estes Park. We will need fifty men and several vehicles. They will meet us at these coordinates in three days,” Redford said. He handed Fenix a piece of paper.

“Sounds like a plan to me, boss.” He walked over to the equipment and waited for the other man to get up.

“I don’t like this, Nile,” the man said to Redford.

“It’s my decision, Theo.”

“This isn’t the right move,” Theo said as he stood. “Teaming with a bunch of neo-Nazi fuckers isn’t going to go over well with the other men.”

“Hey, I really object to the harsh language,” Fenix said.

Redford directed his gaze at Theo. “This man can help us get Spears without putting our own men in jeopardy. I’d rather a few Nazis were lost in taking Estes Park than our men.” He glanced back at Fenix. “No offense.”

Fenix snorted and shrugged. It was good to know where the redskin stood, at least. They would work together for now to achieve their goals, but one of them would eventually stab the other in the back—it was just a question of who got there first.

“Don’t you want justice for Alex?” Redford asked Theo.

“This ain’t justice, and Alex wouldn’t have wanted us to join this piece of shit to avenge him.” Theo walked away, using his shoulder to hit Fenix on the way out of the room.

“You’re lucky you’re blood,” Redford said.

Theo slammed the door behind him, and Hacker looked uncertainly at Redford. It seemed everyone but Redford wanted Fenix dead. But that was fine, as long as the boss made the decisions.

Fenix sat down at the radio before Redford could change his mind. He picked up the receiver and scrolled to the channel the Sons of Liberty used. Then he relayed his message to Sergeant Zach Horton, his second in command. Fortunately for Fenix, his soldiers were more loyal and respectful than Redford’s men. It only took a few minutes for Horton to reply. The plan was set. In three days, Raven Spears would be dead, and Estes Park would belong to the Sons of Liberty.

— 18 —

Albert snuck a look around the corner to check the road for contacts. After finally getting his sister back to the office building where Sergeant Flint, Corporal Van Dyke, and Dave were hiding, they were preparing to move again.

The night vision optics allowed him to see in the darkness. In the green hue, he didn't spot any contacts—just empty sidewalks and a street devoid of any foot traffic. But there were plenty of places for people to hide among the abandoned vehicles or in one of the many apartment windows towering above the street.

Most of the fighting seemed to be coming from the SC though, and despite the early morning hours, the violence had hardly calmed. Sporadic gunfire and even small explosions rocked the airport where the masses were attacking the walls and barriers.

He returned to the alley where Sergeant Flint waited with Jacqueline and Dave. The two people they'd rescued were shivering—although her shakes were from withdrawal, while Dave was almost paralyzed by fear.

Flint flashed a hand signal to Albert, indicating that Corporal Van Dyke hadn't returned from scoping out the other end of the street. They waited in the alley for several minutes, listening to what sounded like a full-fledged battle in the distance. Albert kept his breathing steady, but the rotting scent of death and trash made it difficult and he found himself holding his breath.

"We're going to have to find a way around the fighting to get back to the SC," Flint said.

"Have you been able to get ahold of Captain Harris?"

"Negative. I'll try again." Flint moved to pull out his radio, but gripped his side instead, wincing in pain.

Flipping up his NVGs, Albert glimpsed fresh blood on Flint's uniform.

"I'm fine," Flint said before Albert could say a word.

A shadow darted into the alleyway, and Albert raised his M4. Flipping his NVGs back into place, he saw it was Corporal Van Dyke.

"The other way isn't safe," he said. "Need a detour."

"Jesus, don't sneak up on us like that," Flint said.

Van Dyke sulked. "Sorry, Sarge."

Albert reached down to help his sister up. She was too weak to move on her own, and with Van Dyke's help, Albert hoisted her over his shoulder in a fireman's carry. Once she was secure, he took Dave's hand.

"Stay close," Albert said.

Dave nodded back. He was still gripping the sheathed knife.

Flint took point and moved out of the alley, striding onto the sidewalk and sweeping his carbine high and low. Albert followed close behind. With one hand still clasped around Dave's and the other ensuring his sister didn't fall, he wasn't able to raise a weapon. He shifted Jacqueline higher onto his shoulders. She was so frail, and he hardly noticed the additional weight with the adrenaline pumping through his veins.

They moved down the side of the street at a good pace. Flint stopped at the next intersection and flashed a hand signal to proceed after a quick scan. The sound of gunfire continued in the distance, the pop of small arms answered by the crack of automatic rifles. Harris's men were fighting back now, which told Albert things were spiraling out of control at the SC. How could they hold back tens of thousands of desperate, starving people? Smoke fingered into the skyline over the airport, and as they approached, Albert saw the flames for the first time. Multiple locations at the SC were burning.

"Contacts," Van Dyke whispered from the rear guard.

Albert quickly took cover in an enclosed brick entryway to an office building on the corner of a four-way intersection. Dave tucked his small body behind Albert while Van Dyke and Flint found cover behind a Jeep Wrangler in the middle of the road.

"You sure you saw them?" a man said.

"Pretty damn sure. They had automatic weapons and moved like soldiers."

Dave pulled on his hand. "Mr. Big Al, are those Orcs looking for us?"

"Shhhh," Albert whispered. He carefully placed his sister on the ground. She winced in pain, her eyelids flickering. She was slowly slipping away. He had to get her to a doctor before she lost consciousness.

Across the street, Flint and Van Dyke were hiding behind the Jeep with their rifles angled upward. Both men had their NVGs flipped into position and glanced over at Albert. He nodded, weapon readied.

The voices were coming from the street they had just left, and Albert could make out the footfalls now. There were at least four men. He stole a glance, seeing five Latino men about three hundred feet away, all of them carrying rifles except for one that held what looked like an Uzi. Quickly pulling back, he motioned to Van Dyke and Flint, signaling five hostile contacts.

Taking them down shouldn't be a problem, especially with the advantage of night vision optics, but Albert feared a stray round might hit his sister or Dave. Albert prayed that they would pass by. Still, he slowly readied his rifle, fully prepared to step around the corner and empty the magazine into the men hunting them.

Very carefully, he peeked around the corner again. The men were close enough that Albert could see the five-point sacred crown tattoo on the neck of the closest guy. Definitely Latin Kings. They were now less than one hundred feet away.

"I can't see shit, Jose," one of the gang members said. "Can I use my flashlight now?"

"No, and keep your mouth shut, you dumb shithead," replied another man.

"This is fucking stupid. Why are we looking for a few soldiers out here? The airport is where the action is," said another guy. "I'm ready to carve some mofos up!"

"'Cause these are the pricks that killed Del and Fernandez. The airport will be ripe for the taking tomorrow. Let the civvies do the hard work for us. We'll move in when they're done."

Twenty feet away, Flint and Van Dyke were moving into firing positions. Albert balled his hand to tell them to hold their fire. It was too dangerous to engage with Jacqueline and Dave so close. Plus, if these guys weren't using lights, then maybe they would just continue walking.

The first of the armed men took a left and moved into sight, heading right for the Jeep. Albert nudged Dave back until he was up against the door. The boy had pulled out his knife. He stood next to Jacqueline and said, "I'll protect her."

Albert heard the strength in Dave's voice and saw it in the boy's stance.

"Thank you," Albert whispered. "For now, keep back and stay quiet, okay?"

He took a knee and aimed his rifle at a short man with a bandana covering his features and a wide chain necklace hanging down his chest. Just as he prepared to squeeze off a shot, the crackle of a radio sounded behind the Jeep. Albert cringed at the noise.

“Sierra 1, this is Echo 1. Do you copy? Over.”

It was Captain Harris trying to raise Sergeant Flint, and the message came at worst possible moment.

“There!” yelled one of the Latin Kings. All five gang members raised their guns at the Jeep and fired. The shots lanced into the side of the vehicle, shattering windows, deflating tires, and punching through metal.

Dave yelled, “Shoot ’em, Mr. Big Al!”

Albert pulled the trigger and hit the guy with the chain necklace in the temple. His skull shattered and gore exploded into the air.

The next guy turned to fire his Uzi, but Albert dropped him with a shot through the neck that obliterated his crown tattoo. As the man fell, he managed to fire a burst. Bullets zipped into the brick wall to Albert’s left, and one of them hit the ground in front of his feet.

Dave let out a cry and grabbed onto Albert’s belt, but Albert kept firing. By the time the other three Latino men knew what was happening, two of them were on the ground, bleeding out from mortal wounds. The fifth and final guy took off running.

Albert moved out, Dave still clinging to his back. He fired several shots at the fleeing gangster who vanished around a corner. In a quick motion, Albert pulled out his spent magazine and jammed a fresh one home. Then he raised the carbine in the direction of the guy that had fled, just in case he returned.

“Watch over Jacqueline,” Albert ordered Dave. The kid let go of his belt and hurried away. Albert kept his rifle trained on the corner.

“Sergeant, Corporal, you okay?” Albert called out when he deemed the area clear. He backpedaled toward the Jeep to check on Flint and Van Dyke, who were still crouched behind the cover. Flint made a thumbs up sign and then pulled out his radio to send a message to Harris.

Albert moved over to the downed men. Three of the four were clearly dead, but the fourth was on his back, kicking at the ground. He clutched his neck, blood streaming between his tattooed fingers. Albert kicked his gun away and then bent down for a look. The guy couldn’t have been more than eighteen years old, if that. They locked eyes and the young man’s lips moved, trying to speak.

Another kid, Albert thought. He considered putting him out of his misery, but Van Dyke beat him to the punch by firing a shot in the center of the young man's forehead, ending his suffering with a crack that echoed through the night.

"Piece of shit," Van Dyke said, spitting. "These are probably the guys that hung those guardsmen from the bridge after skinning 'em."

Flint strode over and looked down. "Nice shooting," he said.

It took Albert a moment to realize Flint was talking to him and not Van Dyke. In less than a minute, Albert had killed three men. Technically four, if you counted the one Van Dyke had finished off. A shiver rolled down his back. In his entire career, first as a police officer and then as head of Charlize's security detail, he'd never been involved in a fatal shooting.

"We need to move before they come back. I've got the evac coordinates," Flint said.

"What evac?" Albert asked.

"You got friends in high places, brother," Flint said. "Apparently there's a Black Hawk heading to a park three blocks from here. They'll be here in thirty. The other birds are on their way to the SC to evacuate personnel."

"Fuck yes!" Van Dyke said, too loud. "We're finally getting out of this shithole."

"Let's move," Flint said.

Albert hurried back to get his sister. "You okay?"

She worked her dry, cracked lips for a moment before responding. "Cold… so cold…"

"Just hang on," Albert said. He bent down and picked her up. Flint was waiting in the street with Dave. They continued onward at a quick clip, anxious to get away from the carnage and reach the evac point.

The first block was clear, and Albert started to relax. They were almost there, but by the time they reached the second block, Albert realized they were heading to the same park where they had killed those men, setting off the chain of events that had put a price on their heads.

The team cleared the trees surrounding the park and then moved through a gated entrance where they stopped at the sight of a man hanging by a noose from a tree limb. It was another National Guard soldier.

He pulled Dave close and told him to shut his eyes. For once, he was grateful that Jacqueline was too out of it to notice anything.

"What kind of animals could do this?" Flint said, even though he already

knew. Whatever sense of law and order that had kept the most vicious gangs somewhat in check was gone now. They were living in a world without rules, without morals, and Albert was starting to think that the few remaining good people were no match for the bad.

He forced himself to look at the body as they approached. The clothing and skin had been stripped away, leaving ribbons of bright muscle exposed. Pinned to the man's chest under the dog tags was a sign that read, *This land belongs to the King*. A five-point crown was drawn below the words.

"Cut him down," Flint said.

Van Dyke nodded and ran over to the tree. He climbed up and, using his knife, sliced through the rope. The body crashed to the dirt and Flint bent down to retrieve the dog tags. Dave pulled his hands from his eyes to watch.

"Was that a person?" he asked.

Albert turned to look back the way they had come, anxious to get out of there.

"He deserves a proper burial," Flint said. "He's one of us."

"All due respect, Sarge, but we got to get to that chopper," Van Dyke said.

Flint hesitated for a moment before he continued through the open gates, reaching up to wipe something from his eyes. He didn't strike Albert as a sentimental man, but the sight of a fellow soldier skinned to the bone would break any man.

They took a trail through the woods that ended at an open area of playground equipment and fountains.

"There," Flint whispered, pointing to the basketball courts at the edge of a lake. "That's our evac."

When they reached the courts, Albert lowered his sister to the ground at the foot of a wide tree. Van Dyke and Flint took up position with their rifles angled toward the playground. It was a good location; the lake made it virtually impossible for anyone to sneak up on them in that direction.

Albert scanned the area. A hellish orange light raged in the direction of the airport. The forest bordering the tarmac of the SC must be burning.

"Is that Mordor?" Dave asked, stepping up next to Albert's side.

"Contacts," Flint said before Albert could answer.

Albert turned to see flashlight beams crisscrossing through the trees. Albert moved Dave to sit by his sister. Then he took a knee behind a boulder and aimed his rifle at the approaching figures. To his right, Van Dyke and Flint were both lying in the grass.

“How long till evac?” Albert asked.

“Ten minutes,” Flint whispered.

Armed men moved into view. Albert spotted the guy that got away earlier leading the group, but this time the gangbangers were more cautious. They fanned out like soldiers, weapons shouldered and flashlights raking across the park. He counted at least a dozen beams.

As they moved out around the playground equipment and fountains, Albert heard the thump of the incoming Black Hawk.

“We have to take these guys out or that bird isn’t going to land,” Flint whispered.

Albert nodded. He prepared to take his first shot, lining the sights up on the face of another young man wearing a bandana over his head.

Forgive me, Lord, he prayed as his finger tightened on the trigger.

Van Dyke fired first, sending a burst downrange. Flint and Albert followed a split-second later, and Albert’s target dropped from one shot to the skull and two shots to the chest.

Return fire exploded across the park, muzzle flashes lighting up the area like massive fireflies. A round whizzed past Albert’s head, and another hit the tree behind him, shattering the bark.

“Stay down!” he yelled to his sister and Dave.

Albert squeezed off a burst in the direction of the closest muzzle flash, dropping another gangbanger. Two more men ran for the playground equipment. The squeeze of the trigger brought one of them down in the sand. A second hit the other guy as he attempted to scramble up a plastic slide. The man slid back down, leaving behind a smear of red on the surface.

Flint and Van Dyke fired calculated shots, cutting down three more contacts. Albert focused on a group of four men behind a fountain. They popped up one at a time to fire, forcing Albert back behind the boulder. These guys were smart enough to take cover, but fortunately they couldn’t shoot for shit.

Albert fired a burst, scoring a hit that dropped one of the men into the pool of water with a splash and a choking scream.

Van Dyke suddenly cried out, “I’m hit.”

Albert kept his sights on the fountain and shot another man who was making a run for their position. Then he looked over to Van Dyke. He was trying to raise his rifle, but dropped the weapon and hit the ground.

“Keep firing!” Flint yelled at Albert.

Pushing his rifle back up, Albert counted three more contacts in the green view of his NVGs. The men had all shut off their flashlights, but he could see them with his optics. One man snuck around the fountain at a crouch, and Albert nailed him with a burst to the upper body. He jerked several times before collapsing.

Return fire rang out, and Albert crouched back behind the rock. Bullets kicked up dirt to his right. He pushed his body against the boulder, doing his best to keep his large frame hidden.

"How bad is he hurt?" Albert asked.

"We need to get him out of here fast," Flint said.

More muzzle flashes came from the playground as the chopper approached, descending over the basketball courts. The sight of the bird brought out courage in the remaining Latin Kings. Bringing down a Black Hawk would be a badge of honor for these assholes.

Flint looked over at Albert. "Get Dave and your sister out of here! We'll hold these fuckers back. I'm not leaving until every one of them is dead."

Van Dyke choked out, "Just don't leave without us, bro."

"Never," Albert said. "We're all getting out of here. Just hang on."

Albert took off running for the chopper, shielding his sister and Dave with his body. A flash of motion came from his right. Before he could raise his rifle, a bullet slammed into his side, knocking him to the ground and seizing the air from his lungs. His night vision goggles rolled onto the dirt, and he looked up with naked eyes.

To his right, a man with lip piercings and a thin mustache walked into view. He was holding a Glock. He grinned as he aimed the barrel downward.

Albert focused on the cold, dark eyes of the Latin King. Tattoos covered his face and neck. Was this really the last face Albert would ever see?

"Fuck you, nig—" the man began to say when his words were cut off by a scream of pain.

Albert's eyes flitted to a short figure standing behind the gangbanger. It was Dave, and the boy had plunged his knife into the man's back. He pulled it out and then jammed it in a second time.

"For Gondor!" Dave shouted.

Albert quickly pushed himself up, gritting his teeth at the pain. The gangster howled and reached with one hand to grip the knife sticking out of his back. He aimed his Glock at Dave with his other hand but never got the chance to pull the trigger.

A three-round burst hit the guy in the chest, sending him sprawling backward. Albert turned to see Flint, his rifle raised.

“Go!” Flint yelled.

More flashlights were approaching from the opposite end of the park. Reinforcements had arrived. Albert picked Dave up under one arm like an over-sized football. They returned to the tree where Jacqueline lay, feebly groaning.

“Y’all stop all that noise,” she groaned.

He reached down to help his sister up, but the gunshot wound was too painful. “You’ve got to get up,” he said.

“Just lemme sleep,” she said, turning her head away.

“Come on, Jackie!” he shouted, watching as the chopper landed on the courts. A team of soldiers jumped out and Albert waved at them and yelled, “Over here!”

More gunfire cracked behind them, Van Dyke and Flint exchanging rounds with the advancing gangbangers. The next few seconds dragged by with agonizing slowness.

The pain was intense, and Albert could feel the lifeblood gushing from the wound in his side, warming his belly and chest while turning his limbs cold. He tried to run, but his legs wouldn’t respond. They gave out on him and he collapsed in the dirt.

The soldiers reached them a moment later. Two of them hauled his sister and Dave away.

“Mr. Big Al!” Dave yelled.

A third man with the bulky build of a linebacker bent down and helped Albert up. Using the big soldier as a crutch, Albert hurried toward the bird.

Flint and Van Dyke abandoned their position, but they were still firing as they retreated. A dozen muzzle flashes came from the trees. Van Dyke stumbled, and as Flint leaned over to offer him a hand, bullets tore into his back and side. He fell with Van Dyke, both men tangling on the ground.

“Sergeant!” Albert yelled. He pulled away from the soldier helping him and stopped. “We can’t leave them.”

The soldiers that had helped Dave and Jacqueline into the chopper returned with their rifles shouldered. They fired at the final gangbangers while two of them ran to help Van Dyke and Flint.

Albert wanted to help, but the pain was too intense. He couldn’t even walk on his own. Red encroached across his vision. By the time he reached the

chopper, his body was numb. He collapsed to the floor of the troop hold and forced his eyelids open. A small face stared down at him.

“Please don’t die,” Dave sobbed.

“I won’t leave you, buddy,” Albert said. He looked over to his sister. A medic was crouched next to her, applying an oxygen mask to her gaunt face. A second medic bent down by Albert to check his gunshot wound.

The soldiers that had run to help Van Dyke and Flint were returning now with both men over their shoulders. As soon as they made it to the chopper someone yelled, “Go, go, go!”

As the pilots pulled the bird into the air, he heard a voice say, “He’s gone.”

Van Dyke lowered his head next to the limp form of the sergeant. Flint had taken a round just below the temple. There was nothing anyone could do for him now. Albert closed his eyes and prayed for the man’s soul.

The chopper pulled away from the city, providing a view of the airport. The eastern fence had come down, and thousands of people had streamed inside. Fires raged throughout the camp, and the scene sparked with gunfire.

“It’s a damn warzone down there,” one of the soldiers said as the Black Hawk pulled away into the night sky. “SC Charlotte has fallen.”

— 19 —

Charlize stood on the bottom floor of Central Command with her arms folded across her chest. Dr. Lundy and General Thor flanked her, and President Diego stood in front of them. Everyone was focused on the large, wall-mounted monitor at the front of the room. Her mind was consumed with worry about Albert, but right now she needed to focus on the situation at hand.

On screen, hundreds of ships with Chinese markings were cutting through the water, leaving the shores of China for the United States.

The Chinese government must have been preparing the ships for days if not weeks, knowing that President Diego would likely agree to their offer, and now the fleet had embarked with billions of dollars' worth of industrial equipment and containers packed full of supplies.

But their help came at a cost. Twenty-five thousand Chinese soldiers were also aboard those ships. Their presence in the United States would bring with it the first occupation force in the history of the country.

Agreeing to China's terms felt like betraying her country, but the loss of multiple SCs to violence and disease had forced her hand. Word had come in over the night that another SC had fallen just outside Loveland, Colorado, not far from the town of Estes Park. It had been burned to the ground by raiders. The devastating news continued to flood in over the scrambled comm systems.

The war with North Korea might be over, but the United States was losing the fight against its own people. Now they were at the mercy of a foreign government that had long been an uneasy ally at best.

She wasn't the only one with mixed feelings. The images on screen weren't received with applause or celebration, but skeptical looks from nearly

everyone. Each officer or staff member around her seemed uneasy about the idea of armed Chinese soldiers walking freely around the United States.

As the ships sailed on the screen, President Diego turned and used the opportunity to address the gathered members of his cabinet, his generals, and everyone else that had arrived over the past few weeks. The conversations died down, silence shrouding the Command Center as he began to speak.

“I’m sure I don’t have to tell you that we’re entering a new phase of American history,” Diego said. “A phase that will either lead our country toward a brighter future, or one that will be the end of our republic. Like the Romans and so many other great empires, we’re faced with war, famine, disease, and uncertainty about the future. Every decision we make moving forward will determine if we crumble like the Romans or whether we rebuild and restore the United States of America.”

Diego paused for a moment, tightened his tie with his still-bandaged hand, and took a moment to scan the faces around him, stopping on Charlize. She offered her support with a brisk nod. Although it pained her, this was the only way to save what was left of their country. She just hoped it didn’t backfire. They couldn’t afford a war against the Chinese.

“I’m confident that the Chinese government and our other allies will help us get back on our feet. This will save countless American lives and put us back on a path to prosperity. I reached this decision with the help of my cabinet, and while I know the decision won’t be popular, I feel it is the correct one. I ask you all to work with me with optimism as we move forward. Together we can be strong, but divided we will not succeed.”

Charlize continued nodding, and soon most everyone in the room was dipping their heads in support. Still, there was no applause.

“Thank you,” Diego said simply.

The moment felt as though the United States had reached a crossroads. One day, perhaps, historians would look on President Diego as a great leader who brought America out of darkness. On the other hand, he might be reviled as the man who sold his country out to China.

Charlize had no way of knowing which way things would turn out. She could only pray that there would be a future where someone was left alive to write those history books.

As everyone went back to work, Colonel Raymond walked over to Charlize and whispered in her ear, “Ma’am, I’ve got news about Albert Randall.”

The words flooded her with the anxiety that had momentarily gone away during Diego's short speech. She followed Raymond to a conference room and waited for him to shut the door.

"He found his sister. He's on his way back here via Black Hawk, but Albert was shot, and the sergeant leading the mission was killed," Raymond said.

Charlize slumped into a chair." How bad is Albert?"

"He's going to make it, but his sister is in pretty bad shape. Apparently she was using heroin," Raymond said.

Charlize closed her eyes as her heart rate began to slow down to normal speed. It wouldn't be a popular move bringing Jacqueline to Constellation, but she'd made Albert a promise, and she was going to keep it. She hoped the facility's clinic was prepared to treat a heroin addiction.

"They also rescued a young boy about Ty's age. A kid named Dave," Raymond said. "His parents were in D.C. the night of the North Korean attack."

"Two civilians out of how many?" she mumbled, more to herself than to Raymond.

"Pardon me, ma'am?"

"How many civilians were killed at SC Charlotte?"

Raymond shook his head. "I don't know yet. At a guess…thousands."

For a moment neither of them spoke. Charlize ran through the facts in her head. Albert had been shot, but he'd found his sister and he was coming home with a young boy plucked out of the chaos. For the first time in days, she felt conflicted optimism. With the Chinese sailing toward the United States, Charlize had to hold onto the hope that the country could turn things around.

"MS-13 and the Latin Kings appear to be responsible for the organized attack in Charlotte," Raymond continued. "Perhaps those Chinese soldiers will come in handy."

Charlize stopped short of nodding. Those gangs weren't the only domestic terrorists threatening the lives of innocent civilians and the restoration effort at the survival centers. Dan Fenix and his Sons of Liberty were still out there. They wouldn't slip through her fingers again.

She stood and jerked her chin at the door. "Let's get back to it, Colonel. We have a lot of work to do."

***

Colton didn’t sleep a wink that night. As soon as they got back to the station, Jango led him to the jail cell, where Colton had remained sitting with his back to the wall until the sun came up. It gave him far too much time to think. He’d made some poor decisions, but in the end, each one was made to protect his family, friends, and Estes Park to the best of his abilities.

At the end of the world, a man could only be expected to do so much. Colton had done everything in his power to save those he loved.

And he had failed.

He lowered his head and put his hands on the back of his neck, resisting the urge to scream.

“Hey, friend,” said a voice.

Colton knew it was Clint Bailey, the prisoner across the hallway, but he wasn’t in the mood to talk. He wondered if Clint had suffered a head injury that scrambled brains, or if he’d always been a bit odd. It didn’t matter, really; the man still didn’t know when to shut up.

“I said ‘hey,’” Clint said.

Looking up, Colton glared, ready to snap. But when he saw Clint had suffered another beating during the night, he couldn’t bring himself to yell at the poor bastard. Thompson and his men were animals. In some ways, they were worse than Brown Feather and his brother, because they had the power to commit murder on a much wider scale than the two psychotic Sioux brothers.

Colton lowered his head again, sinking into the hopelessness of his situation.

“It’s okay, friend,” Clint said. “We can help each other.”

The guard at the other end of the hallway let out a long snort and then went back to snoring regularly.

“Don’t give up,” Clint whispered. “We’re going to get out of here, me and you.”

“I’m not giving up,” Colton replied. And to his surprise, he found it was true.

Marcus Colton wasn’t the type of man to quit. Never had been. He had been a soldier and a fighter for most of his life, from the boxing ring to the mountains of Afghanistan. Now wasn’t the time to despair—now was the time to kick some ass and save the people he loved.

He slowly scooted over to the bars, meeting Clint's eyes. The man may have smiled, but Colton couldn't tell because of how bruised Clint's features were.

"Tell me how we can help each other," Colton said.

Clint scratched at his forehead, then looked to the right. The guard continued snoring down the hallway.

"I know things," Clint said. "I know their weaknesses, and most importantly, I know how to get out of here."

Colton paused to think. He was exhausted, and he had no idea if he could trust this man. But what choice did he have? No one was coming to rescue him, and Thompson wasn't going to just let Colton go. He had to find a way to escape and get back to Estes Park. He wouldn't let anyone negotiate with Thompson, that was for sure.

He had only one choice. He would have to trust Clint—not just with his own life, but with the lives of everyone else in Estes Park.

"Okay," Colton said at last. "Tell me everything you know."

***

It was noon on the day after Raven had shot Don in the face on the trail near Storm Mountain. The night had been full of ups and downs, but Creek had pulled through. The dog now slept peacefully on the floor of Chief Colton's office at the police station in Estes Park. After hammering out the terms of an alliance with John Kirkus and his fellow preppers, Raven had returned to Estes Park with Lindsey and Creek earlier that morning.

Raven hadn't known if anyone would believe him about Don's betrayal, which was why he let Lindsey do all the talking. While Raven waited for everyone to gather at town hall, he watched Creek sleep.

A patch covered the dog's eye, and a bandage marked his shoulder where the doctor had removed more pellets. The Akita wouldn't be back to work anytime soon, but he was alive. Thunderer had told Raven he'd lose more loved ones, but at least the universe hadn't taken Creek from him. Raven wasn't sure he'd be able to keep going if that happened.

Instead, he feared that Colton had been lost. Don had seemed certain that the chief wouldn't be coming home. With Don and Hines dead, Colton missing, and the people they'd lost during the raider attack, the town was

defended by a dwindling band of officers and volunteers. Their list of allies was growing thin while their enemies seemed to multiply.

Raven groaned as he shifted in his chair. Creek wasn't the only one in bad shape. Raven had scored more cuts and bruises, and he was pretty sure his ear was about to fall off. Aside from the threat of infection, he wasn't too worried. The injuries were just more scars on his already scarred body. All that mattered was that he was here to fight another day.

A knock on the door made Raven flinch. He turned to see his sister and Allie outside the office. He opened the door, and Sandra reached out to embrace him. She hung back at the last moment and scanned him up and down instead.

"Sam, you look like shi—" Sandra stopped herself from cursing and hugged Raven instead, embracing him in a bear hug that made him groan even louder.

Sandra pulled away. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to hurt…" her words trailed off again when she saw Creek stir on the floor, tail wagging.

"Oh my God," Sandra said.

"Stay down, and don't try and move, boy," Raven said.

Creek rested his head back on the ground, his tail still whipping the carpet.

"What the heck happened to you guys?" Sandra asked.

Raven put his hands in his pockets. "It's a long story. Don ambushed me and Lindsey at Storm Mountain. Apparently Don was behind the burning of the Stanley Hotel, and he also betrayed Colton by sending him to Fort Collins."

"Allie, stay here with Creek," Sandra said. She put her hand on Raven's shoulder and turned him around, directing him into the hallway.

Great, another lecture.

Creek's remaining eye followed Raven out of the room.

"It's okay, boy, I'll be right back," Raven said over his shoulder.

As soon as they stepped into the hallway, footfalls sounded and Lindsey rounded the corner. She forced a smile and said, "Hey, Sandra."

Sandra didn't return the friendly gesture. "One of you needs to tell me what the hell is going on."

"Detective, would you like to answer that?" Raven replied.

"I will in a bit, but right now we need to get to the conference room," Lindsey said. "Sheriff Thompson is on the radio, and he wants to talk to the person in charge of Estes Park."

“Stay here with Allie and Creek,” Raven said to Sandra.

“But…”

“Just listen to *me* for once,” Raven said.

Sandra let out a frustrated huff and walked back to Colton’s office while Raven followed Lindsey into the conference room. Mayor Andrews, Administrator Feagen, Detective Ryburn, Officer Matthew, Margaret, and several other staff members were inside. The shock on their faces told Raven that Lindsey had already broken the news about the previous night. He was glad not to have been here for the majority of the conversation.

“Who’s going to talk to Thompson?” Lindsey asked.

“Colton would want you in charge,” Officer Matthew said.

“Yeah, but Mayor Andrews is in charge of the town until he comes back,” Lindsey replied.

“Me?” Mayor Andrews asked, pointing at her chest. “I…I…”

Lindsey rolled her eyes and grabbed the radio receiver. Raven stepped up next to her.

“This is Detective Lindsey Plymouth,” she said.

“Never heard of you,” Thompson’s voice replied. “I’ll keep this very short. We have Chief Colton. And I’m told you have one of my men, Jason Cole.”

“Cole is the raider that hit us the other day,” Raven said quietly when Lindsey’s questioning eyes met his.

“If you don’t return him, then I’m afraid I’ll just have to keep Chief Colton. I’ve got a spot picked out for him right next to the former sheriff. If you ever want to see him alive again, you’ll do exactly as I say.”

There was another pause full of more shocked looks, and then Thompson added, “Oh, and we’re also going to need half of your medicine supplies, half of the elk meat, and the majority of your weapons. Then we’ll get scheduled drops each week. You will drop off the first load with Jason halfway down Highway 34 in three days. I’ll give you a few minutes to talk it over.”

Lindsey looked at Raven for guidance, something he’d never thought would happen.

“Do we comply with the demands?” Ryburn asked.

“Hell no,” Raven said. “That would leave us unarmed, and we need those supplies to get through the winter.”

“If we don’t, they will kill Colton.” Lindsey shook her head. “What do we do, Sam?”

Everyone else looked at Raven as if they expected him to lead them.

Colton was being held prisoner, Jake Englewood was dead, and Gail Andrews was too flustered to organize a PTA meeting, let alone take charge of a town in crisis. He locked eyes with Lindsey. If anyone here should take the lead, it was her.

The radio crackled and Thompson's voice surged back over the channel. "What's your answer?"

Raven stepped over to Lindsey and whispered, "Tell them we'll comply with their demands."

"Are you crazy?" Lindsey asked, her eyes uncomprehending.

"Just trust me," Raven said. "I have a plan. Don't worry. We're not handing over Cole and we're not giving Thompson jack shit. We're going to fight, and I'm going to get Colton back."

He grinned at Lindsey. It was the smile of a man with a plan that was just crazy enough to work. After a moment, she smiled back at him. Together, they would protect the town and get Colton back safely. They would not allow Estes Park to fall.

Let the storm come, Raven thought. *We'll be ready*.

—End of Book 3—

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Trackers 4: The Damned

TRACKERS 4

~

THE DAMNED

TRACKERS 4

THE DAMNED

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

NICHOLAS SANSBURY SMITH

For my twin brother Zachary Angaran Smith. Thank you for all that you do for at-risk youth. We need more men like you in this world.

“Hell is empty and all the devils are here.”

—William Shakespeare

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Many people have a hand in the creation of this story. I'm grateful for all their help, criticism, and time. I'd like to start with the people I wrote this book for—the readers. You are the reason I always try to write something fresh, and the reason I strive to always make each story better than—and different from—its predecessors. For those of you waiting on my other books, I thank you for your patience, and hope you enjoy the *Trackers* series.

Before you dive in, here's a little background on how this story came to be. In 2016 I was finishing up book five of the Extinction Cycle, and at that time, I thought *Extinction End* would be the "end" of the series. I decided to write a new type of story—a story without monsters, zombies, or aliens—about a different type of threat to our national security.

Rewind ten years. I'm sitting at my desk as a planner with the State of Iowa. It was there that I learned a good deal about a terrifying weapon known as an electromagnetic pulse (EMP). During a meeting with several agencies, I was shocked to learn there wasn't much being done to harden our utilities and critical facilities to protect against such a threat.

A few years later, I started working for Iowa Homeland Security and Emergency Management. I had several duties as a project officer, but my primary focus was on protecting infrastructure and working on the state hazard mitigation plan. During my tenure, I helped multiple communities apply for grants to build safe rooms in their schools or municipal buildings to protect from tornadoes. A few years later, I started working on grants that strengthened and hardened power lines in rural communities.

After several years of working in the disaster mitigation field, I learned of countless threats from natural disasters to manmade weapons, but the EMP, in my opinion, is the greatest of them all.

That brings us to today. We're living in tumultuous times, and our enemies are constantly looking for ways to harm us, both domestically and abroad. We already know that cyber security is a major concern for the United States. North Korea, China, and Russia have all been caught hacking into our systems. We also know other countries are experimenting with technology that can shut down portions of our grid. But imagine a weapon that could shut down our entire grid. The perfectly strategized EMP attack gives our enemies

an opportunity to do just that.

Before you start reading, I would like to take time to thank everyone that helped make this book a reality, starting with the Estes Park Police Department.

In the spring of 2016, my fiancée and I spent a week in Estes Park, Colorado, a place I had visited many times growing up. I wanted to show her this gorgeous tourist town that borders Rocky Mountain National Park, and I decided it would also make a good setting for a portion of *Trackers*.

The police department very graciously allowed me to tour their facilities and ride along with Officer Corey Richards. Department officers and staff explained police procedure for tracking lost people and their operations and response to natural disasters. Captain Eric Rose, who is in charge of the Emergency Operations Center, described what they went through in the flood of 2013, when Estes Park was quite literally cut off from surrounding communities.

I've spent time with many law enforcement departments over my career in government, and I can tell you Estes Park has one of the finest and most professional staffs I've ever had the pleasure of meeting. Thank you to every officer for serving Estes Park and assisting with *Trackers*. I hope you find I did your community justice.

I'd also like to thank my literary agent, David Fugate, who has provided valuable feedback on each of my novels. The version you are reading today is much different than the manuscript I submitted, partly because of David's excellent feedback.

Next up is my editor, Erin Elizabeth Long. She has had a hand in every book I've written thus far. I won't lie—*Trackers* was a challenge for both of us, and Erin really encouraged me to continue pushing until I got the story right. Thanks, E. I appreciate you more than you know.

I also had a great group of beta readers that helped bring this story to life. You all know who you are. Thanks again for your assistance.

Trackers is more than just a post-apocalyptic thriller about the aftermath of an attack on American soil. It's meant to be a mystery as much as it is a thriller. There are a lot of EMP stories out there, but I wanted to write one that included new themes and incorporated elements of Cherokee and Sioux folk stories, which I encountered when obtaining a degree in American Indian Studies.

This story, like many works of fiction, will require some suspension of

belief, but hopefully not as much as my other science fiction stories. Any errors in this book rest solely with me, as the author is always the gatekeeper of the work.

In an interview several years ago, I was asked why I write. My response was that while my stories are meant to entertain, they are also meant to be a warning. *Trackers* could be a true story, and I hope our government continues to prepare and protect us from such a threat.

Much has happened on the North Korean peninsula since *Trackers* was first published in early 2017. The North Korean People's Army has fired multiple ballistic missiles into the Sea of Japan, conducted several nuclear weapon tests, paraded two new intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs), and even threatened thermonuclear war.

These frightening developments have ended the debate over whether or not the North Koreans have nuclear weapons, but it's still not clear if they can actually deliver them by ICBMs. There are other ways to attack an enemy with nuclear weapons, however, and I explore one of them as a novelist in the *Trackers* series.

I don't know the best way to approach the North Korean threat, but one thing is certain—if something isn't done soon, the stability of the entire world could be at risk.

During my visit in 2016, Captain Eric Rose of the Estes Park Police Department told me that he wasn't sure he was ready for a post-apocalyptic Estes Park. I'm not either, but only time will tell if the *Trackers* saga remains fiction.

With that said, I hope you enjoy the read, and as always, feel free to reach out to me on social media if you have questions or comments.

Best wishes,
Nicholas Sansbury Smith

Foreword

Dr. Arthur Bradley

Author of *Disaster Preparedness for EMP Attacks and Solar Storms* and *The Survivalist*.

When used conventionally, a nuclear warhead could destroy a city and cover the surrounding region in deadly radiation. Horrible to be sure, but at least it would be localized. When detonated in the atmosphere at the right altitude, however, that same warhead could generate an electromagnetic pulse (EMP) that would cause almost unimaginable harm to our nation.

The most significant effect of such an attack would be damage to the nation's electrical grid. Due to the interdependency of systems, the loss of electricity would result in a cascade of failures promulgating through every major infrastructure, including telecommunications, financial, petroleum and natural gas, transportation, food, water, emergency services, space operations, and government. Businesses, including banks, grocery stores, restaurants, and gas stations, would all close. Critical services such as the distribution of water, fuel, and food would fail. Emergency services, including hospitals, police, and fire departments, would perhaps remain operable a little longer using generators and backup systems, but they too would collapse due to limited fuel distribution, as well as the loss of key personnel abandoning their posts.

In addition to the collapse of national infrastructures, an EMP could cause widespread damage to transportation systems, such as aircraft, automobiles, trucks, and boats, as well as supervisory control and data acquisition hardware used in telecommunications, fuel processing, and water purification systems. Such an attack could also damage in-space satellites and significantly hamper the government's ability to provide a unified emergency response or even maintain civil order. Finally, many personal electronics could also be damaged, including our beloved computers and cell phones, as well as important health monitoring devices.

With the collapse of infrastructures, loss of commerce, and widespread damage to property, an EMP attack would introduce terrible financial ruin on

the nation. Consider that it is estimated that even a modest 1-2 megaton warhead detonated over the Eastern Seaboard could cause in excess of a trillion ($1,000,000,000,000) dollars in damage.

Testing done in the 1960s, such as Starfish Prime and the Soviet's Test 184, provided some idea of the potential damage, but weapons have become even more powerful and our world more technologically susceptible. No one really knows with certainty the extent of the damage that would be felt, but expert predictions range from catastrophic to apocalyptic. What is universally agreed upon is that the EMP attack allows for an almost unimaginable amount of damage to be done with nothing more than a single nuclear warhead and a missile capable of deploying it to the right altitude. Given that there are more than 128,000 such warheads and 10,000 such missiles in existence, it seems prudent to better understand and prepare for this very real and present danger.

What many do not know is that the U.S. has been openly threatened with an EMP strike by Russia, Iran, and North Korea. Leaderships of these countries have come to appreciate the truly asymmetric nature of such an attack. Consider that an EMP strike would be largely independent of weather, result in long-lasting infrastructure damage, and inflict a damage-to-cost ratio far greater than any conventional weapon, including a nuclear "dirty bomb." Worse yet is that our enemies would not limit themselves to a single EMP strike. Rather, they would detonate several warheads, carefully timed and positioned across the nation to achieve maximum damage.

Author Nicholas Sansbury Smith understands how an attack could cripple the United States. I first spoke with him when he was working for Iowa Homeland Security and Emergency Management in the disaster preparedness field. He reached out when he was writing a science fiction story about solar storms with some questions about my book, *Disaster Preparedness for EMP Attacks and Solar Storms*. Since then, Nicholas has also spent a great deal of time researching EMPs.

Trackers is a work of fiction, but many of the places in the story are real. Utilizing his background in emergency management and disaster mitigation, Nicholas has done an excellent job of describing a realistic geopolitical crisis that sets the stage for an EMP attack. The following story is a terrifying scenario in which brave men and women must adapt to a challenging new world—a world that we could see ourselves being thrust into. Part of me wishes Nicholas had continued writing purely science fiction stories about

aliens and government designed bio-weapons because *Trackers* is a novel that could become non-fiction.

— 1 —

Sam “Raven” Spears watched the refugees in Bond Park huddle around the fire. A cold rain fell from the sky, threatening the flames, but it was still better than snow.

He put a hand on his head, as if that would help the migraine. His shredded ear pulsated with pain, and his entire body felt like someone had taken a hammer to it. He remembered the old Marine Corps saying about pain being weakness leaving your body.

Yeah, that’s bullshit.

Pain was one of the rawest feelings a human could experience—the body’s way of ordering someone to stop doing stupid things that could kill them. Raven had never been great at following orders.

But he was still alive, and so was his family.

Now he had to figure out how to keep it that way.

He walked over to Bond Park, searching the crowd for Detective Lindsey Plymouth. Only two days had passed since Chief Colton had been taken hostage, which left them only one more day to deliver their prisoner, Jason Cole, and the first supply drop to Highway 34.

Time was running out, and he needed to find Lindsey to go over their plan. A voice stopped him halfway across the street.

“Sam, we got a situation at the roadblock on 34.”

Raven turned to see the police dispatcher, Margaret, holding the door to town hall open. He jogged over to her.

“What kind of situation?”

Lindsey came running around the corner of the station. Dressed in a coat and stocking cap, with her duty belt around her waist and a Bushmaster AR-15 slung over her back, she looked ready for a battle.

“We’re about to have company,” she said.

“I’ll get the horses,” Raven said when he saw the look on her face.

A flare shot up from the Crow’s Nest. He followed it into the sky.

“No time. We need to take the Volkswagen,” Lindsey said. “I’ve already grabbed you a rifle.”

Raven bolted toward the parking lot around the side of the building, where the Volkswagen Beetle was already loaded with gear and weapons. He grabbed the AR-15 in the passenger seat and palmed a magazine into the gun. It wasn’t his crossbow, but times had changed. He needed bullets to deal with the enemies closing in on all sides.

The small car tore out of the parking lot, tires squealing. The streets were mostly empty on the way out to Highway 34, aside from several kids riding bicycles on the side of the road. They stopped to wave at the car, but Raven didn’t return the gesture. Every parent here knew the threats outside the town. It blew his mind that they would let their teenaged kids out.

Raven rolled down his window and yelled, “Go home!” Then he chambered a round and looked over at Lindsey.

“You got any idea what’s going on?”

She shook her head. “All I know is that Dale Jackson reported a vehicle stopped near the turn-off for Storm Mountain.”

“Shit,” Raven muttered.

They sped down the open road, the old bug purring like a cat with a smoking habit. The chassis rattled at the high speed.

“You get any sleep last night?” Raven asked, making a stab at small talk.

She shook her head. “Did you?”

Raven shrugged. “I’ve been trying to keep Creek comfortable, but his eye is really bothering him. Damn cone around his head isn’t helping either.”

“I’m sorry,” Lindsey said quietly.

They were both still rattled from the attack on Storm Mountain. Don Aragon and Officer Hines had paid the price for their betrayal. Their bodies were still rotting in the woods, but that didn’t make Raven feel any better. If a man like Officer Hines could try to kill Lindsey, then the world was in major trouble.

Raven clutched his rifle, gritting his teeth, and prepared for another fight.

They rounded another corner and the roadblock came into view. Dale Jackson and three other men had their rifles shouldered at a pickup truck that had stopped about a quarter mile from the barriers. Raven could vaguely

make out two men sitting in the cab and a third in the bed.

“Looks like we got some observers,” he said.

Lindsey parked the car behind the concrete barriers and killed the engine. Raven opened the door and kept low on his way to the two trucks backed against one another on the bridge over the Big Thompson River.

“What you got?” Raven asked Dale.

Dale kept his gaze on the truck. “Three males. All heavily armed. Said they wanted to talk to someone in charge.”

“That’s me,” Lindsey said. “I’ll see what they want. Watch my six.”

“Hold up,” Raven said, grabbing her arm. “Could be a trap.”

He let go of her sleeve and did a quick scan of the spindly trees framing the gorge, dividing the area horizontally into thirds and scanning the canvas from left to right, right to left. Nothing stirred in the hills to either side of the road, but that didn’t mean there wasn’t a sniper out there.

“I’ll go,” Raven said.

“No way.” Lindsey started to move again, but Raven grabbed her by the arm a second time. She whirled around and glared at him.

“Let *go*,” she growled.

Dale raised a brow. “You two gonna dance, or you gonna go talk to those guys?”

“Fine,” Raven replied as Lindsey squeezed between the barrier.

“She means business,” Dale said. “Better not to argue with her, man.”

“No shit.” Raven kept one eye on her as she made her way down the street.

“Detective Lindsey Plymouth with the Estes Park Police Department,” she shouted. “Identify yourselves.”

The two doors on the pickup opened, disgorging men dressed in military fatigues and wearing ski masks. The guy in the pickup bed unslung his rifle and pointed it at her. Raven lined up his sights on the center of the man’s Colorado Rockies hat.

“Try it, you piece of shit, and I’ll give you a third eye,” Raven grumbled.

Dale glanced over, but then turned back to his own scope.

The driver of the pickup strode toward Lindsey, carrying a duffel bag in one hand. He stopped about twenty feet from her and threw the bag at her feet.

“Sheriff Thompson has a message for you about his request,” he said.

“We have another day to fulfill his request,” Lindsey said.

“Right,” the man said with a shrug. He walked back to the truck while his

buddies covered him with their rifles.

Raven kept his crosshairs centered on the man in the bed, his finger on the trigger, ready to squeeze off a shot.

“What the hell do you think is in the bag?” Dale whispered.

“Not sure I want to know.” Raven’s gaze flitted to Lindsey. When she picked up the bag, it left a trail of red behind on the road.

Raven cursed. Thompson had threatened to send Colton back in pieces if they didn’t comply with his demands. Lindsey hurried back to the roadblock with the bag. The driver and passenger got back into the pickup truck and slowly turned around. The muffler fired like a gunshot, making Lindsey hit the ground as the truck peeled away.

The man in the bed hollered, “See you soon, bitch!”

Raven hopped over the barricade and ran to her. Lindsey remained on her knees, looking down at pavement. The contents of the bag had rolled out when she dropped. A severed head lay face down in a puddle of water.

Dale and the other men made their way over. “Is it Colton?” one of them asked.

Lindsey slowly reached toward the head, but Raven placed his hand on her shoulder before she could turn it over.

“Let me,” he said, helping her to her feet.

The volunteer deputies and Lindsey all watched as Raven took a knee, held in a breath, and slowly turned the head over.

Cold brown eyes looked up at Raven.

He let out a breath. It wasn’t Colton after all.

Raven plucked a note from the man’s mouth. Standing, he smoothed out the paper and read it aloud.

“See you tomorrow with the first drop and my man, or Colton’s next.”

***

Police Chief Marcus Colton took a drink of the watered-down soup. He wasn’t all that hungry, especially after seeing Clint Bailey dragged out of his cell at sunrise. The screams had continued into the morning, and ended in a guttural choking.

He knew he would never see the farmer again. And if he didn’t find a way out of here, he would suffer the same fate. But Clint had been his best hope

of escape, and even if Colton did manage to find a way out, there was nowhere to run.

He looked out the barred windows as the sun went down over the hills. Snowflakes fluttered past the glass. Several men armed with rifles and shotguns patrolled the walkway around the compound. Sheriff Thompson was using this place as a hub to terrorize the surrounding communities. According to the chatter Colton had overheard, Estes Park was the next stage of his expanding operation.

A Jeep pulled up outside the building, and Colton clenched his jaw when he saw it was Raven's. They had taken the vehicle, his gear, his guns. And soon, he feared, they would take his life.

He stalked away from the window and turned back to the cell door. Being on the wrong side of the bars in this place made for one of the worst moments in his life. The combination of fear and loneliness threatened to send him over the edge. Sitting in the darkness, having no way of knowing what time it was, how his family was doing, or if he would ever see them again, brought him to the dark edge of post traumatic stress.

You have to be strong. You can't give up.

Colton finished the bowl of soup, downed the glass of warm water, and moved back to the bench. The food and water was a good sign, he decided. They wouldn't waste resources on someone they wanted to kill.

Now that he had nutrition, he needed rest. Several minutes after settling into his bunk and closing his eyes, the door at the entrance to the jail clanked open and footfalls clicked on the concrete.

Colton sat up, alert and ready. He balled his hands into fists, just like before a boxing match, prepared to fight if he had to defend himself.

The light from several candles warmed the hallway. Next came the glow of a torch. Three men walked in front of his cell door and stopped. In the glow of the flames, he saw the rough face of Sheriff Mike Thompson.

"Marcus, good to see you," Thompson said, like Colton was an old friend. His eyes flitted to Colton's fists. "Now that's no way to greet me, is it?"

Colton ignored him and scanned the two goons alongside Thompson. They were both carrying rifles, and had machetes sheathed on their duty belts.

"What did you do with Clint?" Colton asked.

A crooked smile from Thompson. "Didn't you hear?"

Colton tried not to react, but he wanted to throw a punch so badly he had to count to ten in his mind to calm his rage.

Thompson stepped up to the barred door and squinted at him. “Clint told me you two were planning to escape. Is that true?”

Colton kept his lips sealed.

Thompson slammed the bars in front of Colton’s face with the speed of a boxer. When Colton didn’t so much as flinch, Thompson smiled again.

“I’m going to give you the benefit of the doubt, Marcus. I’m going to assume Clint was lying about your little escape plan.”

“I say we kill ’em,” said the man on the left, in a Russian accent.

Thompson frowned and looked over at the man. “Ivan, we can’t kill everyone, or we lose our leverage. Maybe they didn’t teach you that in the motherland.” Thompson directed a finger at the cell. “Marcus is leverage.”

Colton had noticed several of Thompson’s men were Russian. Years ago, Colton had worked several cases involving the Russian Mafia, who had come to Fort Collins for the marijuana business. They brought other drugs. Harder drugs that destroyed families. The mobsters themselves were ruthless, brutal men who murdered their adversaries and dumped the bodies in ditches like trash.

Colton added the Russian mafia to the growing list of threats that included Nazis, organized crimes bosses like Nile Redford, and desperate civilians.

Thompson turned back to Colton. “Your people have one more day to deliver my man, Jason Cole. You better hope they do, Marcus. You better hope they also bring those supplies and don’t short me. I really don’t like to be shorted.”

Colton wanted to tell Thompson to go fuck himself, but he said nothing.

“You’re a quiet son of a bitch today,” Thompson said. “I figured the great Marcus Colton would have more to say. Maybe that little redheaded detective will be more entertaining.”

Colton grabbed the bars and squeezed. “Don’t you touch Lindsey, you piece of shit, or I’ll stomp your face in!”

Thompson grinned in the torchlight. “Ah,” he said. “The dog still can bite. That’s good. I got plans for you.”

Colton cursed himself for losing his cool.

“Don’t worry, I won’t hurt her. As long as your people come through.” Thompson wagged a finger and added, “But if they don’t, I’m going to have some fun with her.”

Colton clamped his jaw shut and watched Thompson lead the two men away from the cell. He knew he shouldn’t call after them, but the anger was

too much to hold back.

“Hey Thompson, why don’t we finish this the old-fashioned way? Like men. You and me. One on one in a cage match.”

That got Thompson’s attention. He halted, and then slowly walked back to look at Colton.

“I heard you’re a boxer, but you’re nothing more than a washed-up old man now, Marcus. You wouldn’t be able to last a minute with me.” Thompson laughed, but there was no real humor in his stony expression. “Maybe I’ll take you up on that, actually. When I’m done beating your eyes in, I’ll piss in your hollow sockets. But not tonight.”

Thompson left with his men. Colton took a seat on the bench, his heart stuttering and his breathing labored. He knew his chances of getting out of here alive were slim to none. There was only one man he could count on now to help him get back to Estes Park and his family.

— 2 —

The white corridors of Constellation were quiet. The underwater bunker was usually much more active, but tonight only a few staffers walked through the halls of the underwater facility.

The calm before the storm, thought Secretary of Defense Charlize Montgomery. She had just come out of a meeting with the new vice president, Tom Walter. He and Secretary of Health and Human Services Ellen Price were leading the effort to combat the spread of cholera in the survival centers. Several had already been abandoned due to the outbreak. All across the country, people were dying from diseases that had been mostly eradicated in the twenty-first century. The conditions, both at the FEMA camps and in the cities were terrible.

But there wasn't much they could do.

They were lucky here at Constellation, where they still had access to plenty of food, clean water, and state-of-the-art medicine. She was heading to the medical ward now to visit Albert Randall. Charlize wanted to check in on him before hitting the sack for a few hours. Big Al was fighting for his life. He was in a critical condition from the round he took to the abdomen while rescuing his sister in Charlotte, North Carolina. The doctors were doing everything they could to save him, but internal bleeding and complications from the first surgery had left him in a coma.

Her breath caught in her chest when she considered that they might lose him. She tried not to show how worried she was, but Ty heard it anyway.

"You okay, Mom?" he asked, turning slightly in his wheelchair.

"Yes, sweetie. Everything's okay." It was a lie. She wasn't okay. She'd lost her chief of staff, Clint Johnson. She'd lost her brother. She'd almost lost Ty. And now she was close to losing her trusted bodyguard and closest

friend.

After checking to make sure no one was coming down the hallway, she stopped pushing Ty and, kneeling down in front of his chair, wrapped her arms around him. “I just want you to know how much I love you,” she said.

Ty’s voice was muffled by her tight embrace. “I knew something was wrong.”

Charlize struggled to find the words to express what she was feeling. “You can never tell someone you love them too many times,” she said at last, letting him go.

“Everything’s going to be okay,” Ty said.

Charlize smiled, but her heart was breaking. She was supposed to be the one comforting him, not the other way around. “I know. You’re such a brave boy.”

She stood and returned to the back of the wheelchair. “I got it,” he said, taking over.

They continued down the passage, with Ty wheeling himself faster than she could walk.

“So, it sounds like you and Dave are getting along pretty well,” she said, trying to keep up. “He’s about your age, isn’t he?”

An enthusiastic nod from Ty. “He’s funny. I’m happy Albert was able to rescue him from the bad people in Charlotte.” He slowed down and waited for her. “Mom, are the bad people everywhere now?”

In the past, she’d been careful what she told her son, but he was old enough and had experienced enough to understand now. It was also important that she didn’t keep things from him. She wasn’t sure how long they would be living down here, and the last thing she wanted was for Ty to grow up sheltered from the real world.

“Yes, sweetie. But there are also good people too, and good will always outweigh the bad,” she said. “People like Big Al.”

“Yeah,” Ty said. “But the bad ones keep getting away. When are you going to find Fenix?”

The question stung. “We will find him,” Charlize said. “You have to trust me.”

When they got to the medical ward, she placed aside her anger at the man who had killed her brother. This was a place for healing, not thoughts of revenge. The thirty-bed facility was filled to the max, with patients ranging from an injured congressman to Albert’s twin sister, Jacqueline.

The empty lobby was outfitted with cream-colored chairs and a rack of magazines. The engineers who designed this place had made it look damn close to the waiting area of a real hospital. Charlize could almost forget they were deep underwater.

“I’ll be right back,” she said. “Can you stay here for a minute?”

Ty reached over to grab a magazine off the rack. His fingers couldn’t quite reach, and Charlize plucked the magazine for him. It was yet another reminder that he was limited by his disability—and limitations would kill most people in the new, brutal world they lived in.

Doctor Parish was typing at her station around the next corner. She looked up when Charlize approached.

“Ah, Madame Secretary, good evening,” Parish said with a tired smile.

The doctor’s dark features sagged with fatigue. Chances were she’d been working for over twenty-four hours; that was normal for many people at Constellation lately, including Charlize.

“How is he?” Charlize asked.

“He’s made some improvement in the past two hours,” Parish said. She gestured for Charlize to follow her. “Come see, I think you will be surprised.”

“Can I bring Ty?”

Parish shrugged. “I don’t see why not.”

Charlize returned to the lobby. “She said we can see Big Al!”

He wheeled after Charlize and Parish down another hallway, past a nurse leaving one of the rooms. The young woman nodded at Charlize and smiled at Ty.

Charlize glimpsed the room where Albert’s sister was resting. She was sitting up in bed and staring blankly at the opposite wall. The sight chilled Charlize to the core. The flow of drugs across the Mexican border hadn’t stopped after America’s lights went out. Things were only going to get even worse.

Parish stopped outside of the fifth door on the right, and opened it to allow Ty and Charlize inside. Albert lay in the hospital bed with a white sheet up to his chest. Charlize hadn’t thought it was possible for him to look like anything less than a giant, but the former football player seemed almost fragile. He gritted his teeth as he tried to sit up.

“Easy there, sir,” Parish said.

“Good evening, ma’am,” Albert said when he saw Charlize. His voice was

strained, but his tone was as polite as ever. He smiled as Ty wheeled into the room. “How are you doing, buddy?”

“I’m good,” Ty beamed. “How are you, Big Al?”

Albert managed to shrug a shoulder, which appeared to hurt, judging from his reaction. “I feel like I got shot,” he said.

Charlize walked over to his bedside. “How long have you been awake?”

He looked to Parish.

“A little over two hours,” she said.

“How’s Jacqueline?” Albert asked.

“She’s going to be okay,” Parish said. “In twenty-four hours, she should have most of that poison out of her system.”

Albert relaxed against his pillow. “And Dave?”

“He’s my new friend,” Ty said. “We’re gonna play racecars later.”

“He’s a good kid.” Albert slowly shook his head again. “He saved my life.”

Charlize narrowed her gaze at him. This was the first she’d heard about Dave saving anyone’s life.

“He told me that he slayed one of the Orcs, but I thought he was kidding,” Ty said. “Is it true?”

Albert looked up to Charlize and then back to Ty. “He stabbed a man who would have killed me.”

A nurse knocked on the door and opened it. “Sorry to interrupt, but Colonel Raymond is here,” the young woman said.

Charlize nodded. “Let him in.”

Colonel Mark Raymond moved into the open doorway. “Good to see you’re awake, Officer Randall,” he said.

“Thank you, sir.”

Raymond’s gaze flitted to Charlize, and she could see he wanted to talk to her alone. After excusing herself, she stepped into the hallway, leaving the door slightly ajar.

“Sorry to bother you, ma’am, but I have an update on the Chinese fleet,” he said. “The first ships will be here in the next twenty-four hours, and are landing at twelve different ports on the east coast.”

“Good,” she said. “Are the ports prepared?”

“Our troops are deployed and ready to accompany the Chinese as soon as they arrive. General Thor just set up our first meeting with General Ken Lin, who will be leading the Chinese recovery efforts. I’m headed to Fort

Lauderdale tomorrow to meet with the general and the Chinese delegation."

"Let's hope they can get those supplies and equipment moving," she said. The FEMA administrator seemed up to the task, but there were still a million things that could go wrong. "I'll stop by Command when I'm done here to discuss it in more detail."

"Sounds good, ma'am."

Charlize returned to Albert's bedside. Ty looked up at her, his curious gaze signaling an imminent question.

"Are the Chinese the good people or the bad people?" he asked.

For a second, Charlize wasn't sure how to respond. She still wasn't convinced the Chinese had nothing to do with the initial attack, but there was no doubt they could have done more to stop North Korea from developing their nuclear program over the years. She didn't exactly blame them for the war, but she also didn't trust them.

"We're going to find out soon," she said. What she didn't say was that she would be going with Colonel Raymond tomorrow to meet with General Lin."

***

Engines roared, mufflers choked, and metal frames rattled over the asphalt as the armada of vehicles moved out. The scent of gasoline and exhaust filled the air. General Dan Fenix loved it. It was American, and he would continue fighting for this great nation until the day he died. Fortunately, he had just found a way to prolong his life.

All he had to do was kill Raven Spears and capture the town of Estes Park, and hand over a shit-ton of guns and gold.

Fenix wasn't going to do it alone. In just under an hour, he was going to meet up with the Sons of Liberty. Sergeant Zach Horton had taken charge of the other divisions, and was on his way, with the rest of their brothers, to the rally point.

But Fenix understood Nile Redford wasn't an idiot. He probably knew the rendezvous could be a setup, which is why he had ordered Fenix to remain in cuffs and have a gun pointed at his head for the meeting.

The Sons of Liberty were the best of the best. Experienced men. Hard men. Many of them with time in the suck. Men with shaved heads and cold hearts. Not wannabee neo-Nazis. Real neo-Nazis. The fucking SS would have been

proud to fight with these men.

Sitting next to Fenix was Nile Redford's version of a hard man. Hacker, the guy with the duty belt full of fancy torture devices. The cliché made Fenix want to laugh, but he held it in. He would have plenty of time for laughing later.

"Your men better come through," Hacker said, shooting a glance at Fenix. "And the loot you claim to have better be real, or I'm going to cut your balls off."

"I'm a man of my word," Fenix said.

Hacker shifted his linebacker shoulders back and pulled his duty belt up over his gut. "Yeah, we'll see."

"The rendezvous is just ahead," the driver of the Jeep said. Fenix had heard Hacker call him Jade. A red bandana held back the American Indian man's thick black hair. He looked in the rearview mirror and scowled at Fenix.

Redford's cousin Theo turned from the passenger seat. He wore a black pinstripe suit and cowboy hat. For some reason, both Theo and Redford wanted to look like old-school mobsters, but Fenix just thought they looked silly.

"Your men better be here, and they better be unarmed," Theo said. His eyes flitted to Hacker. "If this Nazi prick makes any sudden moves, you put a round between his eyes, got it?"

"With pleasure, man."

Fenix didn't feel much like grinning anymore. Now he was just mad.

"Maybe I'll take care of him," Theo said, pulling out a shiny .357 Magnum with a long barrel.

Deliberately ignoring the wannabe mobster, Fenix turned to watch the snow-brushed pines pass alongside the road as the small fleet of trucks climbed up a narrow pass. They were somewhere on the western side of the Rocky Mountains, but he didn't know the exact location.

"We're here," Theo said a few minutes later. He pointed at the roofs of several cabins protruding from the trees on the right side of the road.

Hacker opened his door and came around to let Fenix out of the Jeep. Theo had the barrel of the .357 Magnum pointed at Fenix's face the moment his boots hit the gravel.

"Don't think I won't blow your backward-thinking brains out," Theo said. "I don't care what Nile says. You're nothing but a dumb Nazi prick."

Fenix started walking up the trail, breathing in the crisp cold air. Not

exactly the taste of freedom, but it was better than the cell back at Redford's underground gambling compound.

The hunting camp was comprised of five cabins with boarded-up windows, crooked gutters, and rotting decks. It looked like it hadn't gotten any use for a while. He didn't see any sign of his brothers, but he trusted the Sons of Liberty to be here.

"Horton!" Fenix yelled. "You out there?"

Behind him, twenty of Redford's men fanned out with automatic rifles. Jade slipped into the woods, no doubt to search the area for an ambush, his red bandana vanishing among the trees.

"Where is everyone?" Hacker asked.

Theo pulled the hammer back on the revolver. "Call out again," he said. "Horton!" Fenix repeated, his voice echoing through the woods. A bird cried in the distance, and a small animal moved in the foliage.

The door of the second cabin to the right swung open, and a man walked out carrying two duffel bags. Every gun angled at the figure.

"General," the man called in a rough voice.

Fenix grinned. It was Horton. No one else he knew sounded like a sixty-year-old chain smoker at the age of forty-five. "You're a sight for sore eyes, you old bastard," Fenix said.

"Good to see you're well, sir," Horton continued. He walked out of the shade from the pine trees and scanned the men pointing guns at him.

"Put the bags down," Theo said.

"No need for hostility," Horton said, setting the duffel bags down gently and raising his hands. "I'm unarmed, as instructed. I'm just here to talk to General Fenix and deliver the first batch of gold. The weapons are a mile away."

Theo dug the barrel of the .357 Magnum into the back of Fenix's head. "Watch it," Fenix growled.

"All clear out here," Jade called as he returned from the woods. "No sign of an ambush, snipers, or anything else."

"It's just me, like I said," Horton replied.

Well, that's unfortunate, Fenix thought. He had hoped this was an ambush, but maybe Horton had taken his orders over the radio literally.

Theo gestured toward the bags. Hacker grabbed them and began digging through the contents.

"Looks like the half we were promised," Hacker said.

“Excellent,” Theo said.

Fenix took a few steps toward his second in command, Theo following him with the gun. Horton lowered his hands and clapped Fenix on the shoulder.

“Watch it,” Theo said.

“Easy, man,” Horton said. As he brought his hand away from Fenix’s shoulder, he dropped something into Fenix’s coat pocket.

Maybe Fenix was wrong—maybe Horton did have a plan that didn’t end up with him back in the prison cell. He wasn’t sure what the hell was in his pocket, and he couldn’t look right now.

“As you know, the Sons of Liberty have entered into an agreement with Redford—” Fenix began to say.

“Mr. Nile Redford,” Theo corrected.

“Right,” Fenix said. He focused on Horton. “Have you finished the recon of Estes Park?”

“Yes, sir. Our men have identified nine roadblocks with at least fifty men and women holding them. Another thirty or so people are armed within the city limits. They’ve got a surprising amount of firepower, and are well organized.”

“So they have a militia…smart. Really smart.”

“I’m confident we can take the town. The question is, at what cost?”

“Far as I’m concerned, the more dead Nazis the better,” Theo said.

Horton’s eyes flitted to the redskin, but Fenix subtly shook his head.

“If you just want us to get this Raven Spears, that’s another story,” Horton continued.

“That’s not the deal,” Theo said. “Mr. Redford wants you to secure the supplies the government dropped off there after our first raid. In order to do that, you’re going to need to take out their soldiers.”

“Should I run this by Mr. Redford?” Hacker asked. Theo hesitated, then nodded. Hacker turned on a radio, static crackling. “Mr. Redford, do you copy? Over.”

A few seconds later, the man’s voice rang from the speakers. “Go ahead.”

“We have the first half of the gold, but Estes Park is much better defended than when we raided them last.”

“Let me talk to Fenix,” Redford replied.

Hacker walked over and pushed the radio up so Fenix could speak into it.

“I’m here,” he said.

“It’s your lucky day,” Redford said. “I just got word from an old friend

that the Sheriff of Fort Collins has claimed Estes Park as part of their expanding territory. For now, tell your men to stand down. Just bring me the gold and weapons.”

Horton clenched his jaw, a mannerism that told Fenix he was considering making a move.

Theo pushed the gun back to Fenix’s skull. “Back to the Jeep,” he said.

“Where are you taking him?” Horton asked.

“None of your business,” Theo said.

Horton snorted. “You better watch it, mother—”

“Everyone stay calm,” Fenix said. “Sergeant, I’ll be in touch.”

Horton’s eyes shifted from Theo to Fenix. “Yes, sir,” he finally said.

Theo snorted. “That’s what I fucking thought.” He jerked his chin at Fenix. “Let’s go, you old dog.”

— 3 —

“Some of the refugees spotted men in camouflage on the southern border of town, near the cabins where we put them up,” Lindsey said. “I sent out our scouts, but they didn’t find anyone.”

Raven looked up from the map of the valley. “Men in camo? Could they have been refugees scoping us out?”

She shook her head. “I don’t think so. I was told these guys looked like soldiers.”

“Not American military. They wouldn’t be scoping us out. They’d just walk into town and tell us what they want,” Raven said. “Who told you this?”

“Jennie.”

“Who?”

“The lady who came in with the last round of refugees. We put her and a bunch of other people up in those old run-down cabins south of Beaver Meadows. She’s been watching the area like a hawk.”

Raven ran a hand over his five o’clock shadow, trying to make his tired brain work.

“It could be a false alarm, but I think we should shift some of our guns to Highway 7 just in case.” Lindsey pointed to the roadblocks on the map.

Raven handed her the red marker. “Take over for me, I need a smoke.”

She grabbed the pen and took a seat at the table. Raven left the conference room. The Estes Park police station was jam-packed with militia members and newly deputized officers who had just come off their shift. Most of them were filling out paperwork, but a few eyes flitted toward him as he made his way through the halls.

Chaos had reigned for the first few days after Colton didn’t return from Fort Collins, but Lindsey now had the place operating like a well-oiled

machine. Everyone had a duty, and a gun. The location of every weapon and every bullet was kept in a ledger that was updated daily. Just like the food and medicine supplies. Everything was accounted for and rationed in Estes Park. It was the only way they were going to last the winter.

Only a few people knew where they had stored the majority of their supplies, and Raven planned on keeping it that way. No one would find it unless there was an internal leak. After what happened with Sergeant Aragon and Officer Hines, he didn't trust anyone except Lindsey. She was running a tightly-managed ship, and Raven was helping her do it.

He just wished Creek was here to help too. The dog was back at the Medical Center, resting and healing. Hopefully, in a few days, his furry best friend would be back on his feet, but for now the dog needed to remain under the watchful eye of his sister.

"Evenin'," Raven said to Margaret on the way out of the building. The dispatcher sat at the front desk, watching the radio like a soldier on nuclear missile duty waiting for the fateful order. She raised a hand in an informal salute.

Raven shouldered the door open and rolled a cigarette. Stepping into the chilly afternoon, he jammed it between his lips and struck a match. He twirled his buck knife while he smoked, an old habit from his days in the Corps. It kept his hands busy so his mind could work. If the report of people watching the town was true, then there were more enemies encroaching on Estes Park.

Several citizens were walking down Elkhorn Avenue. The once-bright shops selling coffee, t-shirts, pizza, and cookies were all dark. Several of the windows were even boarded up.

"That's pretty neat, mister."

Raven stopped spinning his knife and looked down at a girl standing nearby. A colorful stocking cap was pulled over her braided hair.

"Jeez, kid. You scared me," Raven said. "Shouldn't sneak up on people like that."

She stepped forward, a grin on her face. "Will you teach me to do that?"

Raven lowered the cigarette. He studied her for a second, seeing the determination in her posture—arms folded across her chest, hardened features.

"Smoking's bad for you," he said.

"Not smoke," she clarified. "I mean the thing with your knife."

“Oh, and no.” Raven put the knife back into the sheath. “Shouldn’t you be at home?”

“I’m here to help.” She gave him a stern look. “I’m here to *fight*.”

Raven raised a brow. “Where are your parents?”

“Dead.” Her words were unemotional. But Raven could tell she was just suppressing the pain. He used to do the same thing when he was her age.

“I’m sorry.” Raven remembered her now. She had come in with the last group of refugees.

“So you going to teach me to do that, or what?” she said, still determined.

“The knife is too big for you, sorry. Bet you’ve never even used one.”

A cocky grin cracked her face. She was probably only ten years old, not much older than Allie or Colton’s little girl.

“Of course I have. But I want to know how to twirl one like you.” She reached out and gestured with her fingers.

Raven smiled, and then took another hit on his cigarette and moved toward the door. “Find me later and maybe I’ll teach you, okay?”

“Okay.” She pulled her stocking cap down over her eyebrows and took a step forward, clearly trying to follow him inside.

Was this what it was coming down to? Children joining the ranks of the militia. A little over a month had passed since the bombs fell, but it already felt like the past was a whole different world.

Raven swallowed hard. He was one of the last barriers standing between the innocent people of Estes Park—and the wolves that were coming. It was just a matter of time.

“You can’t come with me,” he said firmly. He took a final drag of his cigarette, and then stomped it under his boot.

The girl remained in the lobby of town hall while he continued to the conference room. Lindsey was drawing circles on the map at the table. Officer Tom Matthew, Detective Tim Ryburn, and ten other members of the militia were gathered around her. They looked in his direction but remained silent.

These were the best Estes Park had to offer, men and women that Raven and Lindsey had personally vetted when gathering the force needed to save their small town. Some were retired soldiers, like Dale Jackson and Todd Sanders. There were also a few cops, including Todd’s wife, Susan.”

“You ready now, Sam?” Lindsey asked, not even looking up.

“I thought Kirkus and his men were coming,” Raven replied. “They here

yet?”

“Nope. He’s late.”

Raven checked his watch. It was easy to lose track of time with the power off, and he saw she was right. Kirkus was half an hour late.

“You know who that girl is with the hat?” he asked.

“What girl?” Lindsey asked, finally looking up.

“The refugee kid with a rainbow stocking cap. Asks a whole bunch of questions.”

“Oh, Sarah? She’s a firebrand.”

“She’s also ten years old!” Raven shook his head. “We can’t just have kids running around town like that. We could have another hundred Melissa Stones if we don’t do a better job protecting our children.”

Lindsey let out a sigh. “Raven, I totally agree with you, but I can’t exactly keep tabs on everyone. Hell, I can hardly keep tabs on you.”

“I’m not ten years old, and that ain’t funny.”

There were several chuckles from around the room, but Raven shook them off.

“I’ll have my sister look after her, then,” he said.

Dale Jackson spoke up. “I can put her and some of those other refugee kids to work at my place. Keep ’em out of trouble. Need help with my livestock. They’d be safe there.”

Lindsey and Raven exchanged a look. “I’m fine with it,” she said. “Long as you got the time.”

Dale shrugged. “Nothin’ better to do now that the cable’s out. Man, I miss TV.”

The door creaked open, and Mayor Gail Andrews stepped inside with Administrator Tom Feagen.

“Detective Plymouth,” she said.

Lindsey gave the mayor a tight nod. Tensions had been high since the night Aragon and Hines tried to kill Raven and Lindsey. Now that Colton was gone, Lindsey and the mayor had been at major odds. Still, they needed to work with the elected officials, or they would lose the trust of the town. Raven could live with Gail breathing down his neck, but Feagen was beyond annoying. The guy had lived a sheltered life, and knew nothing about protecting people or infrastructure.

“Kirkus and his men are here,” Margaret said from the doorway.

“Let ’em in,” Lindsey said.

The sound of boots slapping on tile echoed from the hallway. John Kirkus stepped into the room and took off his fancy white cowboy hat.

“Afternoon,” he said politely. Two bulky men followed him inside, both of them dressed in winter coats and jeans. Raven had expected the survivalists to be wearing tactical gear, but maybe they were trying to blend in.

“Welcome, and thanks for coming,” Lindsey said. “We have very little time before tomorrow’s drop-off, so I’m going to get started right away.” She looked to Raven.

“She means I’m going to get started,” he said, cracking half a smile to lessen the tension. His stomach growled, but not from hunger. His nerves were tight. He still wasn’t used to leading. “I’ll start with explaining our updated defenses.”

Raven picked up the red marker and pointed at the map. “I’ve added militia to our roadblocks on Highway 34 and Highway 36. Both are areas we could see an attack if things don’t go to plan. Or if Thompson decides to attack us anyways.”

Raven looked up to make sure everyone was paying attention. “Knowing what I do about Thompson, my guess is that he will try to sneak into town, which is why I’ve also assigned extra people to the two roadblocks on Highway 7. We have two people posted at the Crow’s Nest at all times as an early warning system. On top of that, patrols will be combing the boundaries of the town constantly.”

He placed the marker down and walked around the table to the dry-erase board, which was covered with shift schedules and other non-classified info.

“We currently have over a hundred men and women capable of putting up a fight if it comes down to it. We’ve spread them out the best we can,” Raven continued.

“That’s a lot of boots on the ground,” Kirkus said. “Impressive.”

“It’s a start, but it’s nowhere near enough to keep us safe on all sides. That’s why I recently started a first response team. Think Special Forces or SWAT. The ten men and women in this room are part of that team. We’ve distributed the few two-way radios we have to them, and they all have access to some sort of a vehicle.”

Kirkus stroked his thick white mustache. “We have a similar force. Consists of me, my friend Jack, and my brother, Lane.” He jerked his chin at the two men standing next to him.

Raven grinned. “Good to have you here, Jack and Lane.” He had been

wary of the survivalists at first, but after they'd helped save Creek, he was ready to go to war with these men.

You might end up doing just that.

"All right, so you're probably all wondering how we're going to deal with Sheriff Thompson tomorrow," Raven said.

The room went dead quiet, and he breathed in through his nose, still wondering if his plan was going to get him chewed out. The last thing he wanted was for these people to lose their trust in him after how hard he'd fought to gain it.

But he had to trust himself, too. *This will work*, Raven thought. *It has to work.*

"We're going to bring them Jason Cole tomorrow, like Thompson wants, and we're going to bring them the first shipment of food and supplies," he said.

"What?" Lindsey cried, shooting him a serious side-eye. "I thought you said we *weren't* going to do that."

"No way," said the mayor. "We can't give Thompson what he's asking for. Doing so will result in countless deaths in Estes Park. We need our medicine and every pound of food."

Detective Ryburn lowered his head and sighed. "She's right. I love Chief Colton, but we have mouths to feed. And Jason Cole can't go free after what he did."

Raven nodded at them in turn. "I understand—but if we don't do this drop tomorrow, we won't just lose Colton. We will end up going to war, which will result in far more death and suffering. That's why we need to gain Thompson's trust first. Make him think we're already beaten. Once he lowers his guard, I plan to strike him where it counts and get our food and supplies back."

A few of the militia exchanged glances, and the mayor looked over at Lindsey, checking her reaction. The detective's expression was closed off, and Raven worried that she might not back his play.

"Don't worry, we're going to get everything we give them back, plus some. You'll see," Raven said. "You just have to trust me."

***

Sandra Spears wasn't sure what the hell her brother was up to, but she trusted he was going to do the right thing with Sheriff Thompson. For now, her focus was on keeping her patients alive—including Creek. Neither Raven nor Allie would forgive her if she didn't ensure the dog's full recovery.

She walked through the hospital with a lantern to check on Creek, Teddy, and Allie before the next surgery. She was tired.

No. *Exhausted*.

The last time she had slept a full night through had been over a week ago. And that wasn't going to change anytime soon. Especially not tonight. After she finished her rounds, she was headed back into the operating room, which seemed to be a revolving door.

They had put Creek into Teddy's room, since they were running out of space. Teddy's parents were fine with it, and it helped Sandra focus on her work knowing Allie, Creek, and Teddy were all in the same place. When she got to the room, she slowly opened the door and roved the light over the space. Creek was sleeping peacefully in the small bed they had made for him in the corner, his face protected by the cone. Allie was on the floor beside him, curled up in a sleeping bag and holding the dog's front right paw in her hand.

The sight melted her heart.

"Nurse Spears?" Teddy called out.

Sandra quietly made her way over to his bedside and whispered, "How are you feeling?"

"I'm fine," he said, matching her whisper. "How are you?"

She smiled. "I'm good. Just checking on you guys."

"When can I get out of here? I really want to go home. I miss my dog."

"Soon. I promise. We just need to make sure you're healed, and it looks like you pretty much are."

Teddy smiled, but his hand went instinctively to the stump of his arm. "Thank you for being so nice to me."

She leaned in to hug the boy.

"Mom, is that you?"

Sandra pulled away to see that Allie was now awake. Creek sat up too. He tried to paw at his face, but the cone stopped him.

"Go back to sleep, sweetie," Sandra said. Her eyes flitted to motion outside the open doorway. Doctor Newton stood there, already dressed in scrubs and gown for the surgery.

“We’re almost ready,” he said.

“I’ll be right there,” Sandra said.

She bent down to kiss Allie and pat Creek on his head.

“I’ll be back in a couple of hours,” she said. “Sleep well.”

Allie placed her head back on the pillow and watched Sandra leave. After closing the door, Sandra made her way down the hallway. Inside the first room was Martha Kohler, the doctor who had been rescued from the road to Estes Park. She was still recovering from the nearly fatal attack on the road, but she was doing much better.

In the operating room, Doctor Duffy was fully suited up and ready to begin. The other nurse on duty and Doctor Newton were preparing in the clean room. On the operating table was John Palmer, the firefighter and volunteer officer who had been shot at a roadblock. They had already amputated his left arm at his elbow, and now they were preparing to cut off his right arm up to his shoulder.

Infection had set in, even with the medical supplies dropped off by the federal government. Sandra eyed the plastic buckets on the floor next to the table, and the hacksaw on the metal stand. This had once been a modern hospital, but now it looked like something from World War I.

“Turn on the generator,” Newton said.

Sandra flipped the switch, and the lights inside the operating room flickered on. They were running low on fuel, but they had no choice but to use it in this situation. She swallowed as she approached Palmer. He was awake and watching the medical staff, his eyes anxious.

“There’s no other option?” he asked.

Newton shook his head. “I’m sorry, but if we don’t do this now, you’re not going to survive.”

Palmer sucked in a deep breath and looked up at the ceiling.

“It’s going to be okay,” Sandra said.

His eyes shifted to her. “No. No it’s not.”

She wanted to say something reassuring, but he was right. How the hell was he going to get by even if the surgery saved his life? A man without arms was practically helpless to defend himself and his family. She wasn’t even sure Raven could protect her and Allie now, with the threats coming at Estes Park from nearly every direction.

***

Colton knew he was dreaming, but he was unable to wake from the nightmare. Like always, the dream was so vivid that he could swear it was real. This time, it was a memory of his time in Kandahar, Afghanistan. It had been June of 2009, seven days after they'd touched down at the airfield. He and three other soldiers had been stationed at Checkpoint 14.

"Contacts!" shouted PFC Jay Reddker.

Colton wiped the sweat from his forehead and grabbed a pair of binoculars from the private. "Four contacts," he said, zooming in on a black Toyota pickup.

PFC Jacob Smith roved the M40 slightly to the right, the muzzle locking on the rusted hood of the truck. He spat on the ground and looked up for orders.

"Hold your fire," Colton said.

He centered the binoculars on the driver. A middle-aged man with tanned skin and a full beard. In the passenger side sat an elderly woman with a scarf covering most of her face. There were two figures in the back seat, small enough to be children.

Goddammit, *Colton thought. Were they Taliban? Sometimes the insurgents brought civilians along with them on suicide runs. Locals rarely ended up on this road unless they were lost, and this guy didn't look lost at all. He looked determined.*

Colton snagged the bullhorn from the pile of sandbags and signaled the driver of a Humvee parked outside the gate. The soldier in the turret nodded and readied the M240.

Bringing the bullhorn to his mouth, Colton said, "Stop and shut off your engine!" Speaking in Dari was difficult, but after repeating the same phrase hundreds of times, it had gotten easier.

The truck continued to race down the frontage road, dust swirling behind in the trail of their exhaust. Colton put their distance at a little over one thousand meters. Every weapon at Checkpoint 14 was centered on the truck. If the driver hadn't seen the firepower yet, he couldn't miss it now. There were also half a dozen signs in various languages along the dual fences. There was no way his presence here was an accident.

Colton checked the man again with his binoculars. Cold eyes stared back.

Those eyes were desperate—and filled with rage.

"Stop and shut off your engine!" Colton repeated when the truck was at

five hundred meters. He'd hoped the show of firepower would deter the driver, but instead of slowing or turning around, the truck picked up speed.

Colton spoke in Pashto just to make sure. "Stop your truck!"

"Not listening, Sarge," Reddker said. "Want us to light 'em up?" There was a gleam of excitement in his eyes that disgusted Colton. He held up a hand and said, "Hold your goddamn fire."

Reddker and half of the men in Colton's unit were too young to understand death. They didn't get that once you pulled the trigger, you couldn't take it back.

Squinting into the blazing sunlight, Colton confirmed the pickup wasn't going to stop. The truck had passed the three-hundred-meter mark. On the other side of the fence were four F-16s waiting to be fueled by a tanker on the tarmac. The driver swerved toward them, and it was then Colton realized the pickup wasn't heading for their checkpoint after all.

"Open fire!" Colton yelled. "Raptor 2, get after 'em!"

The Humvee squealed onto the road, tires burning rubber as Reddker's M240 barked to life. Tracer rounds tore into the sand on the left side of the road, blanketing the truck with grit. Sweat poured down Colton's head as he watched the driver spin the wheel and veer off the road toward the jets.

A siren screamed in the distance, and the airfield came alive with movement. Humvees, armored vehicles, and fire trucks scrambled across the tarmac. But they were too far away. The only people who could stop the truck were Colton and his men.

Reddker continued firing, shells ejecting from the big gun and smoke swirling from the red-hot muzzle. He was hitting everything but the truck, rounds slamming into concrete and punching through dirt.

Colton pushed his M4 to his eyes and zoomed in with the advanced combat optical gun sight. A tiny face was pressed against the back window of the cab. Dark eyes, wide and innocent, stared back at him.

My God, *Colton thought. The girl couldn't be older than six or seven. Nearly choking on adrenaline, he aimed for the tires.*

A barrage of 7.62 mm rounds battered the bed of the truck as Reddker finally found his target. The Toyota jerked to the right, breaking through the first barricade and dragging a fence panel under the carriage.

Raptor 2, the Humvee Colton had ordered into the fight, pulled off the road and smashed through the fence one hundred meters to the west. Colton focused his crosshairs on the pickup that bobbed up and down in his gun

sights. He saw the young girl's face again just before it vanished from sight as another salvo of rounds punched through the passenger door of the truck.

Somehow, the pickup was still moving. It slammed through the second fence and made a run for the F-16s. Reddker held his fire, out of range now, but Raptor 2 was unloading with everything they had. Three other Humvees were closing in behind the jets, a fire truck on their six.

Colton hurried over to his own Humvee. "Reddker, on me. Everyone else stay here!"

The private hopped into the passenger seat, breathing heavily, a grin on his face.

"I think I got one of 'em, Sarge!"

"There are kids in that truck," Colton growled.

Reddker looked at the truck, the grin fading. "Oh, shit. I didn't see…"

The clatter of metal snapped Colton awake. He sat up in his bed, forgetting where he was for a moment. The bars of his cell reminded him he was still in the jail in Fort Collins. A wave of anxiety tore through him when he also remembered that, in a few hours, his friends in Estes Park were due to barter with Thompson's people in exchange for his life.

The door at the end of the hallway opened, and a strangled voice called out. "Please…please let me go."

Colton moved over to the bars. In the glow of a torch, he saw three figures moving down the hallway to his right. Two guards carried a man under his armpits, his legs dragging across the ground. He was hurt, and hurt bad.

They pulled him past Colton's cell before he could get a look at the man's face. They stopped at the next cell, unlocked the door, and tossed the man inside.

The guards paused in front of Colton's bars. The man with the torch held it up, revealing the bearded faces of Thompson's men. These weren't the hard Russians that Thompson usually brought out. These were just grunts.

The one on the left had his hair neatly parted on the side, an odd look for a man with an AR-15 slung over a shoulder. The guy on the right wore a black baseball cap and glasses. Both of them smelled like they hadn't showered since the bombs dropped.

"Tomorrow's a big day for you, Chief," the man with the cap said.

Side-Part pulled out his knife and clicked the blade against the metal bar several times. "Hear that, Drew?" he said, looking at his buddy with a grin.

"That's the tick-tock of the clock, Chief," Drew said, taking over. "In the

morning we'll find out if you get to live, or if I get to carve you up."

The men both laughed and walked away, but Colton remained standing, his heart still pounding from his dream and the fate that awaited him.

Down the hall, the guards opened the door. It clicked shut behind them. Colton gritted his teeth and squeezed the bars until his knuckles popped. He stood there, staring into the darkness, the anger eating at his insides.

In the past, his wife or his best friend would have been able to talk him out of the darkness, but tonight Colton was alone. Jake was dead, and Kelly might as well have been a million miles away. If he fell back asleep in this state of mind, he would just dream again of the girl he couldn't save in Afghanistan, or Melissa Stone, or…

"Marcus?" called a voice.

Colton loosened his grip on the bars. Was he hearing things?

The voice came again, but it was so muffled he could barely make it out.

"Marcus, it's me. Clint."

Colton let go of the bars. It couldn't be. Clint Bailey was dead. They had dragged him out of here and killed him.

This had to be one of Thompson's tricks.

Clint spoke again, clearer this time.

"They're going to kill you tomorrow," he rasped. "If you have a chance to run, do it."

— 4 —

Charlize boarded the Sikorsky UH-60 Black Hawk helicopter at dawn. There hadn't been much time, but she had put on light makeup and brushed her short hair into a style that looked somewhat respectable. Her outfit—black slacks and blazer with a white blouse—was clean and neatly pressed.

She took a seat next to Colonel Mark Raymond as the pilots prepared to take off. Today was one of the most important days in the history of the United States—it was the day the Chinese landed on American soil. The Founding Fathers would be rolling in their graves. But what choice did they have? The help from China would save countless American lives.

Charlize still had her doubts, and the decision to welcome an occupying military force weighed heavily on her mind. If there had been a conspiracy between China and North Korea, she would find out and deal with those responsible. For now, her duty was to help the country recover.

Over the comms channel, Raymond explained they would be meeting with General Ken Lin, the man the Chinese had entrusted with the recovery efforts. Charlize had never heard of him, but he was apparently well respected throughout the Chinese military.

The thump of the rotor blades sounded as the pilots fired up the bird. A dozen Green Berets jumped inside the chopper. Charlize had been through too much since the bombs fell to ever feel fully safe again, but having a special operations team along for the ride was reassuring.

Sergeant Andrew Fugate, a thin man with short-cropped red hair and a thick mustache, was in charge of the team. He took a seat across from Charlize, and handed her a flak jacket.

"Put this on, Madame Secretary," he said.

She did as ordered, and Colonel Raymond followed suit with his own vest.

It was only a fifteen-minute flight to Fort Lauderdale, but they weren't taking any chances with security. Charlize looked out over the ocean to the east, watching the golden glow of the sun sparkle over the waves. She couldn't see them from her vantage point, but she knew the Chinese ships were out there. All across the Eastern Seaboard, the massive boats were beginning to arrive, and more would be hitting ports on the West Coast.

Initially, the plan had been for General Thor to meet with General Lin, but Charlize had decided it was her responsibility as Secretary of Defense to personally welcome the Chinese General—and assess the situation.

"Five minutes," one of the pilots said over the comms channel.

Charlize focused on the traffic moving on a road below. Vehicles drove on the highway at the edge of the beach, just like they would have a month earlier. Out on the water, several boats cut through the waves. From up here, it didn't look like anything had happened at all. Southern Florida had been spared from the devastating effects of the EMP attack. The cities here still had power, but north of Orlando, the United States was still dark. The only vehicles moving there were hardened military units or old cars and trucks built before modern electronics.

A train snaked along the terrain below, heading north, with a long line of cars packed full of supplies. Across the country, other trains like this one were arriving at their destinations with generators, food, and medicine, while convoys on the highways continued to get hit by raiders. It had been her idea to transport goods the old-fashioned way, by rail. But no matter how hard Charlize worked, it wasn't enough. They'd still had to turn to foreign governments for help.

The chopper came in on the eastern edge of Fort Lauderdale, passing over the beaches and the million-dollar mansions built in coves along the harbors. The Stranahan River came into focus, and Charlize got her first view of the Chinese ships.

Where cruise ships had once docked along the piers of Fort Lauderdale Harbor, there were now a dozen foreign aid ships. Equipment, vehicles, and troops were already being unloaded from the massive ships.

A month ago, there would have been happy tourists here, waving at departing cruise ships. Not today. Instead, thousands of American citizens were impatiently waiting in the streets for supplies to be distributed, all under the watchful eyes of Chinese soldiers wearing blue camouflage and carrying standard QBZ-95 automatic rifles.

“We need to keep those civilians back,” she said.

Raymond agreed with a nod. “They aren’t supposed to be here. The distribution point is another mile to the west. They must have seen the ships and come running.”

Charlize lost sight of the view as the pilots descended over the US Coast Guard facility on the east side of the river. As soon as they landed, the Green Berets jumped out. Sergeant Fugate led the group, barking orders and gesturing for his men to take up position.

Raymond went next, then reached up to help Charlize out. She followed the men away from the bird, keeping low, what was left of her black hair whipping in the rotor drafts.

Thirty-plus American soldiers were already waiting with their rifles cradled. They surrounded her and Raymond on the way to the warehouse that served as a command center. Several Humvees with turrets were waiting outside, guarding the road that led to the beach.

“Captain Harris,” Charlize said, recognizing a familiar face.

Captain Zach Harris turned from a conversation with several FEMA staffers. He threw up a salute and said, “Welcome to Fort Lauderdale, Secretary Montgomery.”

They met in the center of the room. “Glad to see you again, ma’am,” he said, light blue eyes crinkling behind the heavy black frames of his glasses. “I wanted to thank you personally for reassigning me after what happened at the survival center in Charlotte.”

She stole a quick glance over her shoulder to make sure no one was listening. Most of the operations center staff were busy working at laptop computers or talking on radios, but she wanted to have this conversation in private.

“Is there some place we can chat?” she asked.

Harris led her to a small office. Stacks of boxes marked *Coast Guard* surrounded a metal desk covered in dust. Raymond waited for them outside the door.

“I’ll only be a moment,” she said. “Let me know if General Lin arrives.”

As soon as the door shut, Charlize cut to the chase. “I had you transferred here for a reason,” she said. “What happened in Charlotte was not your fault. In fact, I believe it was inevitable. Gangs have overrun every major city, which is part of the reason we accepted China’s terms.”

She pulled at the bottom of her blazer to straighten it under her bulletproof

vest. “FEMA, first responders, the American military—they are simply not enough, as you know. We need the foreign aid to get the grid back up and running. And we need men like you.”

Harris stiffened and held her gaze. “Thank you, ma’am.”

“I was impressed with the way you ran the survival center, and despite the fact it fell, you remained behind with your staff to give others a chance to escape. Even in the chaos, you made sure the men and women under your command did not slaughter the desperate civilians. I respect that.”

“I was just doing my duty. I’m grateful for the opportunity to run the command center here.”

Charlize smiled and shook her head. “That’s not your mission now, Captain.”

He raised his brows over the rims of his glasses. “Ma’am?”

“I’m assigning you a different role. The most important of your career.” After a short pause, she added, “I want you to work with General Ken Lin, and report everything directly to me. I trust you to be my eyes and ears in this matter.”

Harris didn’t reply, and she said, “Captain, do you understand what I’m asking you to do?”

He nodded firmly. “Yes, Secretary Montgomery.”

A rap on the door told Charlize they were out of time. She opened the door and Raymond confirmed she was correct.

“The Chinese are here,” he said.

The room quieted as she approached the front warehouse doors. Growling engines sounded outside. Five Chinese trucks and two black Honggi L5 limousines with tinted windows had pulled up.

Soldiers poured out of the trucks. One of them opened the side door to the second limo, and a short man with wide shoulders stepped out onto the concrete. He shielded his eyes from the morning sun with a pair of aviator glasses before making his way toward the warehouse. Charlize, Raymond, and Harris walked out to meet him.

“Good morning, General Lin,” she said.

“Secretary Montgomery,” Lin said with a thick Chinese accent. “It is a pleasure to meet you.”

“And you, sir.”

He turned and gestured toward the piers across the river, where the ships were still unloading.

“On behalf of the People’s Republic of China, I humbly thank you for accepting our offer to help our American friends rebuild. You have our deepest condolences for the loss of life you have suffered in this outrageous and unprovoked North Korean attack. I assure you that we will do everything we can to help the United States recover as quickly as possible.”

He smiled warmly. *The smile of a politician*, she thought to herself. She returned it with one of her own.

She was good at reading people, and she trusted her instincts more than his words. Nothing Lin said meant anything beyond a well-rehearsed soundbite. She glanced over at Captain Harris, who nodded back with understanding of just how important his mission was to the future of their country.

***

Fenix remained silent in the back seat of a Jeep, the blindfold back over his eyes to make sure he didn’t see where Theo and Hacker were taking him.

They should have been back at Redford’s compound hours ago, so they were taking him somewhere else. That made sense. They were playing things safe, just in case his Sons of Liberty soldiers were up to something. At least, that’s what Fenix would have done if he were in Redford’s expensive Italian shoes.

He kept his suspicions to himself, not daring to give Theo or Hacker a reason to search him. He tried to sneak a glance in his pocket for whatever it was that Sergeant Horton had dropped in it back at the cabin, but he couldn’t see. If he had to guess, it was something to help him out of these cuffs.

The vehicle turned and began accelerating, which told Fenix they were back on a highway. Driving out here in the middle of the day had become increasingly dangerous, but he wasn’t too worried about an ambush. Redford had over a dozen men and automatic rifles in the convoy. The only thing that could stand a chance of stopping them was an armored convoy of American soldiers.

“You know, I’m kinda surprised your boy Horton didn’t pull any bullshit back there,” Theo said, breaking the silence. “I’m also kind of disappointed.”

“I told you, I’m a man of my word,” Fenix replied.

“So am I.”

Fenix waited for Theo to follow up the comment, but nothing came. He

couldn’t tell if Redford’s cousin was an idiot or a wily bastard, and that made him uneasy.

“Where are we going?” Fenix finally asked.

Theo chuckled.

A rustling sounded, like someone moving in a seat, and suddenly the blindfold over Fenix’s eyes lifted. He blinked at the gray light.

“Take a look for yourself,” Theo said.

Fenix stared out the window at a highway dotted with stranded vehicles. A light snow was falling, dusting the ground with a layer of white. The mountains formed a fence on the horizon. Everything else was burnt to a crisp. Miles and miles of trees had been reduced to charcoaled logs and blackened sticks protruding out of the dirt. A FEMA sign warned of potential radiation contamination, but that didn’t seem to bother Theo or the driver. The convoy powered forward into the burned wasteland.

It was a test, Fenix realized. They were taking him somewhere where his men wouldn’t be able to follow easily.

“Don’t worry, Dan,” Theo said. “Those are our signs. It’s perfectly safe out here.” He grinned, a shit-eating expression that made Fenix want to punch him in the jaw. But he also felt a grudging respect. Redford was a smart man. Putting up signs to keep people off this road was genius. Even if his soldiers could find him, the radiation warnings would likely keep them back.

The lead truck, a gunmetal Toyota with a rusted-out bed, suddenly jerked to the left. Jade cursed and pushed down on the brakes. Theo turned back to the windshield, reaching for the AR-15 propped up next to the door.

The Toyota pulled to the side of the road, and the occupants jumped out, rifles shouldered. They moved toward a cluster of stalled cars, shouting at someone ahead.

“Hold us here, Jade,” Theo said to the driver.

Hacker pulled out an M9 and chambered a round with a click. “Anyone got eyes on what’s going on?” he asked.

“I see something,” Theo said, straining to get a look.

The men from the pickup truck returned a few seconds later with a man holding onto a mountain bike. He was dressed in a white coat, white pants, and a white facemask to match. A gray stocking cap topped his head. The only exposed part of his body were his eyes.

“Stay here,” Theo said. He got out of the truck, leaving the door open and

letting in the cold wind.

Fenix scooted across the seat for a better look. The guy with the bike stopped about ten feet in front of their Jeep. Theo and his men surrounded him, rifles all pointed at his head. The biker gently sat his bicycle in the snow and raised his hands into the air.

“Please, please hold your fire,” he said, shielding his head from the guns. Fenix could tell by his posture he wasn’t a soldier. This was just a guy out on his bike, trying to get somewhere in a hurry.

“What are you doing out here?” Theo asked.

“I’m trying to deliver a message,” he said. “That’s it, I swear.”

Theo took a step forward, lowering his rifle. “What message?”

“A message about the Chinese,” the man said.

“What about ’em?”

“They are here,” the man said, hands shaking.

Theo stepped forward again. “Dude, calm down and tell me what the hell you’re talking about.”

“Chinese boats have arrived carrying thousands of soldiers. They’re working with the federal government. I’m supposed to deliver the message to the next town, so we can prepare.”

Fenix felt his blood boiling. There was no way this could be true. No way the United States government would agree to allow the Chinese army into the country. But the more he thought about it, the more it made sense. Someone in the United States government must have been involved with the North Korean attack—and the Chinese had to have played a role also.

He suddenly felt the urge to get out of the Jeep and run. He had to get back to his men. If China was invading, then the fight he had been preparing for his entire life had arrived.

“That’s bullshit,” Theo said. “We haven’t heard anything about that on the radio.”

The man lowered a hand, reaching for his pocket. Before Theo could say a word, a gunshot cracked, followed by a second and third.

The man screamed and stumbled forward, then dropped to his knees. He gripped his chest where one of the bullets had exited. A flower of blood blossomed on his white coat. The facemask fell away, revealing the youthful face of a teenager. Blood bubbled out of his mouth as he tried to speak. In seconds, it was over. He crashed to the ground, dead.

“You fucking idiot!” Theo yelled at the man who had fired the shots.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I thought he was reaching for a gun.”

Theo shook his head.

The dead kid reminded Fenix a bit of Tommy, the pimpled-faced SOL soldier he had tossed out of the Castle for trying to help Ty Montgomery escape.

Theo moved the kid to his back, and then pulled a bloodstained envelope from his hand. He stood to read it.

“Holy shit,” Theo said. “The kid wasn’t lying.”

— 5 —

Colton was dreaming again. He was back at the Kandahar Air Force Base with PFC Reddker, pursuing the pickup truck.

The tire track peeled away like the skin of an orange, and the rim screeched across the pavement. Raptor 2 continued firing, rounds peppering the cab of the truck as the driver tried to maintain control. Blood and dust caked the windshield.

Colton punched the pedal harder. The diesel engine hummed, straining, as they gained speed.

"They're toast," Reddker said.

The Toyota fishtailed, lost control, and flipped onto its side, tumbling over and over. The back door broke open mid-flip, and a small body flew out.

Colton almost closed his eyes, but that felt like a cowardly thing to do.

Fire suddenly exploded from the truck. It rolled to a stop as the underbelly burst into flames. Two of the tires streaked away in a cloud of smoke and shrapnel. Colton slammed on his brakes and stopped the Humvee a few feet away from the tiny, broken figure face down on the tarmac. He put the truck in park and jumped out, the scent of fuel burning his nostrils. Sirens wailed from all directions. The shouts of soldiers and support crew were barely audible over the piercing shrieks.

A fire truck sprayed the wreckage of the Toyota as Colton rushed over to the Afghani girl.

"Someone get me a medic!" he shouted.

With deliberate care, he scooped the child up in his arms and carried her away from the burning pickup truck. The heat burned the back of his fatigues, but the physical pain was nothing compared to the mental pain of seeing the child's injuries. She had the same dark eyes as his own baby girl. They stared

up at him, pleading and terrified.

"It's okay," Colton said in English. Then he changed to Dari. "It's okay. You're going to be okay."

It was a lie. Blood blossomed around what appeared to be a bullet wound. Her chest slowly moved up and down, breath rattling.

"Hold on," Colton said in Dari. He ran as fast as he could toward an ambulance. Reddker was still screaming behind him, "Sarge, LT wants you!"

Colton didn't care about orders right now. He had to save her. An explosion rocked the tarmac. He shielded the girl from the wave of heat as best as he could. When he looked down, tears were streaking away from her eyes. She tried to say something. Instead, she took in a long, final gasp, and died in his arms, five feet away from the ambulance.

He awoke in a cold sweat, sitting up so fast his head hurt. No matter what he tried to tell himself, it wasn't just a bad dream. It had happened, and he would never forgive himself for that girl's death. He hadn't saved her, just like he hadn't saved little Melissa Stone. In his mind's eye, he saw Kelly and Risa lying in the street, their bodies riddled with bullets.

In a fit of anger, he grabbed the bars and screamed, "Let me out of here!"

His voice rang against the walls, but no one answered.

Colton went to sit back on his bench when the door at the end of the hallway creaked open. Footfalls pounded the concrete. Multiple pairs of boots. He listened to the approaching men, knowing that this was it. They had finally come to shut him up.

To his shock, Sheriff Thompson appeared in front of Colton's cell with a grin from cauliflower ear to cauliflower ear.

"Mornin', Chief." He scratched at the back of his neck. "I thought about your suggestion, and I figured I'd take you up on it."

Thompson jerked his head at Ivan, the massive Russian man with thick black eyebrows and chest hair that crept out of his collar. He pulled out a key and unlocked Colton's cell.

"Hands behind your back," he said in his Russian drawl.

Colton did as ordered, and Ivan snapped a pair of handcuffs onto his wrists.

"Come on," Thompson said, jerking his chin.

Colton stepped out after a second of hesitation, and followed Ivan and Thompson down the hallway. They passed several other cells with more prisoners. He kept his gaze ahead, trying his best not to dwell on the fact

there was a ten-year-old boy in the final cell. The kid was sitting up in his bunk, arms folded across his chest like he was hugging himself, teeth chattering from the cold.

They continued into the departmental offices. It was far different from the Estes Park police station. This was more like a barracks, with sleeping bags spread out throughout the workstations. But all of the beds and the desks were empty.

So where was everyone?

Thompson rounded the next corner, and pushed open a door into the lobby. Glass doors leading outside were propped open with bricks. The sun edged over the horizon, revealing a light dusting of snow over the parking lot and two dozen people standing in a circle. Several of them wore coats adorned with the Larimer County Sheriff's logo.

Ivan nudged Colton in the back when he stopped. They continued outside onto the landing, down the steps, and into the parking lot, where Ivan unlocked Colton's cuffs.

"Let's see how tough you really are, Marcus," Thompson said. He took off his coat and dropped it on the ground. Dressed in only a t-shirt and black tactical pants, he raised his fists, muscular arms flexing. His boots moved back and forth as he prepared to fight.

Colton couldn't believe his eyes. The sheriff had actually taken him up on his offer of a brawl.

"Beat his ass, Sheriff!" shouted one man.

"Kill 'em," yelled another.

Within seconds the crowd, gripped by bloodlust, broke into a frenzy; shouting profanities and threats.

A rock hit Colton in the side. He glared at the crowd, bending over in pain. Thompson also turned to look for the culprit.

"Who the fuck threw that?" the sheriff shouted.

That quieted his people down.

By the time Thompson turned back to Colton, he was ready to fight. He strode forward in a boxer's pose, leading with his left foot, his balled hands up to protect his face. It was something a fighter never forgot, like driving a stick shift vehicle.

Colton knew he couldn't let Thompson get him on the ground. The sheriff was a UFC fighter, which meant he knew mixed martial arts. Colton had to keep this fight on both feet, or he was screwed.

Thompson regarded the stance with a wide grin.

“You beat me, and I let you go today. If you don’t, then you better hope to God your people—”

Before Thompson could finish, Colton jabbed at him with his right fist, shutting the cocky sheriff up with knuckles to the mouth.

Thompson took a step backward and reached up with a finger to feel the blood streaming from the cut on his lip. He pulled his fingers away and laughed. “You’re fast, old man.”

Thompson threw a fake right hook and ended up kicking Colton in the left thigh. Pain lanced up his hip and side. He fell back on his left foot, hunched down slightly, fists up. Then he stepped forward, planting his right foot, and threw a punch.

Thompson easily moved away from the blow with the speed of a man ten years younger. Before Colton could defend himself, Thompson kicked him again, hitting Colton in his right thigh this time. He did everything he could to stay standing, but lack of proper nutrition, fatigue, and the cold had taken their toll.

Colton let out a grunt and dropped to one knee, looking up just as Thompson slammed a fist down into his right eyebrow, with a crack so loud that the crowd screamed with approval.

The pain was sharp, but Colton ignored it. He got back up and focused on Thompson, who had his arms up in V-shape while his people chanted his name.

Colton just needed to clip the bastard once, really good, and this would be over. Blood dripped from his eyebrow, and Colton wiped it away with his sleeve.

He waited for Thompson to come to him. Colton watched his boots and hands, trying to predict which he would use first. Thompson swung as he approached him. Once, twice, then a third time. Colton deflected the blows with his arms. He threw a jab after the volley of shots, and nicked Thompson’s left ear.

“Shit!” Thompson yelled. He reached up and clutched his cauliflower ear.

“That had to sting,” Colton said with a grin. He let out an icy breath and followed up the punch with another right hook, but this time Thompson hunched low, moving beneath the jab and coming up with one of his own, which hit Colton in the side of his jaw.

The blow stunned him, giving Thompson another opportunity. The sheriff

seized it with a punch that impacted Colton above his left eyebrow. He felt knuckles open up his flesh.

Colton stumbled backward, stars floating before his vision. Blood streamed down both eyes now, and his jaw pulsed from the pain.

Get it together. You're fine. You're…

He took in a deep breath and brought his hands back up, watching Thompson move, his eyes flitting from shoulders and hands to legs and boots.

The next move came as a kick to Colton's shins, not that hard, but the steel-toed boots still hurt enough to send a shockwave of pain up his leg.

Colton swung wide with his right hand, and then came in for a left jab that was meant for Thompson's face. It hit him in the neck instead. This time Thompson staggered backward, reaching up to grip his neck. He sucked in breath through his nose.

Colton moved forward, using the stolen moment while the sheriff was trying to catch his breath. But just as he went to throw another barrage of punches, Thompson hunched down, dropped his hands, and used his legs to propel him forward.

Bringing his elbow down, Colton hit Thompson in the back as the sheriff plowed into him like a linebacker. There wasn't anything Colton could do now. He hit the ground hard, with Thompson on top.

The stars returned as his skull hit the pavement with a clank. Blood flowed from his forehead and down his temples, but at least it wasn't going into his eyes.

Thompson swung at Colton's unprotected head, hitting him multiple times in the cheek, jaw, and nose. It would all be over soon if Colton didn't do something drastic.

He tried to buck the sheriff off, but the man had him wrapped up tight.

"You're a…" Colton spat blood and pushed harder. "You're a fucking disgrace."

Thompson brought his elbow down on the bridge of Colton's nose with a crack. Several cries of excitement rang out from the crowd.

In that moment, everything came crashing over Colton. The violence, the fear, the atrocities of the past month. He summoned every bit of strength he had left and brought his skull up to hit Thompson in the center of his face, flattening his nose and breaking the cartilage.

Thompson rolled off, gripping his gushing nose, while Colton crawled

away until he could push himself up. Blood flowed from his own nostrils, covering the snow with carmine. He pushed himself up, fell to his stomach, and tried again.

“Sheriff!” someone shouted.

Colton rolled to his back, gasping for air. He watched through blurred vision as Drew, the prison guard, came bounding down the stairs of the station and out onto the ground, his hand holding his cap on his head.

Thompson was already on his feet. “What the hell is it, Drew?” he grumbled.

“The Chinese, Sheriff. The Chinese are landing!”

The crowd went silent.

“It’s not just a rumor, Sheriff,” Drew said. “There are thousands of soldiers arriving across the country.”

Thompson kept his hand on his nose, blood flowing from between his fingers. He strode past Colton, not bothering to look at him.

“We’ll finish this later, Marcus,” he said.

***

Raven zoomed in with his rifle’s scope on a man walking down the highway wearing a parka and a hood. It was difficult to see his features with the hood shadowing much of his face, but what Raven could see was bruised and bloody. He roved the sights to bound hands and then pulled the scope away.

It had to be Colton, and Sheriff Thompson sure had done a number on the Chief of Police. A dozen of Thompson’s deputies followed him down the road. They were followed by a pickup truck with a figure standing in the bed gripping a mounted machine gun. Metal sheets provided armor around the gunner.

Raven bit down on the toothpick in his mouth when he recognized it as the same pickup Thompson had used to attack the town several days earlier. The same gun Jason Cole had used to gun down officers and innocent civilians.

It was a slap in the face, but Raven wasn’t going to take the bait. He moved his scope back to the team of horses pulling a trailer along Highway 34. Jason Cole was there, surrounded by the Estes Park militia, walking slowly with guns at his back.

It took every ounce of his willpower to not center the crosshairs on Cole’s

head and pull the trigger. But if Raven did that, he might as well shoot Colton himself. The only way the chief came home was if they played this by Thompson's rules. The plan was set in motion, and there was nothing he could do to stop it now. All he could do was hope both parties remained calm and civil. A single shot could spark a slaughter.

Raven settled behind the rocky outcropping with his MK11 semi-automatic sniper rifle. It was the same type of rifle he had used in the Marines. This one had killed a dozen Sons of Liberty soldiers back at the Castle. If things did go wrong, he would be ready to cover his friends below.

The caravan continued toward the drop point, where Lindsey and the members of the militia would hand over Jason Cole and the food in exchange for Chief Colton's life and the truce that would prevent a war.

For now.

At least, that's what Thompson and his men thought. Little did they know Raven was going to kill them all. Just not at this moment. John Kirkus and his men were watching too, ready to join the fight if needed.

Raven brought the scope up to his eye and zoomed in on the road again. Taking into consideration the chilly wind, distance, and lighting, he made some mental calculations and then adjusted his aim.

The caravan slowly crossed the crosshairs. Five militia soldiers up front, led by Dale Jackson, all of them armed with semi-automatic rifles and a secondary weapon. Then came the horses, pulling the trailer with crates of food and medical supplies. Behind that were five more militia soldiers surrounding Jason Cole. Raven focused on the man's bruised face, taking satisfaction in the fact that he'd given the man the bruises and cuts.

"Soon, you son of a bitch," Raven whispered. He had to force himself to look away. The temptation to end the murderous bastard's life was too strong.

The road barrier was just ahead, and several Estes Park civilians were positioned there. Raven cursed when he saw that one of them was Sarah, the young girl who had asked him to teach her how to twirl a knife.

He had told Lindsey to pull the women off the barrier today. But given how pushy Sarah could be, maybe this wasn't Lindsey's fault. He had a feeling the kid went wherever she wanted.

Raven continued chewing on his toothpick. He would have preferred a cigarette to calm his nerves, but didn't want to give up his position. With Creek in the hospital, he was on his own up here. Just him, his rifle, and a

whole hell of a lot of problems. The slow burn of the coming winter, and the threats closing in, had him more anxious than ever. General Fenix was still out there, and Nile Redford too. Justice for Nathan was still on his radar, but his focus right now was on Estes Park and Colton.

Raven flicked the safety off the rifle and spat the toothpick into the dirt.

He looked for Lindsey on the road, and found her walking alongside the horses. She patted her favorite mare, Willow, on the head, trying to calm the horse. Even the beasts could sense the tension as they approached the roadblock.

The men there moved the barriers to let the horses and trailer through. They stopped ten feet from the bridge across Big Thompson River, and Lindsey unlatched the horses, leaving the trailer on the road.

Thompson's men stopped on the other side of the bridge. Raven centered his sights on the men, scanning each face to look for the sheriff, but as Raven suspected, he wasn't here.

There goes Plan B.

He knew it had been unlikely, but if the sheriff had shown up, Raven had intended to blow his head off and end this right here. Some of their people would die, but it was better than a lot of their people dying from disease and starvation over the winter.

It was the one plan Lindsey had agreed to without hesitation.

So it was now back to Plan A. Bait the sheriff, but don't take his bait.

Three of Thompson's men led Colton out onto the bridge. Raven zoomed in. The man's face looked like Rocky Balboa after his fight with Apollo Creed. It could be the chief under all those bruises, but between the injuries and the hood of the parka, Raven couldn't be a hundred percent sure.

Lindsey and Dale Jackson brought Jason Cole over next. They pushed him toward the bridge. The murderer jogged over to Thompson's men while their truck backed up to the trailer. Several of the soldiers used chains to hook it up while the man in the back angled the machine gun at the barrier.

Their duty done, Lindsey and Dale were herding Sarah away from the concrete blocks and stranded vehicles. With Sarah safely out of the way, Lindsey shouted something Raven couldn't make out to the man in the back of the pickup truck. He watched them exchanging words, straining to listen. All he could hear was Lindsey saying, "Chief Colton".

The pickup truck pulled the trailer away, and the men on the bridge standing guard left Colton alone on the bridge.

Everything continued to go to plan. So why was Raven's gut twisted into knots?

He focused the sights on Colton as he staggered across the bridge. His hands were bound by a rope. He paused in the center of the bridge and turned to look at the pickup truck. The driver stopped as the men on the road all piled inside.

"What are you doing, Chief?" Raven whispered.

Colton continued to look at the truck. One of the men in the bed yelled something, and Colton reached up to pull down his hood.

That's when Raven saw it *wasn't* Colton at all. It was a man Raven had never even seen before.

Son of a bitch tricked us!

Raven brought his walkie-talkie up to his lips to relay the information.

"Lindsey, do you copy?" he said.

"I'm here," she said.

"That's not Colton. I repeat, that's not Colton."

"I know," she said. "These fuckers said they would give Colton back on the next drop, long as all of them get home in one piece."

Raven cursed again. The sheriff hadn't lived up to his end of the bargain. He lowered the walkie-talkie and went to push his eye back into the scope when the crack of gunfire pulled his head away.

Three men in the back of the truck had opened fire on the bridge. The fusillade cut through the man who was not Colton, jerking him back and forth as the bullets shredded his body. A severed arm rolled across the road, and blood spurted from the riven stump of the man's shoulder.

Raven centered his sights on the shooters in the pickup truck, his finger hovering over the trigger. He held a breath in his lungs, trying his best to fight the anger. If they fired a single shot at the barrier, he would waste them all.

But doing so wasn't going to get Colton back. Patience was the only thing that would save the chief now, and he needed time for his plan to work. Especially against these animals. He didn't know who the prisoner on the bridge had been, but the message was clear. Thompson and his men were in charge, and there was little Raven could do about it.

The gunshots faded away, and a new sound emerged in the distance, a low rumbling that quickly grew into a roar. The men in the pickup truck stopped firing, and everyone on the road looked to the sky. Raven shifted his gaze to

the clouds just as three fighter jets burst from the cover, emerging long enough for him to identify them as F-35 Lightning II jets. He swiveled his head to watch another squadron of fighters moving right behind them.

“What in the name of…?” he whispered when he realized these weren’t American aircraft, but a trio of Chinese L-15/JL-10 fighter jets. For a fleeting moment he thought they were pursuing the F-35s, but the jets merely continued flying to the east, away from the Rocky Mountains.

Together.

The shock of being tricked by Thompson’s men wasn’t anything like the shock he felt when he realized what the sight meant.

The rumors of the Chinese armed forces arriving in the States were true.

What the hell was happening to his country?

— 6 —

“I agreed to authorize troops, but not fighter jets,” Charlize said, frustration rising in her voice. She stood inside an office in the Coast Guard building with Captain Harris and Colonel Raymond, all of them looking at the satellite phone on the dusty desk.

The other line was connected to a room full of some of the most important people in the United States. President Ron Diego, Vice President Tom Walter, Doctor Peter Lundy, National Security Advisor Duane Ibsen, and General Justin Thor. They were safely located at Central Command in Constellation, monitoring the situation from the bunker.

She didn’t blame them for staying at Constellation, but at the same time, she was increasingly frustrated at being out on the frontlines without the intel she needed to lead.

The report of the Chinese fighters had struck her especially hard. It was one thing to see troops on the ground, but fighter jets? A soldier could only do so much damage. A fighter jet could level a city.

“I authorized them,” Diego said after a few moments of silence.

Raymond looked over at Charlize, apparently just as surprised as she was. At least she wasn’t the only one who’d been kept in the dark.

“Without consulting with me?” Charlize asked. She picked the phone off the desk and brought it to her lips. “How am I supposed to do my job if you don’t tell me everything I need to know?”

“I knew what you would say, Charlize, being a pilot and all, but this was part of the deal,” Diego replied. “I don’t like it either, but the Chinese want to be able to protect their assets on the ground.”

“Against Americans,” Raymond said quietly.

Charlize’s shoulders were a stiff line as she clutched the phone. “If one of

those fighter jets fires on Americans, we're going to have a shit show on our hands. Our citizens may not have access to social media anymore, but stories will spread like wildfire. You do realize that, sir?"

"I understand your frustration, and I understand the risks, but this mission will save countless American lives if all goes to plan."

"And if it doesn't go to plan?"

"Then we deal with it accordingly, Charlize."

Vice President Walter chimed in with some thoughts, but Charlize was hardly listening. She wasn't all that impressed with the man Diego had picked to be his second in command. He was the former CEO of a major energy company with ties to China, which Charlize found all too convenient, considering he'd helped jam the Chinese deal down the president's throat.

Now wasn't the time to raise those questions, though. There was no use talking further with Diego about the fighter jets, either. He had made up his mind. Her job—her duty—was to make sure not a single missile, bomb, or bullet was fired by the Chinese. Although she knew that was going to be near impossible.

"Charlize, I want you to know that I've had multiple conversations with the Chinese president, and he has assured me his pilots and troops will exhaust every possible solution before utilizing force," said Walter.

"Do you know how that sounds, Mr. Vice President?" Charlize asked, squinting in disbelief.

There was a pause, then Diego's voice spoke again. "Just do your job and we will do ours, Secretary Montgomery."

At least he called me by my title, she thought.

"Roger that, sir," she said as respectfully as possible. "In the meantime, I'm going to meet with FEMA and the Army Corps of Engineers."

"Madame Secretary?" said Peter Lundy.

Charlize sighed. She had had a feeling the chief scientist at Constellation was on the line for a reason.

"Please get me an updated count of the large power transformers the Chinese have brought. Those are the biggest hurdle we're facing right now," he continued.

"You got it," she said. "Anything else? I really need to get going."

"I'd also like an update on delivery dates for each power grid section."

"Understood."

"Good luck," Diego added.

Charlize hung up the phone and handed it back to Raymond.

“Chinese fighter jets?” Harris asked. “Did I hear that right?”

A nod from Raymond and a snort from Charlize.

“Another reason your mission is so important, Captain,” she said.

They walked back into the command center that had been set up inside the Coast Guard building. She studied the maps of the power grid sections Lundy had referred to on the call. The United States had been divided into ten different regions. It was going to be a hell of a job to get them all functional again.

Horns sounded outside, the cry of more ships coming in to harbor.

She passed a group of FEMA workers talking about moving water trucks. The American Red Cross, along with several local and state government officials, were huddled around a map of northern Florida. Chinese representatives were crowded in with them, an interpreter translating the conversation.

Charlize slowed on her way out of the warehouse to listen to the multiple discussions. Judging by what she observed, the American and Chinese officials were working well together. Feeling more optimistic, she stepped outside and approached the waiting convoy of five armored Humvees. Her work here was done. Captain Harris would accompany the Chinese delegation, led by General Lin, as soon as they moved out of the city.

Her next task today was to see how things were being managed on the front lines. And she was already late.

The Green Berets were waiting for her. Colonel Raymond walked over to talk to Sergeant Fugate. He glanced over his shoulder at Charlize, then dipped his helmet.

“Okay, we’re good to go,” Raymond said when he rejoined Charlize.

“Good luck, and keep me appraised,” she said to Harris.

“Yes, ma’am. I will do my utmost.”

She watched him walk away. So much was resting in his hands, but she was glad she had someone on the ground. The young captain was going to be her ears and eyes out here over the next few months, possibly even years. The scope of the work ahead was staggering, but Charlize had to focus on one piece at a time. She boarded her Humvee and buckled in.

“Let’s go,” Fugate said from the passenger seat. The trucks rolled out, moving in combat intervals down Seabreeze Boulevard. More soldiers were posted along the road, holding sentry to protect access to the survival center

headquarters they were leaving behind. They had moved the SC operations out to near the shoreline, in order to separate the headquarters from the distribution of food and supplies. It was a smart move; if something happened, the command center wouldn't fall, like it had in Charlotte.

Unfortunately, that meant the people she needed to see were also spread out. Both the FEMA regional administrator and the Army Corps of Engineers administration were at a forward operating base set up near the piers, which was where she was headed now.

They stopped at three more roadblocks before hitting the bridge over Stranahan River. To the north was the harbor, where the Chinese ships were continuing to dock and offload equipment. A crane lowered a bucket truck onto the pier. Forklifts, bulldozers, heavy haulers, and every type of truck imaginable, were being moved onto the platforms. This had been one of the busiest cruise ports in the world, which was one reason they had opted to bring part of the Chinese fleet here.

"This isn't looking good," Sergeant Fugate said, gesturing to the people gathered around the operation. "There's no telling what that crowd is going to do."

Hundreds of American and Chinese soldiers held the surging civilians back, but Charlize could see they had their work cut out for them. It was pure chaos near the docks. Thousands of people, all of them looking for food and other supplies. She could hear their shouts rising into a discord that reminded her of a music festival.

"If it's like this here, I can't imagine what it's like north of Orlando, where the grid is down," Raymond said.

"Exactly what I was thinking." Charlize continued to watch while the convoy continued across the bridge. Yachts and fishing boats were docked in the canals below, and million-dollar homes lined the harbor. Most of that money was worthless now. In the blink of an eye, the wealthy one percent had lost everything, and many of them were out on the streets, just like the rest of the surviving Americans.

Palm trees whipped in the salty breeze, and Charlize prepared for her final meeting of the day by looking through the folder Raymond had given her.

The FEMA administrator was a man named Josh Howard who had worked on the recovery efforts during Katrina, where he'd made a name for himself after going in to clean up the mess. She would also be meeting with the Army Corps of Engineer regional administrator, Major General Troy Brock.

The Humvees took a left toward the piers and down another road guarded by American soldiers. After passing a small guard booth that had once monitored traffic coming into the cruise terminals, they arrived at their destination—Terminal 4, a large building with white pillars and a domed roof.

Metal fences held back the hundreds of civilians waiting in line outside. Soldiers motioned for the crowd to get back as the Humvees came to a stop. Fugate and his men fanned out, setting up a perimeter along the flower beds with their weapons lowered. Several of them accompanied Charlize and Raymond to the front steps.

Inside, the building was alive with activity. FEMA staff, Army Corps of Engineers workers, city officials, soldiers, and dozens of others hurried back and forth.

“Secretary Montgomery,” called a voice.

Charlize turned toward a man sporting a salt-and-pepper crew cut. He filled out his Army uniform with a broad chest. A pair of aviator glasses were tucked into a front pocket.

“Major General Troy Brock,” he said.

“Pleased to meet you,” Charlize replied. “This is Colonel Mark Raymond.”

“It’s an honor, Secretary Montgomery, and good to meet you, Colonel. If you’d both follow me, Josh Howard is waiting for us upstairs.”

The group continued to a large office overlooking the port. Sitting behind a desk was Josh Howard, a fifty-year-old man with a graying red beard, freckles, and receding hairline.

“Welcome to Terminal 4, Secretary Montgomery,” he said, standing. “Colonel, welcome.”

“Good to be here,” she said.

“Thank you for meeting with us,” Raymond said.

“As you can see, the ships have just arrived and are unloading. Others are still on their way.” Howard pointed toward a round table with six chairs. “Let’s have a seat to discuss what I know now, and what the plan is moving forward.”

Major General Brock sat to his right, and Colonel Raymond sat next to Charlize.

“I’m told you were instrumental in the recovery efforts after Katrina,” she said to Howard.

He nodded. “We worked very hard in a very difficult situation. But this

situation is a thousand times worse, and more complicated. I'm using lessons learned to help, but we have an uphill battle."

"There are 160,000 miles of transmission lines in the US," Brock said. "The EMP surge did not damage all of them, but hundreds of miles will need to be replaced, especially in the region hit by the ground explosion."

"Like Washington D.C.," Charlize said.

She was heading back to D.C. soon. She wasn't sure when, but the thought of returning to the crater that was once the symbol for democracy sent a chill up her back.

"We're also faced with repairing and rebuilding power plants, substations, and other facilities that were fried," Brock said. "I've talked to Doctor Lundy numerous times, and as I've told him, it's a mess out there. Frankly, I'm glad we have the Chinese help."

"I couldn't agree more," Howard said. "During the last hurricane in Texas, we had eighteen thousand boots on the ground. We're going to need fifty times that, plus protection for the crews while they work."

Howard let out a short sigh. "In a normal disaster, we're faced with replacing transmission lines and poles. However, in this case we have to replace large power transformers. Half of the total cost for these is electrical steel, and China just happens to make thirty-five percent of the world's supply. We're lucky they offered to help."

"LPTs are extremely expensive and time-consuming to make, but the Chinese have plenty for us to get started," Brock added. "With the help of their crews, we should be able to replace most of the LPTs in a year, instead of two. Assuming all goes to plan, of course. And only for easily-accessed areas. Other places won't be so fortunate."

Charlize nodded as she wrote down a few notes for Lundy. There was a moment of silence, in which she thought of the places that would suffer the most. Rural areas, like Estes Park, Colorado. The isolated mountain community her brother had crash-landed near during the night of the attack was a prime example of a town that was both low on the government's priority list, and difficult to access.

The quiet was broken by Raymond, who pointed at the window. "Is that one of the LPTs being unloaded right now?

Charlize stood and made her way over to the windows facing the port. Brock, Howard, and Raymond joined her there. The FEMA administrator handed her a pair of binoculars.

“Yup, that’s one of ’em,” he said, directing his finger at the machinery being unloaded by a crane.

After glancing at the power transformer, she pivoted and focused the binos on the crowd of civilians surrounding the piers. Food, water, and other goods were being distributed to the desperate civilians by Chinese workers, while American and Chinese soldiers stood guard.

“Look at that,” said Sergeant Fugate. He was staring at a Chinese ship sailing into the harbor. She moved the binos toward the vessel, noticing the sleek stern and the guns on deck. This wasn’t one of the vessels packed full of aid and equipment. It was a Chinese aircraft carrier, with dozens of L-15/JL-10 Chinese fighters on the deck.

All of a sudden, this didn’t look like a major aid operation to Charlize. It looked more and more like an invasion.

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Fenix sat in the dining room of a lodge that overlooked the Rocky Mountains. The restaurant had once served the upper tiers of society—the rich, who came here on weekend getaways to ski, drink champagne, and eat tiny plates of expensive food.

He had always hated those people, especially the political elite. They were the worst. The people who didn’t think the law applied to them.

The tables around him were empty now, the people who had once sat here either in private bunkers or dying on the streets for a can of beans. He hoped it was the latter of the two.

But what boiled his blood even more than the thought of crooked politicians, was the idea of a bunch of damned Chinamen flooding his country.

Fenix looked down at his soup, his appetite gone. He hadn’t believed the reports at first. How could the government have been so stupid as to let them in? This had to be the result of a conspiracy even deeper than he had ever imagined. Someone at the top levels of the United States government had conspired to bring the country to its knees.

The mission of the Sons of Liberty was more important now than ever. They couldn’t let the Chinese take over the country. The thought made him sick.

“Not hungry?” asked Theo. “If it were up to me, I wouldn’t have given you anything in the first place. I would have made you eat it out of a dog bowl, which is what you are, Dan. A dog with fleas.”

The redskin sat at a nearby table, watching Fenix with rage-filled eyes. He knew what hate looked like, and this was something even deeper.

Fenix stared right back. He placed his spoon back on the table and turned to look outside, his heart stuttering in his chest, adrenaline rushing through his veins. He would have liked to pop his fist into Theo’s face, but the truth was, he was more worried about the Chinese than the damned injuns.

The Americans had dealt with them before, and it hadn’t ended up too good for Theo’s people. But China? That was a different story. The cheeky bastards could crush what was left of America through sheer numbers.

The serene view of the mountains outside helped calm him. The moonlight spread over the terrain and illuminated the main lodge and surrounding buildings. Most of them had burned, along with the trees on the perimeter. It really made a great place to ride out the apocalypse. Redford was a real genius to come here—at least, Redford probably thought so.

“If you’re not going to eat that, I’ll give it to my men,” Theo growled.

Fenix picked up the spoon and forced the soup to his lips.

“You really need to lighten up, you know that? Take a lesson from Nile… I mean, Mr. Redford,” Fenix said, correcting himself. “We survived the apocalypse, and now it’s time to take over the country. We can’t let these Chinese fucks come in and take what’s ours.”

Theo set his spoon down gently on the table and then brought up a napkin to dab at the sides of his mouth. He stood and gave his suit cuffs a quick tug.

“I don’t think working with a Nazi is something to take lightly,” he said. “My cousin and I have never agreed on much, but if he knew your heart, I think he would agree that you deserve to die.”

Fenix tightened his grip on the spoon and glanced at the .357 Magnum on the table in front of Theo. He was no more than ten feet away, but by the time Fenix got to the table, he would have at least two gaping holes in his body.

No, he couldn’t try anything right now. He needed to be patient, and wait for his chance. But at some point, they were going to fight. It was just a matter of time.

Theo followed his gaze to the gun. He grinned.

“You want this?” he asked, tilting the gun from side to side.

Fenix shrugged and slurped another spoonful of soup. He went back to

looking out the window. The moon peeked through the clouds, illuminating the landscape. Two deer, a buck with a nice set of antlers, and a fawn walked through the courtyard below, searching for a meal in the burned grass.

Theo walked around the tables, gun still in hand. The door opened across the room and Hacker walked in, pulling up his duty belt with one hand and carrying a plate of food in his other.

“Shit is boring up here, man,” he said to Theo. “How long until we can get back to the compound? I want that poker rematch.”

Theo didn’t respond. Fenix figured it was because he didn’t want him to know the answer, or perhaps because he didn’t *have* an answer.

“You’re supposed to be on watch,” Theo said.

“Jade is on it.” Hacker took a seat and shoveled several bites into his mouth. Theo silently watched him eat. He was clearly pissed off.

“Fine,” Hacker finally said. “But I’m taking this with me. I’m freaking starving.”

Theo returned to his seat, and Fenix went back to watching the deer outside. The moon had slipped back into the gray clouds, shrouding the ground in darkness. Shadows moved in the weak light near the burned-out building to the east. They vanished before he could get a look at what was creating them.

“You know, I’ve been wonderin’,” Theo said.

Fenix rolled his eyes. This guy just didn’t shut up.

“How do you become a Nazi?” Theo asked. “Do you just wake up one day and think, ‘Oh shit, I’m a racist asshole and I want to oppress anyone that’s not white’?”

Theo waited for him to respond, but Fenix wasn’t going to give him the satisfaction. At this point, the redskin was just annoying.

“Not going to answer? You don’t want to give me some insight on what fills someone with so much hate for other races? Because I assume it’s fear. Fear turns men into cowards like yourself.”

Fenix still didn’t take the bait.

Theo remained seated at his table, but reached for the .357 Magnum next to his soup bowl. He picked it up and pulled back the hammer, closing one eye and aiming it at Fenix.

“All that gold and weapons you promised are the only things keeping me from blowing your dumb head off, you know that?”

Fenix couldn’t help himself any longer. “You sure are judgmental for

someone that works for a criminal. Don’t act like your shit don’t stink, man.”

He looked away, not worried about Theo pulling the trigger. Outside, the moon had returned. Another flurry of shadows moved across the landscape, and Fenix spotted a deer bolting away from the courtyard. Something had spooked it.

“Do you think I won’t kill you?” Theo asked. He got up from his chair, still pointing the gun. Fenix watched the small man in the reflection of the windows as he approached.

The glass in the central pane shattered, and Theo jerked as a bullet punched through his expensive suit. He dropped to the ground, losing his pistol on the floor, and cried out in pain.

Fenix smiled at the sight and muttered, “Who’s the dog now?”

The other windows to the right exploded, raining glass on the carpet. Rounds punched into the tables, floor, and walls. Shouting for help, Theo scrambled for the cover of the table he’d been sitting at earlier. He propped it up to shield his body.

Fenix remained where he was, his appetite slowly returning. He brought up another spoonful to his lips as bullets peppered the room.

Theo covered his head with his hands and shouted, “Hacker, Jade!”

He glanced over at Fenix, who was in the process of bringing the final spoonful of cold soup to his lips. He swallowed, set the spoon down gently, and stood, heedless of the gunfire.

The Sons of Liberty didn’t miss.

Fenix walked toward the .357 Magnum. Theo reached out to grab it first, but gunfire lanced into the ground, forcing his hand back.

He picked up the pistol and aimed it at Theo. He was on his back now, hands on his gut, legs and feet squirming as he bled out.

The automatic gunfire continued for several seconds before waning into sporadic shots. Fenix brought the gun up and aimed it at the door as footsteps sounded in the stairwell outside.

The door swung open and Jade stumbled inside, three rosy spots on the front of his coat. He dropped to his knees, and Fenix fired a shot that hit him in the top of the head, blowing off his red bandana and splattering his brains over the wall.

Three more men emerged in the open doorway, carrying M4 rifles and dressed in all-black. The leader pulled down his facemask and smiled when he saw Fenix.

“General,” Horton said in his gruff voice.

“About time, Sergeant,” Fenix said. He moved over to Theo, who was looking up, eyes wide and fancy Italian shoes kicking at the ground.

Reaching into his coat pocket, Fenix pulled out the tracking device Horton had dropped inside back at the cabin earlier that day. He bent down next to Theo.

“You thought some stupid radiation signs were going to keep my men from coming for me?” Fenix asked. He tilted his head to one side. “That plan was almost as dumb as you talking to me the way you did earlier.”

“Nazi pig…” Blood bubbled out of Theo’s mouth. “Rot in hell.”

“Maybe, but not for this,” Fenix said. He stood and pointed the .357 Magnum at Theo’s face just as more SOL soldiers moved into the room.

“Well, this is a pleasant surprise,” Fenix said when he saw they had captured Hacker. The man stumbled through the open doorway, his hands bound behind his back.

“There’s a few other prisoners downstairs,” Horton said. “Figured I’d let you decide what to do with ’em.”

Hacker glanced over his shoulder and growled at the SOL soldier who’d pushed him into the room.

“Hey, pencil dick,” Fenix said, his smile returning. He waited for Hacker to look him in the eye, and then said, “Seems to me like you’re out of a job. You want a new one?”

Hacker hesitated, then shrugged. “Never really did care for Nile that much, to be honest.”

Theo spat blood in Hacker’s direction. “Fucking traitor.”

Fenix laughed, and aimed the barrel at Theo with one hand and motioned for Hacker to join them with his other.

“Tell you what,” he said when Hacker got there. “You can join the Sons of Liberty if you perform one simple task.”

Fenix pointed with his other hand at the pliers on Hacker’s duty belt. “You pluck out Theo’s eyes for me so I can send them to his cousin. The treaty between SOL and these redskins ends tonight.”

— 7 —

The ancient pickup truck climbed a hill, chassis groaning like an old man walking down stairs. Another old man was sitting in the bed of the truck, blindfolded and hands bound in front of him. Like the truck, Colton's body had seen better days. His eyelids were both swollen and obstructing his view. The right eyelid was completely closed. His lip had been split in two, and he was pretty sure he had a stress fracture in both of his shins.

But the physical and mental pain would all be over soon.

This was it. He was going to die today. Clint Bailey's words emerged in his mind.

They are going to kill you tomorrow. If you have a chance to run, do it.

Clint was already dead. His body had been left on the road just outside Estes Park, according to Sheriff Thompson. He had ordered Colton to get into the back of the truck, and then had placed the blindfold over his eyes. The food drop must have gone awry, and he was going to pay the price.

They had been driving for about ten minutes, and were now climbing, which told him they were heading into the mountains. He considered jumping out of the bed, but even if the fall didn't kill him, it would break his legs, and then what would he do?

You are a dumb son of a bitch, Colton thought. *Coming out here thinking you could make a deal.*

He should have stayed in Estes Park. He should have never left his family behind. Everything had changed the night he found Melissa Stone and the fighter jets fell from the sky. The world had changed, and the wolves that had been hiding among the sheep were now in charge.

Colton shielded his swollen face from a gust of chilly wind as the driver took a right and accelerated down a new road. He wasn't sure who was in the

back of the bed with him, but he had heard two other people climbing in. He guessed one of them was Thompson.

He wanted to be angry, but it quickly changed to despair. He had fought, and he had lost. Colton never thought he would plead for his life, but desperation set in. He wanted to see Kelly and Risa, to hold his girls again and never leave them.

“You don’t have to kill me, Sheriff. Please let me go. I can help you. We can help each other,” he said.

There was a chuckle over the noise of the wind, but it faded away, leaving Colton alone in the darkness and the cold.

“You’re a brave man,” Thompson replied. “But you lack what it takes to survive in this new world. You’re a decent fighter, but you’re not a killer. That’s the difference between you and me.”

The truck stopped a few minutes later, and the lift gate clanked open. Someone grabbed Colton under the arm and helped him down.

Then his blindfold came off.

He blinked into the cold wind, looking at the rolling hills east of Fort Collins instead of the Rocky Mountains to the west.

Sheriff Thompson and his Russian henchman stood next to him, both of them focused on the burned-out FEMA Survival Center camp in the distance. A mile of debris spread across fields now covered in a sheet of snow.

“I own this land,” Thompson said. He turned to Colton, a cocky grin under his broken nose and bruised eyes. “I’m the king.”

“Not for long,” Colton said. “The government will be here soon. They will stop you.”

“What government?” Thompson said, his smile fading. “The only thing I’m worried about is the fucking Chinese.”

Colton couldn’t resist asking. “What about them?”

“Those bastards are streaming across our borders to ‘help’ with rebuilding efforts, from what we’re hearing over the radio.”

“Invading,” Ivan said.

“I’ll kill any of them that step into these parts. Like I said. I’m the king.” Thompson shrugged. “Besides, I don’t need the government’s help, and never did. We have dozens of warehouses packed full of supplies, food, medicine, and other shit we took from the FEMA camp. Soon we will have the weapons to hold back the Chinese, and anyone stupid enough to try and take Fort Collins by force.”

Colton could tell by the crazed look in Thompson's eyes that he already had a plan to deal with the so-called invaders, but his concern now was the sheriff's plan for Colton. Would he crucify Colton on one of the poles down the road like he had Sheriff Gerrard? Would he cut up Colton and send him back in pieces, like he'd threatened?

The questions swarmed his mind as they walked down the road. Why would Thompson show him all this just to kill him? Maybe he just wanted to talk. He was a narcissistic sociopath, and those people were near impossible to understand or profile. They were the worst type of criminal, feeding off power. No remorse. No morals.

"Anyone who challenges me will end up like them," Thompson said. He didn't elaborate, but Colton knew who he was talking about. Almost every pole on the side of the road had a dead body nailed to it.

"You won't win," Colton said. "Evil never wins in the long term. It's always conquered by good men."

"Evil?" Thompson asked, sounding genuinely surprised. "Good men? You think you're a good man? Please, spare me the bullshit, Marcus."

Colton turned to get a better look out of his left eye. Judging by the confused look on Thompson's face, the man really believed he was doing the right thing. There wasn't anything else Colton could say. Thompson was batshit crazy.

"Let's go," he said. "Get back into the truck."

Colton hesitated to look out at the corpses once last time. This was what Thompson's kingdom would look like if Colton didn't find a way to stop him. But what could he do?

Ivan turned back to the truck with Thompson, and Colton saw a sudden opportunity. Maybe there was something he could do, and if he was going to die anyways, why not go down fighting?

He grabbed the Glock in Ivan's hip holster, and drew it with his bound hands before the big Russian could react.

Thompson spun to face Colton, but found himself staring down the barrel of the gun instead.

"Don't move, or Thompson takes one to the heart!" Colton yelled at the two men who hopped out of the truck. They both shouldered rifles at him, but Colton kept his pistol aimed at the sheriff.

"Think about what you're doing," Thompson said. "This is a big mistake, Marcus."

“Tell your men to drop their weapons or I swear to *God* I’ll put a bullet in your head and another in your black heart,” Colton said.

Thompson held Colton’s gaze, reading him for a bluff. The sheriff must have seen he was serious.

“Do it,” Thompson said after a short hesitation.

“But boss?” Ivan protested.

“I said drop your fucking guns.”

The driver and passenger slowly lowered their rifles.

“No, throw them in the truck,” Colton said.

Thompson nodded.

Both guns went inside the pickup. The truck was still running, the muffler coughing in the chilly weather.

“Leave me a knife too,” Colton said. “Then get over to the side of the road.”

“You’re making a *really* big mistake,” Thompson said. He chuckled, and looked at Ivan. “It’s actually really funny that he got the drop on you.”

“You made the mistake, asshole,” Colton said. “Now get moving or I’ll shoot you right now.”

“Feel free to shoot Ivan,” Thompson said.

“I said move!” Colton said.

Thompson drew in a deep breath and nodded. The driver pulled a knife out of a sheath and placed it on the seat of the truck. Then he raised his gloved hands and walked over to the shoulder of the road with the passenger. They lined up next to Ivan and Thompson, while Colton retreated to the truck.

“You fought well against me,” Thompson said. “I respected that. I was going to let you go. I was preparing to take you back to Estes Park and drop your dumb ass off, but now you’re a dead man.”

“We’ll see about that,” Colton said. He backed up to the front seat of the truck with the gun still aimed at the men. He could easily jump in and speed off, leaving them here. That would make him a better man than Thompson.

You lack what it takes to survive in this new world.

“Never let a rabid dog have a chance to bite you again,” Colton muttered.

“What was that, Marcus?” Thompson asked.

Colton hesitated, knowing that what happened next would stick with him forever. This could very well be the defining moment of his entire life. Specters of those he hadn’t been able to save formed in his mind, followed by the images of his wife and daughter. He couldn’t let them die. He couldn’t let

a man like Thompson survive.

Thompson's eyes widened with realization just as Colton pulled the trigger, twice. Both bullets hit the sheriff in the chest. He spun away, hitting the dirt, and then rolling into the ditch.

Colton roved the gun to Ivan.

"*Nyet*!" screamed the Russian.

He ate a bullet that exited the back of his head. The other two men took off running. Colton aimed the barrel at the fat man on the right, but he had never shot a man in the back before, and hesitated again.

You can't afford to have mercy.

With the sights lined up, he shot the man in the back three times. The second man turned and shielded his head, knocking off his baseball cap on the process.

"Please," he said. "Please don't shoot me. I have a family."

Colton looked over to Thompson, who lay in the dirt at the bottom of the ditch, his sightless eyes staring up at the sky.

"Please!" the man entreated.

Colton slowly lowered the Glock. "Tell your friends that Estes Park is off limits. If anyone shows their face there, they will meet the same fate as Thompson."

The man nodded rapidly. "Yes, sir. I promise."

Colton scanned his handiwork as he backpedaled to the truck; the fat man lay sprawled on the pavement with blood ballooning around the holes in the back of his coat; Ivan was face down, snow flurries falling into the gory exit wound where his skull had been moments earlier; and finally, Thompson.

A month ago, executing three men in cold blood would have made Colton throw up. But he was no longer that man. This was no longer that world.

After Afghanistan, he'd thought he had seen the worst humanity could do to each other, but atrocities like the burned-out FEMA camp in the distance, and the dead civilians hanging from poles on the side of the road, had taught him how cruel humans could be. Witnessing the things Thompson had done was sickening, but it had been necessary in teaching him what he needed to do to protect those he loved.

He was no longer a lawman.

He was one of the damned now.

***

Raven patted Willow on the neck. The mare snorted and continued up the trail. The sun was starting to go down over the mountains, leaving an orange streak across the iceberg-shaped clouds.

Chilly wind whipped Raven's long hair across his face. He pulled the curtain back and redid his ponytail. His ear was really hurting from the cold. The stocking cap helped a little, but he was really starting to worry. An infection could cost him his ear, or worse.

"It's cold as balls out here," Dale Jackson said. He rode Colton's horse, Obsidian. Saddlebags packed full of elk, deer, rabbit, and even squirrel meat hung over both horses.

"You think this is cold? Man, you white people don't know cold," Raven said.

Dale heaved a laugh, his breath coming out in a cloud of white. "You know, I didn't like you much at first, but you're a good guy, Sam. Funny, too. I didn't realize you had a sense of humor."

"I don't," Raven replied. He thought of the night of the North Korean attack, when Dale had nearly shot him on the road, and added, "For the record, I didn't like you much, either."

Dale hung his head ruefully. "I'm sorry. I wasn't thinkin' straight when I said those things to you. Went a bit crazy that night. Reminded me too much of…"

"No need to explain," Raven said. "I'm a combat vet too, you know."

"Right, and that makes us brothers."

"Yes it does."

He gave Willow a nudge, and continued down the road in silence, save for the sound of hooves clicking, as the sun retreated behind the mountains. They were headed for the new supply bunker on the eastern edge of town to store the meat. Raven had his crossbow strapped over his shoulder, wary of wild animals like coyotes and anyone that might be watching. He cradled an AR-15 and searched the woods framing the road for movement, but all was quiet.

After thirty minutes of trotting down the frontage road, they came upon the soccer field in the middle of the forest. It was a very odd place for it, but the perfect place to hide their supplies. Only two trails led to the area, and it was surrounded by forestland. The field was owned by a private school a mile away, and Lindsey had worked with the administrator to secure the land.

A pair of guards stood at the gate at the end of the dirt road. Dale dismounted and walked alongside Obsidian on the approach.

“Who goes there?” shouted one of the sentries silhouetted in the shadows of the pine trees.

“Raven Spears and Dale Jackson,” Dale said.

“Ah, good evenin’ gentlemen,” replied the guard. They both lowered their rifles and opened the gate.

Raven saw the face of the first guard in the waning light. Rex Stone, the father of Melissa, nodded at him. Standing on his right was Jim Meyers, the former manager of the Stanley Inn.

“Todd and Susan Sanders brought home quite the prize today,” Raven said. “They took down a buck with a couple of bows. We’re dropping it off, along with a few other fresh kills, and then taking a tally before heading back out on patrol.”

“Good news,” Rex said. He finished opening the gate and gave Willow a pat on her neck.

“Pretty quiet tonight,” said Meyers.

“Just the way we like it,” Raven said.

“Heard things weren’t so quiet on the highway today, though,” Rex said.

“You heard right,” Dale said. “But don’t worry. We’ve got the situation under control. Right, Raven?”

“Yeah.” Raven wasn’t sure if he believed his own words, but the last thing he wanted was to scare people. Rex looked up as Raven and Willow passed, with the sad eyes of a grieving father. At least he had something to do. Being out here was better than sitting at home thinking about his little girl. Lilly, his wife, was working inside the bunker beneath the field tonight.

Raven and Dale guided their horses around the edge of the grass, and finally stopped when they got to a metal shed. After tying up the horses, they grabbed the satchels of fresh meat and lugged them inside the building while Rex and Jim stood guard.

The building looked like a machine shed, with racks of tools hanging on the walls and several tables in the center of the room. But under those tables was a trap door. Raven put the satchels down and then, with Dale’s help, moved the table covering the industrial carpet. They pulled the carpet back and then opened the door, revealing a stairwell that led into a basement lit with an orange glow.

During the Cold War, the bunker had been built to shield the private school

kids from a nuclear explosion. Now it was the best-guarded secret in Estes Park. And it was protected by a woman who wouldn't hesitate to blast an intruder in the face with her shotgun.

"Who goes there?" said Lilly Stone. She angled the gun up the stairs. Raven moved his head back and announced himself.

Lilly lowered the barrel. "Oh, okay. Come on down."

Raven and Dale brought the meat down in several trips. The chilly basement was a large open space with tables and racks full of canned food, massive barrels of water, medical supplies, and countless other goods. They had even turned a storage room into a refrigerator that doubled as the meat locker.

All told, it made up sixty percent of the town's supplies. The meat stored on Trail Ridge Road had also been transferred here.

Lilly handed Raven a clipboard, and he signed off on the new shipment. Then he went through the ledger, noting the supplies they had handed over to Thompson.

"That really hurt us," Lilly said. "Over five percent of our stock."

Raven scratched at the back of his neck. "I know, but like I said, we're going to get it all back, plus some. Trust me."

He didn't blame Lilly for her dirty look. After all, he hadn't been able to save her daughter. Even though it wasn't Raven's fault directly, he was sure Rex and Lilly hated him for his failure to bring their little girl home.

"You ready, Raven?" Dale asked.

"Yeah."

Raven handed Lilly the clipboard and followed Dale out to their horses. A few minutes later, they were on their way through the Beaver Meadows. Raven wanted to start the patrol off with a quick check of the area where Jennie and some of the other refugees had seen the figures they described as soldiers.

They only made it halfway when the walkie-talkie on Raven's duty belt crackled.

"Raven, this is Lindsey. What's your current location? Over."

"I'm just about back to town hall," Raven replied.

"We need you at the roadblock on 34. There's a vehicle. Meet me out front of the station. You can ride with me."

"We're on our way."

Raven clipped the radio back on his belt and gave Willow a gentle kick.

“Let’s go, girl,” he said.

The two horses took off, breaking into a full-blown gallop along the side of the road. Lindsey was waiting with Detective Ryburn in the Volkswagen Beetle outside the station when they arrived. They started the car as soon as Raven and Dale rounded the corner. Saving gasoline was a huge part of their effort, which was part of the reason Raven and Dale were patrolling on horses, but this was an emergency. It would take thirty minutes to get to the roadblock on Willow.

Lindsey sped away as soon as they were all inside. They passed the first roadblock without even slowing, the car zipping through the open barriers at almost full speed. Another message came over Lindsey’s radio as they approached the second roadblock, but she stayed focused on the road, flipping on the beams as the final glow of the sun receded.

“Get ready,” she said.

Raven flicked the safety on his AR-15 off as Dale whispered a prayer. Lindsey slowed on the approach to the barrier. Raven squinted, unable to make out much. What he could see was several of the militia guards posted there with rifles lowered. They had someone surrounded.

“A refugee?” Lindsey said as she killed the engine. She hopped out, and the men quickly followed her.

“What the hell is going on out here?” Lindsey asked.

Raven hurried over with his rifle at the ready, but paused in his tracks when he saw the battered face of the man the militia soldiers had surrounded.

“Chief Colton?” Lindsey gasped.

Raven took a step forward, confusion setting in. Was this some sort of a trap?

Colton moved out into the moonlight. His entire face was marked with a patchwork of cuts and bruises, and his right eye completely swollen shut. A gash divided his lips.

“Chief, what the hell happened to you?” Lindsey asked.

Colton wiped his mouth with a sleeve. “I killed ’em,” he grumbled. “I killed Sheriff Thompson and his men.”

Everyone went quiet, waiting for the chief to continue. But Colton just shook his head. He looked over at Raven, their eyes locking for a moment. Raven could see something had changed—something bad had happened to Colton out there.

“Get ready,” Colton said to Raven, his voice raspy.

“For what?” Dale asked.
Colton shot him a glare. “For war.”

— 8 —

Albert Randall sat up in bed. The pain was bad tonight. The worst yet. But that's what happened when you took a 5.56 mm round to the gut and refused most of the painkillers. He didn't want to end up like his sister—all doped up to the point he couldn't think or move.

After finally managing to prop his back up with the pillows, Albert watched Dave and Ty, who were sitting in chairs across the small room.

"Don't they have any movies in this joint?" Dave asked.

The boy Albert had discovered hiding in an abandoned apartment in Charlotte hadn't shut up for the past hour. Ty, on the other hand, had remained mostly quiet, waiting anxiously for his mother to come back from her trip. And, despite the doctor's orders, Albert was playing babysitter to them both.

"This place is boring. I want to go fishing. I thought they said we were gonna live at the ocean. I don't see no water." He tapped his tennis shoes on the ground, the noise grating on Albert's already frayed nerves.

"There are some movies in the lounge," Ty said. "But I don't think they have anything cool. Just sappy drama stuff."

"They got *Lord of the Rings*?" Dave asked.

Albert chuckled despite himself, and then gritted his teeth to fend off the pulsating pain.

"Yo, Mr. Big Al! When are we going to get out of this place and get back to our quest?" Dave asked. "We haven't completed our mission to Mordor yet."

Albert couldn't tell if the boy was being serious or not.

Neither could Ty, apparently. "You're joking, right?" he asked.

Dave grinned from ear to ear. "Kinda. I've slayed enough Orcs for now.

There shall come a day when men fail, but that day is not today."

Albert shook his head. The kid had slaughtered the movie quote.

"That's not how it goes. Besides, you're not a man. You're just a kid," Ty said.

Dave stood with his hands on his hips. "How dare you talk to Frodo like that."

"You're not Frodo either," Ty said with a heavy sigh.

"And you're not gonna join the Fellowship. You can't walk anyways."

Ty quickly furrowed his brows, and then looked at the ground. Seeing the boy's pain almost hurt Albert worse than the gunshot wound. It was a different type of pain that made his heart ache.

"Knock it off, Dave," Albert growled. "Ty is more than capable of keeping up with us when we head back out on our mission to Mordor."

Dave ran his sweatshirt sleeve across his nose, dragging a strand of snot.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean you can't come. You can be a Hobbit too," Dave said. He waited a moment for Ty to respond, but Ty just shrugged a shoulder.

"Really, I'm sorry," Dave entreated.

"It's okay. I'm used to it."

Albert's heart continued to hurt for the boy. This wasn't the first time he had been put down for his disability, and Albert knew it wouldn't be the last.

"For real, though. When the Fellowship heads back out, you're coming with," Dave said.

Ty cracked a half smile. "Okay."

"I'm coming with, too," Albert said. "Keep you stinkers out of trouble."

The kids both chuckled, but Albert had to force a laugh. Ty and Dave had both seen the horrors out there. Hopefully, neither of them would have to face it again. Not if Albert could help it. That's why he had to get better. As soon as he was on his feet again, he had a feeling he would be heading back out into the fray.

A heart rate monitor chirped next to Albert's bed.

"What's that?" Dave asked. "Does that mean the Orcs are coming?"

"Yes," Albert said, trying to keep a straight face. He gritted his teeth again at another wave of pain through his gut. It felt like a hot knife jabbing his insides.

Both of the boys watched Albert anxiously, concern painted on their faces.

"Are you okay, Mr. Big Al?" Dave asked, his nasally voice cracking.

"Yeah, I'm…" Albert groaned. "I'm fine."

“I think Officer Randall needs to rest, boys,” came a voice from the open doorway. Doctor Parish stood there, her arms folded across her white coat.

“Aw, man,” Dave said.

“Let’s go see if we can find a good movie,” Ty said. He wheeled his chair toward the door, but Dave walked over and put his hand on Albert’s.

“Feel better, Mr. Big Al. I miss hanging out with you.”

Albert patted Dave’s hand. “Thanks, kid.”

Dave flashed a toothy grin and then followed Ty out of the room, pushing past a skinny figure standing in the doorway beside the doctor.

“Jacqueline,” Parish said. “I didn’t realize you were up.”

Albert hardly recognized his sister. She was gaunt as a scarecrow, and her wrinkled face appeared ten years older than he remembered. The drugs had nearly destroyed his twin sister. But there was hope for her now. She was finally safe.

“Mind if I talk to my brother for a few minutes?” Jacqueline asked.

Parish looked at Albert, and he gave her an approving nod.

“Make it fast, ma’am. He really does need to rest.”

Jacqueline dragged a chair over to Albert’s bedside and took a seat. This was the first time she had visited him since he had woken up from surgery. She still hadn’t looked him in the eye, her gaze constantly flitting from side to side, focused on anything but him.

“Hey, sis,” he said.

“Hi.”

“I’m glad I found you.” He struggled to find the right words. “I’m… I’m sorry it took me so long to try and make up for the…”

He didn’t even finish his sentence before she started crying. The tears streamed away from the crow’s feet framing her dark brown eyes.

“Hey,” Albert said, reaching out. “Don’t cry, Jackie. It’s going to be okay. You’re safe now. You’re going to get the help you need.”

“I don’t deserve it.” She finally met his gaze. “That’s what you don’t understand, Al. I wasn’t just getting high when you found me. I was trying to end the nightmare.”

Albert swallowed hard, unsure what to say. It was difficult for him to fathom just how dark a place she had been in. How could his own sister, his twin, want to end her life? But then again, the world had gone mad, and she was addicted to heroin. The combination could drive anyone over the edge.

He reached out, and she huddled closer so he could wrap his arms around

her. The embrace hurt, but he didn't care about the pain.

"I love you, Jackie."

"You too."

Albert looked up to see another figure standing in the doorway. This time it was Charlize. She backed away to give the siblings some privacy, but Albert held up a free hand to tell her to wait.

As soon as Jackie pulled away, Albert said, "Secretary Montgomery, how was your trip?"

The hard look on her face told Albert there was trouble. She hadn't just come to see how he was feeling. It looked like he might be headed back into the field even sooner than he thought.

***

Sandra Spears put on a new pair of surgical gloves. It was the one item they weren't running low on, which was a good thing considering the number of patients going in and out of the operating room. The most important thing at this point was making sure everything remained sanitary. A cut could turn into an infection, and an infection could lead to sepsis, or staph, or Necrotizing Fasciitis, the flesh-eating bacteria that had nearly killed Teddy.

Her next patient had plenty of deep cuts that could easily become infected. He was also the last person Sandra had expected to be treating during her shift tonight.

"Chief Colton," she said. "It's good to see you."

Colton acknowledged her with a dip of his head, but didn't reply. He sat on the table, stripped down to his briefs. Bruises and cuts marked much of his bare skin, including two nasty purple spots on both his shins.

Doctor Duffy asked Colton several questions, but the chief didn't reply to any of them with more than a shrug or a one-word response.

It was a product of shock, or perhaps post-traumatic stress. Sandra could only imagine what had occurred during Colton's captivity, but from the looks of it, he had been tortured. His right eyelid was swollen shut, and his lip had been split down the middle like a worm cut in half. She had only seen a few men beaten this badly in her life.

"Just patch me up. I need to get back to the station," Colton said.

"You're in shock, Chief," Duffy replied. "You need to rest and heal."

Colton looked up, his left eye homing in on the doctor. “There’s no time to rest. Not with what’s coming.”

Sandra and Duffy exchanged a glance.

“Just patch me up,” Colton said.

“Okay, Chief,” Duffy replied. He nodded at Sandra. She grabbed the sanitizing supplies while Duffy prepared the sutures. She pulled out the antibiotic ointment and saturated a cotton ball with the liquid.

“This is going to sting,” she said.

Colton remained quiet while she worked with the doctor to clean his wounds. By the time Sandra and Doctor Duffy were finished, they had given him twenty stitches in three locations.

“Thanks,” Colton said. He stood and began putting his clothes back on.

“You’re really not going to tell us anything?” Duffy asked. “I know you probably don’t want to talk, but there’s a lot of rumors floating around, and it would be good to—”

Colton cut the doctor off. “What kind of rumors?”

There was a short pause as Sandra turned away to put the supplies back into a cabinet.

“About what happened to you, and with Sergeant Aragon and Officer Hines…” Duffy said, his words trailing off.

Colton bent down to lace up his boots, gritting his teeth in pain. “Listen, I really got to get back to the station, and I don’t want to tell this story more than once. If you can spare Sandra for a few hours, she can brief everyone here when she comes back.”

Duffy shrugged his approval. “That’s fine, I suppose.”

“But Allie,” Sandra began to say.

“She will be fine,” Duffy said. “I’ll make sure she’s looked after while you’re gone.”

Sandra didn’t like the idea of leaving her daughter here alone with Creek and Teddy, but they were all sleeping, and there were guards posted. Chances were she would be back before the kids woke up.

She followed Colton out to the lobby, where his wife and daughter were waiting.

“Daddy!” Risa shouted, bolting out of her chair.

Kelly had her arms folded across her chest. She hadn’t bothered trying to fix the smudged mascara around her eyes.

Colton wrapped his arms around Risa. “Hey, kiddo.”

“Anything broken?” Kelly asked.

“Nah, just some scratches.” Colton reached out and pulled his wife close in a three-way hug with their daughter.

Sandra stepped outside to give them some privacy. Dale Jackson stood guarding the Volkswagen van in the front drive. He chewed on an unlit cigar and cradled a rifle across his beefy chest.

“Evenin’, Nurse Spears,” he said.

“Hello, Dale.”

She put her back up to the van and watched Colton and his family inside the lobby.

“Nice to see a happy reunion for once,” she said.

Dale dipped his hat in assent.

A few minutes later, Colton and his family walked into the parking lot. He was doing his best not to limp, from the looks of it, but Sandra could see when someone was trying to mask pain. Humans were just like animals. There were other tells, like a clenched jaw.

“Drop me and Sandra off at town hall,” Colton instructed Dale. “Then give my family a lift home.”

“You got it, Chief,” Dale said.

By the time they got to the town hall, it was close to midnight. Colton said goodbye to his family and then led Sandra to the conference room, where several folks were huddled around the table listening to a radio. Raven and Lindsey were there, along with Mayor Gail Andrews and the town administrator, Tom Feagen.

“Fifty thousand Chinese boots on the ground, and twenty-five thousand soldiers,” Raven said. “Plus fighter jets. It’s a lot of firepower.”

“Chief’s back,” Lindsey said.

Raven glanced over, seeing Sandra first. “What the heck are you doing here, sis?”

Sandra walked over to give him a quick hug. “Colton asked me to come to the briefing so I can tell the doctors what’s going on.”

“Have a seat everyone,” Colton said. He waited a few minutes, pacing, while several more people joined them in the conference room, including Margaret the dispatcher. Sandra took a seat next to Lindsey. The detective continued listening to the radio while they waited.

After everyone had gathered, Colton cleared his throat and said, “I called this meeting to tell you what’s going on out there, and to make some changes

in light of the situation with Don Aragon and Sam Hines." He directed his gaze to Mayor Andrews.

"Your tenure as mayor is over," Colton said. His eyes shifted to Feagen. "You're out, too, Tom."

"What?" Gail said, taking off her glasses. "You can't just—"

Colton pounded the table with a fist, the sound echoing through the room and silencing the woman.

"You're out, Gail. You and Tom can clean out your offices, but then you need to get the hell out of this building. I don't want to see you here ever again," Colton snapped.

The raw anger in his voice frightened Sandra. She had never seen the chief act like this before.

"You can't do that," Feagen said. "You don't have the authority. Mayor Andrews is an elected official."

"We're under martial law, Tom, and we have a foreign army on our soil now. Things don't work the way they used to. You're lucky I don't throw you both in jail," Colton said.

"On what charge?" Gail asked.

"How about conspiring to kill Raven and me?" Lindsey said.

Raven bobbed his head. "If it were up to me, we'd kick you both out of town to fend for yourselves."

"You were too close to Don all along, Gail," Colton said. "I don't trust you anymore. And Tom, you're weak. I need strong people running this town."

"Yeah," Raven said again.

Lindsey walked over to Gail and gestured toward the door. "Go and pack up your things," Lindsey said.

"This is crazy," Gail said. "You won't get away with it."

Sandra stepped up next to Lindsey to show her support. She had never been a fan of the mayor, but hearing she might have known something about Don's plot to kill her brother made her blood boil.

Colton jerked his bruised chin toward the door. "Get out," he said firmly.

The former mayor and her second in command both glared at Colton, but then filed out of the room muttering darkly to each other.

"Guess we're going to have to hold another election," Lindsey said.

Colton shook his head. "Right now our focus is on survival."

"You told us to prepare for war," Raven said. "What did you mean?"

"We've got a lot of enemies out there. Not just Thompson's goons. Men

like Fenix and Redford. And winter isn't far off."

"Damn, we just never catch a break, do we?" Lindsey said with a slow head shake.

"We will survive if we're smart," Colton said. "I was stupid to leave Estes Park and try and negotiate with Thompson. He may be dead, but his people have some of our supplies."

"I'm sorry," Raven said.

Colton palmed the table, displaying bloodied knuckles. "I want an updated inventory of the food and supplies after today's charity run. And I want a plan to get back what you guys handed over earlier today."

Raven stared at the Chief's hands and wondered how many lives the chief had taken today with those hands, but he decided it didn't matter. Whatever happened from here on out was justified if it meant saving their families. He and Colton were both prepared to do whatever it took.

"You hear me, Sam?"

Raven nodded. "Loud and clear, Chief."

— 9 —

Fenix opened the breach to make sure the .357 Magnum was fully loaded with six bullets. He snapped it shut with a smile, holstered the gun, and then grabbed his suppressed M4.

The convoy of Sons of Liberty vehicles was stopped on a dirt road at the edge of a dense forest. Sergeant Horton sat in the back seat of a Jeep with Fenix, listening to chatter over a handheld radio.

“Hacker says this is the place,” Horton confirmed.

Fenix twisted around to look out the back window at Hacker. The former associate of Nile Redford had provided a map to this place, and while Fenix didn’t completely trust him, they didn’t have any choice if they wanted to find the boss.

“Let’s move out, but tell the men to be cautious. This could be a trap,” Fenix said.

Horton gave the order over the radio. Twenty-four SOL soldiers piled out of trucks and Jeeps and fanned out toward the forest with their weapons in combat position, sweeping for contacts. It was two in the morning and freezing, but the temperature wasn’t going to deter these patriots from doing what they needed to do.

Splitting off into four teams, the soldiers moved toward their target—Nile Redford’s mansion. It hadn’t taken much for Hacker—whose real name turned out to be Tony—to give up the location. Fenix had promised him a job, and Hacker had put his finger on the map quicker than a hooker taking a Benjamin for services rendered.

That’s what Hacker was now—a prostitute. Fenix would have laughed if he wasn’t prepping for battle.

He got out of the truck with Horton and did a quick scan of the area. They

were just west of Granby, Colorado, about fourteen miles from Rocky Mountain National Park and eighty-five miles west of Denver.

The last of the fire-teams vanished into the woods, leaving only the drivers and a few sentries with Fenix and Horton. The men had the element of surprise, but some of them would still die tonight. Maybe even Fenix himself. But it was worth the risk.

“Bring Hacker over here,” Fenix said.

Horton flashed a hand signal and waited for the prisoner. Hacker kept low, like he was worried about getting hit. That told Fenix they were in the right place.

“You’re sure Redford is here?” Fenix asked.

Hacker nodded.

“You wouldn’t lie to me, now would you, Tony?” Fenix asked.

“No, sir.”

“Good. Now follow me.”

Fenix flashed a hand signal and Sergeant Horton took point. He moved toward the forest with his rifle shouldered. Fenix and four other SOL soldiers led Hacker into the woods with rifles at the ready.

These were the same guns his men had given to Theo earlier that day. Funny how that worked, Fenix thought to himself. Now they were going to be used to exterminate the rest of Nile Redford’s henchmen, and take everything the bastard owned.

Horton balled his hand into a fist as they entered a clearing. Fenix looked over his shoulder and flashed a shit-eating grin at the man who was going to help the Sons of Liberty enter the Redford compound. Hacker was crouched next to the trunk of a tree, his hands bound and his weapons removed.

“How does it feel to have the tables turned?” Fenix whispered.

“I told you, I never liked Nile much,” Hacker replied.

“We’ll see about that,” Fenix said, pulling out a radio from his vest. He held it up to Hacker’s mouth. “Go ahead,” he said.

“White Crow, this is Hacker. Reporting in. All is well here, over.”

Static crackled from the speaker for several seconds before a voice replied. “Copy that, Hacker. Talk to you in the mornin’.”

Fenix pulled the radio back. “How many men did you say are posted here?”

A shrug from Hacker. “Maybe a dozen. Could be less, could be a few more. Just depends.”

“Depends on what?” Fenix asked.

“How many Redford decided to post. I don’t know, man. It just depends on the night.”

“What do you think, Sarge?” Fenix asked.

“I think we can take ’em. We got the cover of darkness and the element of surprise.”

“I agree,” Fenix replied. “Let’s move in.”

A messy flood of adrenaline soaked into his nerve endings. It was the calm before the storm, something that always came right before combat.

And Fenix loved it to his core.

Horton crept up to where a man named Geoff Hough was posted with a sniper rifle. Fenix tucked the radio back in its pouch pocket and then patted Hacker on the shoulder.

“You better hope they bought it, or you’re going to be very sorry,” Fenix said. He motioned for one of the other men to guard Hacker, and then moved up next to Horton, using the time to scan the mansion on the other side of the fort of trees.

It was an impressive house with a brick and stone façade and a wrap-around porch overlooking a small lake at the center of the property. He counted at least four chimneys sprouting from the roof. Sprawling gardens and fancy metal fences surrounded the ten-acre plot.

“Three contacts,” Horton said.

Fenix took up position next to the sergeant. The red glow of a cigarette gave away the position of one of the sentries, but Fenix strained to make out the silhouette of the man in the darkness. He borrowed the night vision goggles. Sure enough, three men were patrolling the porch. He handed the goggles to Hough next.

“Take ’em down,” Fenix ordered.

The suppressed crack came a second later, and Fenix watched the lit cigarette fall to the porch floor along with a body. Two more cracks followed, and two more bodies hit the ground.

Horton flashed a hand signal, and the fire-team bolted out of the tree line and toward the drive that twisted up to the massive metal gate.

Two more sentries had been posted here, but both were already on the ground with what looked like massive toothpicks sticking out of their backs.

Indians dead from arrows, Fenix thought, smiling at the irony. The SOL soldier that had fired the crossbow was working on cutting the lock off the

gate with bolt cutters.

On the eastern side of the forest, the other fire-teams came striding out, weapons up, moving in combat intervals. They were just shadows in the darkness. As soon as the gate was opened, the teams came together, flooding the property. They had made it halfway through the gardens before gunfire cracked from a third-story window.

“Find cover!” Horton yelled.

He didn’t need to tell the men. They were already fanning out and taking up cover behind hedges and brick walls.

“Bring in the trucks!” Fenix shouted.

The engines growled. More shots rang out from the porch as Redford’s men figured out what was happening. It wasn’t the way Fenix had planned on things going down, but they still had the numbers.

He took up position behind a brick wall, keeping his head low. The pickups and a Jeep pulled onto the road about a quarter mile behind them.

A shout came from his right, and he glanced over to see one of his men take two bullets to the chest. He hit the ground and squirmed for several seconds before going still.

All around Fenix, muzzle flashes lit up the night like drunk fireflies. A round chipped the brick overhead, and he got down to his belly. He crawled to the side of the ledge and peeked around the corner, counting six shooters behind the windows, and five more on the porch.

Another SOL soldier dove for cover next to Fenix before he could fire on any of the targets. It was John Stone, a thirty-year-old staff sergeant who had served under Fenix in Iraq, and he was bleeding bad.

“I’m hit, General,” Stone choked, gripping his gut.

Even in the weak light, Fenix could see the man wasn’t going to make it. Not without medical support.

“Hang in there, John,” Fenix said. Then he shouted, “Get the M240 up here!”

As if in answer, the big gun mounted to the back of the pickup truck barked. Tracer rounds streaked into the mansion, shattering brick and glass.

“Hell yes, that’s what I’m talking about,” Fenix said. He turned back to Stone. “We’re going to get you out of…” His words trailed off when he saw the man was already dead, his eyes staring up at the moon.

“Shit,” Fenix muttered. He propped up a leg and aimed his M4 over the wall at the porch. He squeezed off a barrage of automatic fire at one of the

enemy shooters.

God, it felt good to fire a gun again.

He held down the trigger, not caring about his ammunition. There was plenty of it, and from what Hacker said, there was a ton of brass and weapons in the basement of the mansion.

Fenix centered the barrel on the other muzzle flash, hitting his target with grim satisfaction. Taking the life of an enemy was one of the greatest feelings in the world. There was no rush of power quite like it.

The 7.62 mm rounds from the big gun on the truck slammed into the side of the house, punching through stone and brick, and shattering glass with cracks and thumps. The man on the big gun was an expert. He raked it back and forth, making the enemy on the porch run for cover while the other SOL soldiers picked them off.

Or, at least, the soldiers *should* have been picking them off. Fenix looked around him to see his men waiting for the M240 to do all the work.

“Fire!” Fenix shouted. “Everyone fucking fire!”

He came up on one knee again to lead by example. The automatic gunfire returned from all directions. The noise rose into a din that made his head hurt, but it was still music to his ears.

Fenix ejected another spent magazine, plucked one from his vest, and then continued firing. The overhang on the porch crashed to the ground, and a gutter fell away from the building. Hunks of broken stone pummeled the dirt and flowerbeds around the house.

A final muzzle flash came from the third-floor window. The man was a brave bastard, but stupid. Fenix aimed his rifle at the last guard—along with every other SOL soldier.

Hundreds of bullets hit the window all at once, shattering the frame and breaking away the brick exterior. The man toppled out, crashing to the porch below.

“Hold your fire!” someone yelled. It took another shouted order before the gunfire finally ceased.

Fenix watched the house for movement, moving his barrel across the façade and broken windows.

“That looks like all of ’em,” called a hoarse voice.

“Bring me Hacker,” Fenix replied. It took a few minutes, but Horton finally brought the man across the battlefield.

“Twelve to fifteen guards, my ass,” Fenix said.

Hacker didn't reply, and Fenix scrutinized him in the dim light. From the look of it, he was shivering. Fenix wasn't sure if it was from fear or the cold. If it wasn't the latter, then he had grossly underestimated the man. He scanned Hacker again, raised a nostril, and then handed the radio to him.

"Tell your boss to get out here," Fenix said, spitting in the dirt.

Hacker relayed the message as the SOL soldiers moved in. Fenix counted twenty soldiers, bringing their losses to just four from the fire-teams.

Not bad at all.

The men stopped beyond the porch, their rifles aimed at the front door. It creaked open a few minutes later, and a man wearing a suit stepped out holding a hat with a red feather. He put it on his head, and then gripped his shoulder.

He thinks I'm going to take him prisoner. That's why he threw on his suit and hat, Fenix thought.

"You got me, General!" Redford shouted. "You won."

Fenix left his position and slowly walked over, cautious but confident.

"Where's my cousin?" Redford asked, looking at Hacker.

Fenix stopped at the bottom of the steps. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a plastic bag containing Theo's eyeballs, which he then tossed onto the porch.

"This is what's left of him," Fenix said with a half shrug.

Redford looked down at the package, and then back at Fenix, his jaw clenched with rage.

"You really thought you could win this?" Fenix asked dryly. "You really thought you could beat the Sons of Liberty?"

He didn't wait for Redford to reply, and gestured for Hacker. The man moved forward and stood at the bottom of the steps. Redford's eyes widened in confusion before realization set in.

Fenix drew the .357 Magnum he'd taken from Theo and handed it to Hacker.

"Show me you really want to work for the Sons of Liberty, and finish this," Fenix said. Then he turned and walked away. Three beats later, a gunshot cracked behind him.

A smile broke across Fenix's face at the sound of Redford's body hitting the porch. Fenix stopped and walked back to the porch, realizing he had forgotten part of what he'd come to collect.

Walking up the stairs, he then bent down next to Redford's corpse and

plucked the hat off his head. Blood splatter had soiled the rim and he wiped it on the front of Redford's fancy suit.

Fenix stood and placed the hat on, smiling at his men. "What do you boys think?"

"I think the Sons of Liberty are back in business, sir," Horton said.

"Damn straight," Fenix said with a dip of his new souvenir.

***

Four days had passed since Charlize returned from Fort Lauderdale. Albert was already making gains in his recovery, and Dave and Ty had taken a real liking to one another. The restoration efforts were moving full steam ahead, with their NATO allies and the Chinese moving up the coasts and inland. Every day seemed to bring another new disaster. One of them was being reported by Captain Harris over the satellite phone.

"Yesterday, a Chinese supply convoy was hit by raiders on a road just west of Jacksonville," he said. "Two Chinese soldiers and a worker were killed. The American forces pushed the raiders back, and the Chinese showed remarkable restraint."

"That's good to hear," Charlize replied.

"Yes, but I'm not sure how much longer that will last. This is the second attack I've seen since the landing, and there are rumors about other attacks."

"I'm well aware," Charlize said. "So far we haven't had any reports of Chinese soldiers firing on civilians, but I'm guessing that will change soon."

"I hope not, but I agree that it's only a matter of time, ma'am. On another note, I've been assigned a liaison that reports directly to General Lin. I'm hoping to get more intel from him, but so far he's been pretty tight-lipped about things."

"Keep working," she said. "Is there anything else to report?"

"Yes, ma'am. As I'm sure you're aware, a Chinese container ship and an American ship collided in the harbor in New York. The Chinese vessel sank with over ten thousand pounds of medical supplies on board."

"I've seen the report," she said dryly. "These are the types of mistakes that costs lives, Captain. We can't afford for things like this to happen."

"I know, especially with the news coming out of SC 115 in New Jersey…"

"What news?"

“Cholera. There are several reported cases.”

Charlize cursed under her breath. She would need to give that information to Ellen Price shortly, assuming the Secretary of Health and Human Services didn’t already know. It was entirely possible she didn’t, though, considering how convoluted the communication network was.

“Is there anything else, Captain?” she asked.

“Negative, ma’am.”

“Keep up the good work, and stay safe.”

“Will do, and you too.”

She hung up the line, returned the phone, and walked back to the conference room for yet another briefing. Inside sat Lundy, Vice President Walter, Price, and General Thor, along with National Security Advisor Duane Ibsen. It looked like President Diego was still running late.

Charlize took her seat next to Price, and looked over to Colonel Raymond, who was standing in front of one of ten maps on moveable stands.

“Sorry about that,” Charlize said. “I had to take that call.”

“No problem,” Raymond said. “As I was saying, in region 1 we are making great strides.” He pointed at the orange block of the United States, representing Florida, Georgia, Alabama, and South Carolina. “Most of northern Florida past Orlando should have power restored by this time next month, if all goes to plan. But region 2 won’t be so fortunate.”

He moved over to the next board, with a map of North Carolina, Tennessee, Kentucky, Virginia, West Virginia, and Maryland.

“The ground burst in Washington, D.C. has caused devastation that we simply aren’t prepared to deal with. Between hundreds of miles of destroyed power lines, radiation contamination, and the surge from the EMP, we’ve got an environmental disaster that will take decades to remedy. And unfortunately, we don’t have a solution right now.”

“I thought we did have a solution,” said Walter.

Charlize looked at the vice president. He was still new to the job, but so was Charlize. Thus far, she wasn’t too impressed with the former Fortune 500 executive.

“There’s no solution to the environmental disaster, sir,” Raymond said.

“That’s not what I meant,” Walter said, heaving a sigh. He stood and made his way over to the maps. He pulled at his cufflinks before picking up the pointer. Then he traced a circle with the tip around D.C. on the region 2 map.

“This approximate area is to be fenced off and secured for the indefinite

future. Signage will be posted warning of the radiation poisoning. All recovery missions will cease. Anyone inside the zone is on their own now."

"We didn't agree to that last part," Charlize said. "I was told recovery missions would continue."

President Diego walked into the room and shut the door behind him. "Sorry I'm late," he said. When no one responded, he ran his fingers through his thick black hair, a nervous tick. "Okay, what did I miss?"

"We're talking about the radiation zone," Charlize said. "Vice President Walter—"

"I just told them we're blocking the area off and canceling recovery missions," Walter said, cutting Charlize off.

Diego looked to his second in command and then over to Charlize, nodding at her in confirmation.

"It's a matter of logistics, Secretary Montgomery," he said.

Charlize knew from experience that he only used her title when he knew she would be pissed. And she was really pissed. Albert had already accepted that his family was likely dead, but how was she supposed to tell him that the government was ceasing all recovery efforts? There had to be other people out there hunkered down and waiting for help.

"Listen, I know how it sounds, but we have to focus on the people we can still save. With that said, I will authorize missions on a case-by-case basis," Diego said.

It was something, but Charlize was still pretty disappointed in the president.

"Shall we continue?" Walter said, handing the pointer back to Raymond.

"By all means, sir," Charlize said.

Raymond waited for Diego and Walter to take seats, and then continued the briefing. They went through the other ten regions, one by one, going over estimated delivery dates for the grid restoration. Some would take months, but many would be much longer than that depending on resistance, weather, and violence.

"These are just estimates," Lundy cut in. "The variables Colonel Raymond just mentioned could lead to…issues beyond our control."

"But *most* of the country will have their lights back in a year," Raymond said.

"How does this change our casualty rate estimates?" Diego asked.

Lundy pulled out a piece of paper from his folder and placed it neatly in

front of him. He was a numbers guy, just like the president, which is probably why Diego liked him so much.

“Sir, we estimated about thirty percent of our population would perish in the first month after the blast. That estimate was a bit high, but from the data I’ve seen coming in from the SCs, it’s likely where we are headed. However, if we can continue moving supplies and restoring power, we should be able to bring down the final death count considerably.”

“If we can evacuate areas without power into areas with power,” Walter said. “That’s key.”

“Good,” Diego said. He grabbed his bottled water with his scarred hand and took a drink. “I’ve been in constant contact with the Chinese president, and he has promised they will continue supplying LPTs, equipment, workers, et cetera, until the job is done.”

He looked to Charlize. “Do you have anything to add about the current recovery efforts?”

“Yes, Mr. President.” She stood to address the room. “First off, SC 115 in New Jersey has reported several cases of cholera.”

“I’m aware, but I was only informed of that fact a few hours ago,” said Price. She didn’t ask where Charlize got the information, and Charlize didn’t volunteer it.

“The recovery efforts with the Chinese are going well for the most part, but another convoy was attacked yesterday,” Charlize said. “What I’m told is that the Chinese soldiers did not return fire despite two of their soldiers and one worker being killed.”

“General Lin isn’t happy about it, but he also understands this sort of thing is inevitable, especially as we cross into zones where people have had no contact with the government for the past month,” Diego said. “When they see Chinese troops, they panic and think we are being invaded.”

“Which is why I’m suggesting another air drop of pamphlets explaining what is going on,” Charlize said. “The SCs should also be broadcasting this information.”

“Make sure it happens,” Diego said.

“There’s also been a collision in the New York harbor,” Charlize added. “We lost an entire shipment of medical supplies. It’s a huge setback.”

“We’re dealing with that,” Diego said. He took another drink. “Is there anything else?”

Charlize shook her head. “No sir, that’s all I have for now.”

“I do have one more item.” Diego twisted in his chair and pointed to region 1. “Since we were on this topic earlier, I thought I would let you know I’m actively seeking a new home for the White House now that we’ve officially decided to seal off D.C.”

He turned back to Charlize.

“And since you are fond of road trips, I’d like you to scout out a few locations for me over the next few weeks. Right now, New York City is looking like one of the most promising places,” he said. “Perhaps Officer Randall will be able to accompany you?”

She gave the president a curt nod, but inside she was seething. He wanted her to go check out new locations for the White House when the country was bursting at the seams and barreling toward winter?

“Good, it’s settled then,” Diego said. “You’ll head to New York as soon as your schedule allows to find me a home for the White House.”

Charlize flipped her folder shut and stood. “Yes, sir.”

— 10 —

Almost a week had passed since Colton had returned from Fort Collins. The chief had warned Raven and everyone else in Estes Park to prepare for war, but the retaliation for Sheriff Thompson's death hadn't come. Fenix, Redford, and their other enemies hadn't shown up either.

Not yet, anyway.

Instead, a traveler named Robbie Cotter from southern Colorado had shown up at one of the roadblocks in Estes Park with other news—news about Nile Redford.

The report had rocked Raven to his core, and he'd raced to the station to talk to the man. Colton was already busy with his own questions.

Raven waited with his back to the wall, arms folded across his chest, trying to get a read on Robbie. The fifty-year-old man sat at a table facing Colton, his baldhead dipped low as he stroked his gray beard. He smelled like a mixture of body odor and grease, which told Raven he wasn't lying when he said he was a mechanic.

"So that's why you came here?" Colton asked. "For work?"

"Heard you guys were offering protection and food to people with skills like mine. I've worked on cars since I was old enough to hold a wrench."

"Okay, but explain to me why you name-dropped Nile Redford at our roadblock," Raven chimed in.

Robbie looked over. "'Cause I used to work on his cars, man, and he came back to Granby a few weeks ago bragging about how he stole a shit-ton of supplies from Estes Park. I figured you guys might want to know where those supplies are now."

Raven and Colton exchanged a quick glance.

"So you worked for Redford. Why did you leave?" Colton asked.

“I don’t like dealing with Nazis.”

“What?” Colton asked, leaning forward with his elbows on the table.

“Mr. Redford’s teamed up with some Nazis. I left as soon as I heard the news. Started walking north to find a new place to work, and a few refugees told me about Estes Park. I remembered the town from things I overheard Redford talking to his men about, including the raid of your stockpile.”

“Wait, back up,” Colton said. “Tell me more about the Nazis.”

Robbie shrugged. “Nazis, man. That’s all I heard.”

“Was one of them called General Fenix?” Raven asked.

Robbie shifted his gaze away from Colton to Raven.

“Phoenix?” Robbie said. “Like, Arizona?”

“Just answer the question,” Colton replied.

“Never heard of nobody called that. All I know is that Redford had captured some Nazis and then teamed up with the bastards, and that didn’t sit real well with me.” He reached into a pocket on his overalls and fished out a rolled-up smoke.

“You mind?” he asked.

Colton shook his head. Robbie lit the homemade cigarette with a match and took in a puff.

“So you got a job for me here or not?” he asked, exhaling through his nose.

“If your story adds up, maybe,” Colton said. He gestured for Raven to meet him in the hallway. Raven already knew what the chief was going to say, but he would have volunteered for the mission anyway.

“Let me scope it out, see if Redford is there with any SOL soldiers,” Raven said. “If they are, then two birds, one stone. Right, Chief?”

Colton brought a hand up to touch his swollen right eyelid. It had opened partially, but his face was still the color of ripe fruit.

“Look, I know we want those supplies from Fort Collins, but Redford’s got our stuff, too. It might make more sense to try and raid his compound than to hit Fort Collins.”

“I agree,” Colton said, to Raven’s surprise. “Take Dale with you.”

Raven perked up. “You serious?”

“Yeah. Take Dale and go tonight.” Colton held out his hand and gripped Raven’s arm, hard. “You see Redford or any Sons of Liberty, you don’t kill them, you got it? You’re only going on a recon mission to check this lead out. No violence. I need you and Dale alive.”

Raven wasn’t sure he could hold up his end of the deal. “I mean, if I see a

Nazi, I'm not sure I can help pulling the trigger."

"Promise me, or I won't authorize this mission," Colton said.

"Fine. Now, will you let go of my sleeve? It's getting wrinkled."

Colton smiled, or tried to, but his bruised face merely seemed to distort. Raven returned the smile and jogged out of the station.

That afternoon, Raven spent his time preparing for the road ahead. He and Dale loaded the Swag Wagon with cold weather gear just in case they got stranded. The most important piece of gear was the night vision goggles that would allow Raven to drive in the dark without headlights. On the way out of town, they stopped at the hospital where Raven pitched the mission to Sandra the same way Colton had pitched it to him—recon only.

"It's dangerous to leave Estes Park no matter what, Sam," she said. "Every time you go out there, I worry it'll be the last time I see you."

"I promise I'll be careful."

She gave him a hug, clearly too exhausted to argue. He kissed Creek goodbye and gave Allie a hug, and then drove south to the first roadblock, where Dale motioned for him to stop.

Sarah, the refugee girl, and her caretaker, Jennie, were both posted there with a dozen other people. Dale had taken a real liking to them. They were staying on his property to look after his livestock, but truth be told, Dale seemed happy to have the company regardless of the help. It was yet another reason Raven had changed his mind about the veteran. He'd proven that people could change. Hell, Raven had proved the same about himself. He hadn't taken a sip of alcohol for weeks.

Jennie stepped over to the passenger window with Sarah by her side.

"Can I come?" the young girl asked without so much as a hello.

Dale patted her on the top of her stocking cap. "Not this time, kiddo. You got chickens to look after."

He winked at Jennie.

I see how it is, Raven thought, realization setting in. Dale had a thing for Jennie. Raven relaxed in his seat, giving Dale time to say his goodbyes. To Raven's surprise, Sarah walked over to his side of the van.

"Hey, you never gave me anything," she said.

"Huh?" Raven said.

"Back at the police station, a few weeks ago, you said you had something for me."

"Oh, yeah." Raven sighed, and then fished a butterfly knife out of his

rucksack in the back seat.

“Holy shit,” she said when he handed it to her.

“Watch your language. And be very careful with that,” Dale said. He looked over at Raven and grumbled something about how it was a dumb idea.

“Don’t use that until I get back,” Dale told Sarah. He turned to Jennie. “Please make sure she doesn’t stab herself. Or anyone else.”

Jennie laughed. “I’ll try, Dale.”

“You ready to go?” Raven said.

“I’ll be back soon,” Dale told Jennie.

“Thanks for the cool knife,” Sarah said.

Dale shook his head, but beneath his beard he was smiling. Raven drove the vehicle through the center of the open barriers. Wind whistled through the open window, but no matter what Raven did, he couldn’t get the damn thing to roll up. At least it wasn’t snowing.

The glow of the sun slowly retreated over the terrain as they drove farther away from the secure borders of Estes Park. It didn’t take long before they hit the areas where hundreds of acres of forest had been reduced to ash.

“Holy shit,” Dale said. “You guys weren’t kidding. It really looks like the apocalypse out here.”

The endless view reminded Raven of the Sioux story about the end of the world, the same story he had shared with Nathan Sardetti. A moment of despair gripped him at the thought of the pilot, and Raven made a mental promise to Nathan that he would capture Shunka Sapa, the monstrous black dog in the Sioux story whom Raven believed was General Dan Fenix.

“I’ll find Shunka Sapa, and I’ll kill him,” Raven whispered to himself.

“What?” Dale asked, glancing over.

“Nothing.”

“Who the hell is Shunka Sapa? That one of your Indian gods?”

Raven scowled. He was not in the mood to give a lesson on folklore.

“Sorry, man, not trying to be offensive. Just curious. I don’t know much about the, uh, indigenous peoples.”

“We’re called American Indians. That’s the politically correct term, at least.”

“Sorry, I meant American Indians.”

Raven shrugged. “I don’t get my panties in a bunch about it, but it does piss me off when people don’t understand why it might be offensive to call us redskins. I don’t call you an albino skin, do I?”

Dale pulled off his hat, ran his hand through his hair, and sighed. “I get it, man. I’m sorry.” He checked the magazine in his AR-15 and then looked out the window, lapsing into silence.

By the time the sun went down, they had driven fifty miles without seeing a single person. Raven figured the radiation still had people scared, which was good. The less contact they had on this trip, the better.

He waited until the final rays of light receded on the horizon and then pulled to the side of the road to put on the night vision goggles. Once his eyes had adjusted to the green hue, he pulled back onto the road and continued south.

“We’re getting close,” Dale said. The map was draped over his lap, and he used a flashlight to check it every few minutes.

About five miles north of Granby, Raven finally saw a flicker of movement across the road. He brought the van to a stop behind an abandoned pickup truck and killed the engine. He grabbed his Glock, and Dale readied his rifle.

“What do you see?” Dale asked, leaning forward to look out the windshield.

Raven focused on the shapes moving along the shoulder of the road. “Horses and men.”

“They armed?”

“Can’t tell.”

Dale moved to open the van door, but Raven grabbed his arm.

“Just keep quiet and stay inside. They’re heading our way,” Raven said. He counted six men, and now he could see they were armed with rifles and shotguns.

Raven caught a glimpse of motion in the rearview mirror, and cursed when he saw more horses a quarter mile behind them.

“Shit, we’re trapped,” he said.

Dale looked over his shoulder and heaved a breath. “I can’t see anything.”

“Get down,” Raven said. He twisted the key to turn the van back on, but the engine whined, not turning over.

“You got to be fucking kidding me,” Dale said.

“Shut up, man.”

“Bro, don’t tell me to—”

Raven turned the key again, his eyes closed, pleading with the van. “Come on, baby.”

The starter clicked again but didn’t turn over. When he opened his eyes, the horses ahead were moving faster, and several voices rang out. The men had spotted the van.

“We’ve been made,” Raven said. He considered telling Dale to bail and making a run for it, but he decided to try the key a third time. It finally caught, and the engine growled to life. With no time to waste, he punched the pedal down to the floor. The tires squealed.

“Go, go, go!” Dale shouted.

Raven steered the van around the pickup and into the center of the two-lane highway. The horses were moving into the road to block their escape. Driving on the shoulder wasn’t an option; there was no way the tires were going to make it on an off-road trip. Times like these, he really missed his Jeep.

“Dale, roll down your window and shoot over the front of the hood,” Raven said. “Aim for the center of the road, at those horses!”

“You serious, man? I—”

The boom of a shotgun cut Dale off. Pellets punched through the windshield and peppered the back seat.

“Son of a bitch!” Dale shouted. He quickly rolled down the window and then leaned outside with the rifle, squeezing off several bursts at the horses.

Raven hated seeing the beasts hurt, but if it came down to his survival, he wasn’t going to die out here. He pushed down on the pedal as far as it would go and drove right for the horses. One of them bucked its rider out of the saddle like a rag doll.

At the last second, the other mounted shooters moved the horses away, but not before one of them fired a shotgun blast that punched through the side of the van.

Dale let out a cry, but Raven focused on maneuvering through the gap between the horses. The tires screeched and the rusty chassis clanked as they shot through the narrow pass.

Another shot followed them, taking out the back window and raining glass on the seats. Dale and Raven both ducked as two more booms sounded. Pellets lanced into the back of the truck, penetrating the rusty metal, but within minutes they were out of range.

Raven loosened his grip on the steering wheel, chest heaving. “You okay, Dale?”

Dale managed a nod, but his hand was gripping his shoulder.

“You hit?” Raven said.

“Just a flesh wound.”

“You sure?”

“I’m good. Trust me, I’ve been hit way worse before.”

Raven focused on the road, steering around abandoned vehicles, while Dale put a bandage on his shoulder. Several pellets had punctured his skin, but he was right that it was just a flesh wound.

“Who the hell were those guys?” Dale muttered.

“I didn’t get a look. Probably just raiders.” Raven glimpsed a sign for Granby and jerked his chin at the map on the floor.

Dale finished with the bandage and grabbed the map. “Looks like it’s the second exit, then you pull onto a frontage road and head east for a mile.”

Raven found the exit a few minutes later and turned onto a dirt frontage road. He could see the outline of Granby in the distance. The moon had emerged, splitting through the clouds and spreading soft white light over the sleeping city.

“Robbie said the house is somewhere on the other side of those woods,” Raven said. He parked the van and jumped out into the cold night, his boots crunching on the frozen dirt. He met Dale around the other side of the van, and they loaded up on gear and ammunition.

“You sure about this?” Raven asked.

Dale looked down at his shoulder. “Brother, I’m fine.”

Raven holstered his Glock and then grabbed his AR-15. “Follow me, and keep quiet.”

Raven flipped his night vision goggles back over his eyes and led Dale into the forest. The leaf-covered ground crunched under their boots no matter how slowly they moved. It was dead quiet out here, with not even the call of a bird to break the silence. Raven stopped every few minutes to listen, trying to identify any sounds out of the ordinary. He sniffed the air to check for smoke, and picked up the scent of a fire. Someone was definitely out there.

Flashing a hand signal, Raven continued onward with Dale walking cautiously through the forest behind him. The big man was doing a pretty good job of keeping his foot impacts low considering he only had moonlight to guide him.

Although Raven wished Creek was here, he was also anxious about bringing the dog anywhere again. He had taken a bullet for his handler, and seeing the Akita suffer broke Raven’s heart. Not that he would be happy if

Dale got shot again, but it was different. Creek was his best friend.

“There,” Dale whispered, pointing.

Raven saw the mansion a moment later. The building was situated on the shore of a lake, overlooking the sparkling water. At first scan, the property appeared empty. Not a single sentry in sight, but smoke was fingering away from one of the chimneys on the east side of the house. He moved toward the edge of the trees and crouched down. Dale joined him and took up position behind a pine.

“You see anyone?” he asked.

Raven shook his head. He got up and prepared to move, but froze. Flipping up the goggles, he laid eyes on what looked like the burning end of a cigarette.

“One contact,” he said quietly.

Lowering the goggles back over his eyes, he focused on the man sitting on the porch. The man got up a few minutes later, after throwing away the cigarette, and walked back inside.

“Come on,” Raven said.

He led Dale out into a clearing, and they made their way across the grass to a tall metal fence. About a quarter mile to the east, the front gate was wide open.

Mr. Redford would never leave the front door unlocked.

Raven crushed something under his boot. He reached down and plucked a spent shell casing off the ground. Then he saw the others. There were hundreds of spent rounds littered across the dirt.

A fight had gone down here.

He flipped his NVGs back over his eyes and examined the house. From this new vantage point, he could see it had been hit by thousands of rounds that had shattered windows, chipped the facade, and destroyed the overhang.

Not a fight at all.

A battle.

“What’s wrong?” Dale asked.

“We’re too late,” Raven said.

He did another quick scan of the property. In the gardens, he saw them.

Severed heads. At least a dozen, all mounted on pikes.

“Fucking hell,” Raven whispered.

“Dude, what?” Dale asked. “You’re freaking me out.”

“Stay here, and cover me if someone starts shooting,” Raven said. He took

off running before Dale could reply. Keeping low, Raven moved into the gardens, using the shrubbery for cover. He made his way over to the front porch and examined the heads. They were a grisly spectacle, but he didn't immediately recognize any of them.

He navigated his way onto the porch, seeing a glow of light coming from one of the rooms on the first floor. After he cleared the area, he moved to the back door, trying the handle.

Raven slung his rifle and slowly picked the lock with his knife. The door creaked open in front of him. He sheathed his knife, pulled both of his hatchets from his back, and moved into a dark kitchen.

Light bled into the room from under the door. He stopped to listen, hearing a rustling noise in the next room. He flipped the NVGs up and then reached for the door. It was ajar, and he slowly pushed it open to see a man warming his hands in front of a fire. A rifle was propped up against the wall.

Raven again stopped to listen, but all he heard was the crackle of burning wood. He moved for a better view, and noticed the swastika on the man's neck. This wasn't one of Redford's men.

As soon as he saw this guy was a Nazi, Raven kicked the door open and then tossed both of the hatchets. One of the blades hit the man in the back with a thump, and the other struck him in the right leg. He grabbed the fireplace mantle, screaming in agony. The sounds didn't draw any other hostiles, but Raven unslung his rifle and raised it just in case the man wasn't alone.

The Nazi thug dropped to the ground. Raven waited for a few seconds, gaze flitting back and forth from the stairs to the man who was trying to crawl away.

Hearing nothing but groans, Raven followed the trail of blood streaking across the expensive carpet. He bent down next to the man, who turned on his side to look at Raven.

"What did you do with Redford?" Raven asked.

The man chuckled up bloody bubbles. His eyes flitted up toward the wall, and Raven pivoted to see a collection of mounted trophies. An elk, an eight-point buck, and several other kills. But there was something else there, something that was out of place.

Raven took a step over just to make sure he was seeing clearly in the faint light of the fire. He swallowed as his brain finally confirmed what his eyes were seeing.

A bloody human head hung among the hunting trophies.
This one, he recognized.
It belonged to Nile Redford.

— 11 —

Albert Randall was doing his best not to eavesdrop on the conversation between Charlize and Colonel Raymond, but he found it hard to ignore.

“Secretary Montgomery, I just got another report of an attack that has SOL written all over it,” Raymond said. “Fenix and his men are active, ma’am.”

Albert stood outside her office door with Dave and Ty, all of them waiting for Charlize to finish some last-minute work before she left Constellation for another trip.

Albert loosened his flak jacket while he waited. The vest was a better fit than the one from Charlotte. This time it covered his stomach where the bullet had ripped through his abdomen and torn up his insides. After three weeks of recovery, he was finally back on his feet with a new mission. His injuries were still hurting, but he was glad to be out of that hospital bed.

“I really want to come with you, Mr. Big Al,” Dave said, pulling on Albert’s sleeve. “You promised the Fellowship wasn’t over.”

Albert put a finger to his lips and strained to listen to the conversation inside the office.

“How do we know it was SOL?” Charlize was asking.

“Swastikas carved at the scene and some very brazen anti-Chinese graffiti,” Raymond replied. “It’s got to be SOL, unless there are more Nazi groups in Colorado.”

Albert didn’t want the kids to hear this. He grabbed the back of Ty’s wheelchair and pushed him away. Dave followed them across the hallway, still talking about hobbits.

“I won’t be gone long,” Albert said. “Then I’ll come back, and—”

Dave shook his shaggy hair. “No!” he shouted.

Several personnel walking down the hallway glanced in their direction.

Albert let out a sigh and got down on one knee, pain racing up his gut. He gritted his teeth. The doctors had told him certain movements were still going to hurt, and they were right, as usual.

"See, you can't go without me, you're still in pain from the last Orc. This time the Orcs might kill you, Mr. Big Al." Dave blinked rapidly, his eyes shining with frustrated tears. "You need me."

"I'll be fine. You have to be strong and look after the people here while I'm gone. That's your mission now." Albert put a hand on Dave's shoulder.

A single tear fled the boy's eye and streaked down his cheek. He looked down at his tennis shoes, his small potbelly rising up and down with his labored breathing.

"Okay?" Albert asked.

"Yeah, okay," Dave whispered.

"We'll have fun," Ty said.

"And I'll bring you back a DVD of *Lord of the Rings*," Albert said.

Dave looked up with the hint of a smile forming on his lips. "Promise?"

"Promise."

Albert stood and walked over to the office door. Charlize and Raymond were still deep in discussion. He caught her eye, and tapped on his watch to indicate it was time to go. Charlize nodded back. He was already late, and if she didn't hurry, she was going to be as well.

"Every time we send out a team, Fenix and his men are gone before we can get there," Raymond said.

"I don't want to risk another American life until we know for certain that it's SOL," Charlize said. "Let's talk more on the flight."

Albert could hear the frustration rising in her voice, but she held it in check. It had been two months since the North Korean attack, and over a month since her brother had been brought home in a casket from Colorado. Her fuse had been growing shorter as the guilt piled up on her shoulders. But, she had recently changed her approach, saving her anger for the people who had kidnapped Ty and killed her brother instead of venting it at every little frustration.

Two weeks ago, she had confessed to Albert how powerless and angry she felt. "I'd kill every single one of them if I could," she had said.

"With all due respect, ma'am, of course you would. They're Nazis," Albert had replied. "I would give my life to stop them too. This isn't just about your son. It's about stamping out a terrorist organization before the virus spreads."

She had nodded along, but Albert could tell he wasn't really getting through to her. He worried that Charlize was after revenge, not justice.

"Okay, let's go," Charlize said as she stepped out of her office and hugged Ty goodbye. Albert held out a hand to Dave.

"Give me a high-five, buddy," Albert said.

Dave rolled his eyes, then slapped Albert's hand so hard the smack echoed.

"That hurt," Albert said.

Dave grinned from ear to ear. "Oops."

"You guys done?" Charlize asked, smiling.

Albert stiffened. "Yes, ma'am."

Dave followed his lead, straightening his back and throwing up a salute.

A few minutes later, the kids were sent back to class, and Albert was following Charlize and Raymond toward the elevator. It took them another fifteen minutes to get to the surface through the labyrinth of tunnels, lifts, and trams that made up Constellation.

A dozen Green Berets, led by Sergeant Fugate, were waiting for them outside the blast doors. Breaking up into two groups, they took Zodiacs to the opposite shore. Thirty minutes later, they arrived at an isolated airfield on the mainland.

An armored MATV was idling on the nearby road. Albert took a second to admire it as he walked with the group toward the helicopter landing pad. The mine-resistant vehicle was the American military's answer to the epidemic of roadside IEDs in Iraq and Afghanistan. It had replaced the Humvee in most combat zones, and seeing it in the United States reminded Albert of just how severe it was out on the highways. And he was about to head out there to see it firsthand. Again.

"There's our ride, ma'am," Raymond said. He pointed at the sky, where a tiny black dot was crossing the skyline.

Charlize turned to face Albert. "You're sure about this?" she asked.

"Yes, ma'am." His response was polite, but firm. "I'm sick of lying in that bed or walking those halls. And between you and me, Dave is getting on my nerves."

Charlize smiled. It was odd seeing the sun on her face after so long underground, and he noticed a few new wrinkles. They had both lost so much over the last few months.

Just thinking of his wife and daughters hurt him worse than any bullet. Jane had been the light of his life, and his girls, Kylie and Abigail, had been

full of so much potential that would now never be realized. It broke his heart—and, if he was being honest, it made him crave revenge at least as much as Charlize did. His brother, Fred, had also perished in the blast that leveled D.C., so the only family left was his sister. And, once again, he was leaving her behind.

"Don't put yourself in danger on this trip," Charlize said. "I just want you there to make sure Captain Harris is doing his job, and to report back anything I need to know."

"Understood, ma'am," he said.

The chop of the big black bird made it difficult to hear as it descended over the airfield. Charlize waved goodbye, and they parted once again, with Albert hurrying over to the MATV and Charlize heading toward the helicopter. By the time he reached the truck, the chopper was already in the air.

The driver's door to the truck popped open and a friendly face emerged.

"Corporal Van Dyke," Albert said. "It's real good to see you again."

Van Dyke stroked his mustache and grinned. "Officer Randall, you're late. Go figure."

"Sorry. I was saying goodbye to Secretary Montgomery."

Van Dyke brought a hand to shield his eyes as he looked at the sky. "Damn, that bird has Montgomery on it?"

"That's right."

"Where she headed?"

"D.C., and then New York, for meetings."

Van Dyke lowered his hand and gave Albert an incredulous look. "Shit man, why is she going to D.C.?"

"I'll tell you on the drive. Come on," Albert said. He carried his rucksack and M4 over to the truck and placed them inside. Then he hopped in the passenger seat.

Van Dyke put his seatbelt on with a click and looked over. "I'd much rather be driving the lawless highways than flying to Washington, to be honest. From what I hear, the radiation zone is hell on earth."

Albert watched the helicopter vanish over the horizon. He had heard there were no more recovery efforts inside the radiation zone, and while he was sure his family was gone, he was glad he wasn't going out there with Charlize. He didn't want to see the place where his family had perished.

They were nothing but ashes and memories now.

***

Charlize had dreamt of this moment, but the devastation below was nothing like her nightmares.

It was far worse.

“My God,” Raymond said over the comms system.

The six Green Berets in the troop hadn’t said a word throughout the flight, but they were all looking out the portholes with awestruck expressions on their hard faces.

Below, the fires had almost all ceased, but fingers of smoke still inched across the heavy sky hanging over the destroyed city. Charlize spotted the Potomac River in the distance, and glimpsed the epicenter of the blast. The nuclear detonation appeared to have changed the course of the river. From there, the fireball had spread in a circle, flattening everything for almost a mile. The destruction continued in all directions, and even at two miles away from the epicenter, buildings were nothing but husks.

The original plan had been to survey the area outside of the city, where the military had constructed fences to keep civilians out of the radiation zone. But Charlize had wanted to see ground zero.

She *needed* to see it.

The chopper continued toward the crater, providing a remarkable view of the blast zone. Buildings, parks, and streets had been completely erased. Everything was charcoaled and melted from the extreme heat.

The pilots circled the epicenter until Charlize had seen enough.

“Okay,” she said, waving them onward.

The bird changed course, heading away from ground zero and out toward an area she had once called home. But all the landmarks she remembered were gone. The Washington Monument, Capitol Hill, the White House…

She squinted at what was once 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue.

“Take us lower,” Charlize ordered.

The pilots obeyed the order without trepidation, lowering the craft so Charlize could get a better view. The Green Berets continued to watch, but remained silent, not one of them discussing the horrific sight until a young man with freckles and peach fuzz for a mustache pointed and asked, “Is that what I think it is?”

Somehow, despite all odds, the White House had survived. Although *survive* perhaps wasn’t the best way to describe it. The front had collapsed,

and the white façade was burned black like an overcooked marshmallow. Twisted metal surrounded the perimeter, and flipped cars littered the streets. She had been pulled out of this place by a chopper the morning after the attack. The area looked very different now. The fires were out, and all she saw was an endless junkyard of roasted metal and ashes. Diego was right about one thing: anyone within the blast zone was long since dead.

"Seen enough?" Raymond asked.

Charlize nodded. "Take us back to the perimeter."

The pilots changed course again, and Charlize closed her eyes, taking in a deep breath of air that tasted like smoke. A few minutes later, her eyes flipped open at the sound of a voice over the comms channel.

"I think I see something moving down there."

The pilot had forgotten to shut off the main channel. Either that, or he wanted Charlize to hear. The Marines scrambled across the troop hold for a look out the windows.

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"Thought I saw something back there," he replied, using a jerk of his thumb behind them. Charlize turned to look out the window, but saw nothing stir in the radioactive wasteland.

"What did you see, Captain?" she asked, curiously.

"I… I think I saw a person."

The reply chilled Charlize to the core. Was that possible? Could the pilot really have seen someone alive down there?

If there were people this far into the blast zone, then it changed everything she had heard about recovery efforts in the area.

"Go back," she said.

Raymond frowned, showing a rare hint of emotion. "Ma'am, I would highly recommend—" he began to say when she cut him off.

"We're going back." The pilots hesitated, and she added, "That's an order."

Turning sharply, the bird curved back toward the White House. She twisted again to look out the window. The Green Berets were all looking out the windows too.

"There," said one of the pilots. "Three o'clock."

Charlize and Raymond both unbuckled their harnesses and moved over for a better view out the windows next to Sergeant Fugate.

"Looks like a person to me," said the other pilot. "Two, actually."

Charlize couldn’t believe it when she saw the two figures trekking down the middle of the ash-covered street. They were dressed in white outfits, and for a moment she thought they must be ghosts.

The people crouched behind the heat-warped hull of a vehicle and looked up at the chopper.

“It looks like they are wearing hazard suits,” Raymond said.

Charlize studied the two figures as the helicopter circled. “Are they ours? Military, maybe?”

Raymond frowned. “I doubt it. We stopped looking for survivors here a week after the attack.”

The figures lifted their arms. Charlize thought they might be signaling for help until one of the pilots yelled, “Hold on!”

The flash of a muzzle came from the street as the two men in suits fired rifles at the bird. Several of the Green Berets moved over to surround Charlize and protect her with their armored bodies.

“Get us the hell out of here!” Raymond shouted.

The bird rolled hard to the right and then pulled back into the sky, leaving the mysterious men. Charlize tried to look out the windows, but she was surrounded by camouflage uniforms. She listened for the distant crack of gunfire, but couldn’t hear anything over the thump of rotors and the blood pulsing in her ears.

Several agonizing seconds later, one of the pilots confirmed they were clear. The Green Berets slowly backed away from Charlize.

“Are you okay, ma’am?” asked the boy with the peach fuzz—Staff Sergeant Thoreau, according to his nametag.

“I’m fine, Staff Sergeant. Thank you,” she replied.

“Who the hell were those guys, and what were they doing out there?” Fugate asked.

Raymond shook his head. “No idea.”

“They could have been looters,” Thoreau said.

“Report this to Command,” Raymond told the pilots.

“Roger that, sir.”

Charlize settled back into her seat and looked out her window, but there was no sign of other survivors. Only the black landscape. Two weeks after the blast, there had been stories of survivors stumbling out of the radiation zone, suffering from horrific burns and radiation poisoning. She had been one of them, but she was lucky enough to have had the medical support she’d

needed to recover.

She closed her eyes and tried to relax for the next leg of the journey. She dozed off, and was awoken sometime later by a hand on her shoulder.

“Ma’am, we’re almost here,” Raymond said.

Charlize looked out the window at a skyline she had loved her entire life. On the horizon, New York’s familiar buildings rose proudly into the sky. The metropolis had mostly been spared from the radioactive fallout, thanks to the winds after the blast. It was one of the few major cities in the entire country that hadn’t completely fallen into anarchy. Part of that had to do with the fact that the New York Police Department was a small army in itself with over fifty thousand men and women employees, thirty thousand of them in uniform.

On top of that, the ports had allowed aid from foreign countries to come in and help with the recovery. She glimpsed the piers in the Hudson River and thought back to the North Korean submarine they had stopped from attacking New York. It was hard to imagine what that sub would have done if they hadn’t blown it out of the water.

Now, two months after the bombs, New York was starting to recover. But that didn’t mean the city was safe. Far from it. Many areas were warzones. That’s why she had brought the Green Berets with her again.

Unlike her trips to Charlotte and Fort Lauderdale, though, she wasn’t here just to work on the recovery efforts. She was here to meet with the Chinese delegation to discuss the progress of getting the power back on, to listen to a speech at the United Nations, and to help select the new seat of the federal government.

There was a lot to accomplish in a short amount of time, and she was already late. The pilots began the descent and Charlize exhaled, ready for the challenges ahead.

***

Colton rode Obsidian down the center of Main Street, watching as the line of civilians wrapped in heavy coats inched along the sidewalk. Their destination was the Italian restaurant on the river, which the owners had retrofitted into a soup kitchen. The stew there was helping to feed over ten thousand residents, but there were only so many elk and rabbits in Rocky Mountain National

Park to hunt. He just hoped the game would sustain his town until the government could finally get the power back on and things started to return to normal.

Normal, he thought. *Yeah, right.*

It was only November. They still had another four months of cold, and at least six months until the power came back on, if Colton had to guess. Every night he listened to the radio about the recovery efforts, and it sounded like the Chinese were helping get the grid back up faster than originally thought.

Until power came back in Estes Park, though, he had no choice but to rule with an iron fist. He couldn't trust Gail Andrews or her staff anymore. Not after what happened with Don Aragon and Sam Hines.

Thinking of the patrol sergeant made him furious, but he still couldn't quite believe Hines had joined Don in the plot to kill Lindsey and Raven.

Colton had thought Hines to be a good man. At one point he had thought the same of Don, but the end of the world had brought out their true natures.

He shook his head and looked over at one of the few people he could trust—Lindsey Plymouth. Colton had just promoted her to captain, filling the role left vacant by the death of Jake Englewood. Colton had even considered making Raven a sergeant, but he wasn't interested in titles, apparently.

Never thought I'd trust Sam. Now I'm trying to give him a badge.

Motion ahead showed Colton even more how much things had changed in Estes Park. A dozen militia soldiers rounded the next corner, all of them carrying rifles and shotguns. Half of these people were refugees, and all of them were working hard to protect the town.

Colton gave Dale Jackson, the leader of the group, a wave. Dale winced as he raised a hand back. He was still recovering from an infection to his shoulder where he had been shot on the mission to find their stolen supplies.

With Nile and Thompson dead, Estes Park had checked off two enemies from the list. But Fenix and other men like him were still out there. The war Colton feared was still a real possibility. They had been lucky the past three weeks to avoid further violence, but the reports of the chaos coming in over the radio had him concerned.

Lindsey was talking to Colton, but he drowned her out, his mind a mess of thoughts. The storm of violence sweeping across the United States—and the presence of the Chinese soldiers—had him on edge. Even with the foreign aid, the country was bordering on collapse, and men like Fenix were doing everything they could to take advantage of the situation.

“Have you been listening to a damn thing I’ve been saying?” Lindsey asked.

Colton nodded like he’d heard every word.

“Chief? What’s the last thing I said?”

“Yup.”

She let out a huff.

“I’m sorry, was just thinking,” he said.

“You been doing a lot of that lately. Ever since you got back from Fort Collins.”

“You sound like my wife,” Colton said gruffly.

“Anyways. I was explaining how many people I’ve got posted out there today. I doubled some of the patrols, and set up a schedule of volunteer spotters so that every point of entry to town is watched.”

“Good. We need the additional security on our borders.”

“You said to prepare for war.”

He was quiet for another moment, and then said, “I’m hoping it doesn’t come to that.”

Obsidian suddenly halted and let out a snort.

Willow stopped too and shook her head from side to side. Lindsey patted the mare’s neck gently. “Easy, girl, easy.”

“Something’s got them spooked,” Colton said.

A rumble sounded in the distance, and Colton and Lindsey both twisted in their saddles to look east, toward Lake Estes.

“What is that?” Lindsey asked.

Colton knew right away. “A plane,” he replied.

Everyone on the streets stopped what they were doing to look at the sky as a massive airliner zoomed through the gray clouds. It was low enough that Colton could see it wasn’t one of theirs. The white aircraft had Chinese markings on the side.

The raucous sound made people put their hands over their ears. It passed overhead, low enough that some frightened citizens ran for cover. Colton held the reins tight just in case Obsidian tried to bolt. But, aside from pacing, the horse stayed put.

The plane turned sharply, moving southeast toward Denver, and vanished back into the clouds. Colton watched the sky, hoping to see supply crates parachuting toward them, but nothing came.

The rumble faded away, and the citizens all around gathered in groups to

talk. Several of them shouted questions.

“What the heck was that about, Chief?” someone asked.

“Was that a Chinese plane?” another person said.

“Are we really being invaded?” came another voice.

“Everything’s fine,” Colton said.

“What’s that?” someone yelled.

Colton followed the woman’s finger down the street, to where sheets of white paper were fluttering over the road like oversized snowflakes. He gave Obsidian a nudge, and the horse took off. Willow and Lindsey followed. When they got to the center of the street, Colton dismounted. His boots hit the asphalt, and he plucked a piece of paper off the ground.

To the residents of Loveland, Estes Park, Fort Collins, Greely… the list of towns went on and on. He continued reading past the names.

The United States military and FEMA are working hard with the Chinese government to get the power back on. We estimate that this could take anywhere from one to two years in your area. Until then, please remember to tune in to the emergency broadcast channel for updates and tips on rationing food, water, and medical supplies. Good luck.

“Good luck,” Colton said, rolling up the paper into a ball and tossing it onto the ground.

Lindsey stared at the sheet of paper in her own hand. “One to two years?”

Colton kicked the balled-up flyer away and turned to look at the hundreds of people wandering away from the soup kitchen line to see what was going on. The last thing he wanted was for these people to see the timeframe.

“Help me keep ’em back,” he said to Lindsey.

“Everyone back to the soup line!” she shouted.

Colton walked toward the crowd, hands up, trying to keep his voice low. He stopped mid-stride when he saw a kid holding up one of the pieces of paper.

“I found something!” he yelled.

A man grabbed it from the kid’s hand.

“Read it,” someone said.

“What’s it say?” another person asked.

Colton cursed as the man read it aloud. Dozens of faces suddenly looked in his direction, and then came the bombardment of questions.

“Guess our luck’s run out,” Colton said to Lindsey. Two months already seemed like an eternity. He couldn’t imagine another two years without

power, but, somehow, he would have to convince these people that things weren’t as dire as they seemed.

— 12 —

Raven kicked at the frozen dirt. The roar of the plane had scared off his chase—an eight-point buck he'd been tracking for the past hour. Hell, the damn thing had probably frightened every animal within a twenty-mile radius. And while he was pissed, he was also curious about the plane. The craft had vanished into the clouds before he got a good look at what model it was, but it had sounded large.

"Just my damn luck," he whispered.

Raven slung his crossbow over his back and yanked his facemask down. He pulled the walkie-talkie from his vest and whistled for Creek. The dog came bounding around a tree a few minutes later, tail wagging.

This was their first hunt since the unsuccessful execution on Storm Mountain, and the Akita was clearly thrilled to get back on the trail. Raven could hardly keep the dog calm on the ride here earlier. But no matter how happy Creek was to be outside, his energy level was not back to normal. He wasn't the only one; Raven was suffering from a cold, a headache, and a growling stomach.

Every step he took made him consider throwing in the towel for today's hunt. Considering how much he had prepped for this one—the traditional cold water dips, the fasting, the prayers—he didn't want to just give up. But his first priority was the town, and he needed to get back there if something was wrong.

He raised the radio to see what was going on. "Colton, this is Raven. Do you copy? Over."

The crackle of the static echoed through the cold forest.

"Copy," Colton said a few minutes later.

"Yeah…uh, what the hell was that plane doing up here?" Raven asked.

“Dropping info.”

Raven stopped mid-stride. “What kind of info?”

“About the power. Sounds like we’re pretty low on the totem pole in terms of getting back on.”

Raven sneered. He hated the “totem pole” cliché.

“Should I come back?” he asked.

“It can wait. Finish your hunt. Food is the most important thing right now, especially since it’s going to take…”

Static crackled from the radio and he held it into the air to get a better signal.

“What was that?” Raven asked. “Chief?”

“I’ll talk to you later,” Colton said.

“Roger that.”

Raven tucked the walkie-talkie back into his vest and filled his lungs with icy air. He had to keep focused and strong. It was the only way he was going to come back with a kill today—and from the sounds of it, that was pretty important.

He signaled for Creek to follow, and continued into the woods. Fasting the previous day hadn’t been a good idea, especially being sick, but it was Cherokee tradition to fast before a hunt. Raven reached out to put a glove on the coarse bark of a tree, his headache suddenly beating his skull so hard he squinted from the pain. It felt like someone was hitting him every other second with a mallet. The cold was worse because of another Cherokee tradition—dipping in freezing water the two nights before a hunt.

He had to be careful after everything he had been through, from gunshot and knife wounds to nearly being blown up. The last thing he wanted to take him down was a freaking runny nose. Raven could picture his tombstone now:

Sam “Raven” Spears.

Died of a cold.

Raising his crossbow, he kept pushing through the woods. Snow fluttered down around him, coating the dirt and leaves in a layer of powder. It was heavy enough to cover any recent tracks. The snow didn’t just cover tracks—it also disguised traps in the ground, places where Raven could twist an ankle or slip and fall. He picked each step carefully, knowing an injury could take him out of commission.

Creek had his muzzle down toward the ground, sniffing for a scent. Raven

picked up the pace to follow. He pushed his stocking cap up above his ears and listened for prey as he moved, trying to pick up the crack of a twig or the rustle of movement. The woods were quiet for mid-afternoon. Aside from the chirp of a few birds and the whistle of the wind, he heard nothing.

Cold air carrying the scent of cedar filled his lungs. He exhaled and flexed his muscles, then relaxed them to keep the blood flowing. He wiggled his toes and fingers every ten minutes. Cramping was also a concern, although he had been drinking plenty of water. It was the one thing Estes Park had in abundance.

He ducked under the branch of an aspen tree and crouched next to the trunk of a towering ponderosa to scan a clearing. *Light as a feather*, Raven reminded himself. He sure felt like light, having lost over twenty pounds since the bombs.

Creek came back into view, sniffing the ground as he zigzagged up a hill. His back went rigid, and he glanced over his shoulders at Raven. The dog had a scent.

Raven nodded, and Creek took off toward the hill. In seconds, the dog had ascended the slope and vanished over the other side. It took Raven much longer. He trekked up slowly, his muscles straining. Snow fluttered around him, and he stopped to rest and take in the view. To the west, the mountain peaks rose on the horizon like jagged, bleached teeth. A twig crunched behind Raven, and he turned to scan the fence of aspen trees.

Nothing moved in the white landscape.

He tightened his muscles again before relaxing them, willing his legs to continue up the hill. Using his calves, he pushed upward, carefully selecting each step between the trees growing out of the steep incline. Near the top, he one-handed his crossbow and used the other to grab the wide trunk of a Douglas fir. He hefted himself up to the crest and stopped to rest again.

Standing in the open allowed the gusting wind to cut into his body. Even with multiple layers, the cold found its way into his coat. He pulled his stocking cap back down over his ears, making the sounds all around him muffled. Stars floated across his vision from straining his way up the hill. He leaned on the tree and closed his eyes.

When he opened them again, the stars were gone but he was still light-headed. Another twig snapped in the distance, and Raven quickly brought his crossbow up. His eyes flitted left and right over the terrain, searching for whatever was making the sound. A squirrel suddenly raced up the bark of a

ponderosa, snow falling off the disturbed branches.

Raven forced air out of his stuffy nose, but that just made his sinuses burn. He got out the binoculars and turned to look over the valley carved through the forest below. A stream meandered through a field on the east side of woods. The elk came here to drink, but today he didn't see a single one of the beasts. Most of them had retreated deeper into Rocky Mountain National Park, and hunting parties were being forced to trek farther and farther to find food. Predatory animals were starving from their food source being killed off, driving them to desperation. Several dogs in town had been dragged off by coyotes. Raven wasn't too worried about Creek, but anyone with one of those yippy little dogs was keeping them inside, just to be safe.

He saw movement along the edge of the forest, where the trees met the meadows, and spotted his Akita. Creek was still following the scent. Now that was a real dog. You shouldn't be able to put a dog in a handbag.

"Good, boy," Raven said. He raised the binos and glassed the valley, dividing it into thirds and scanning the canvas by looking left to right, and then back again.

A flash of white moved near the stream. He held the binos steady. But what he saw wasn't the eight-point buck he was looking for, or even an elk. Instead, a pair of translucent figures was standing at the edge of the trees.

Raven closed his eyes, but when he opened them again, the apparitions were still there. His heart pounded at the sight, even though he knew they weren't real. They couldn't be.

He vividly remembered the dream of Jistu the trickster rabbit, the Thunderer storm spirit, and the humanoid children with faces of adults called Yunwi Tsunsdi'. But the two men standing below weren't Yunwi Tsunsdi', and Raven wasn't dreaming. He finally recognized them as Nunnehi warriors—spirit hunters. The two men stood there watching Raven, bows at their sides, draped in skins and furs.

You've really lost it now, Sam.

He whistled, and Creek halted in the meadow below, glancing up at Raven with a rabbit in his maw. At least the dog had caught his chase. The Nunnehi warriors were walking along the river now, paying no attention to the dog. Normally the spirit race was invisible, but they showed themselves to humans they liked, and would show up to help during a hunt.

So why the hell were they raising bows at him?

Raven remained frozen, staring. They were just a figment of his

imagination, a product of his pounding headache. But he couldn't help but flinch when they fired translucent arrows that curved overhead.

Something slammed into Raven from behind a beat later, knocking his crossbow from his hands. He hit the ground hard, the air bursting from his lungs. As soon as he sucked in a gasp, a blade slashed his leg. The air came right back out in an animalistic holler of pain.

A growl replied.

Raven rolled onto his back and looked up into the majestic face of a mountain lion. The elusive creatures normally avoided humans, but men like Raven had taken so many elk that the beast was starving. Yellow eyes locked onto his neck, and black lips parted to reveal yellow, dagger-like teeth as the beast went for his jugular vein.

Everything seemed to freeze in that moment. He could see the saliva dripping from the creature's maw as it bent down, and watched the fur stretch as the beast flexed its muscles.

He grabbed the creature by the neck and pushed as hard as he could, screaming in a war cry. Hot breath hit Raven's face as the mountain lion fought him, its head just inches from his own.

Raven caught a glimpse of the translucent arrows sticking out of the tree behind the beast. It was then he realized the Nunnehi hadn't been aiming for him. They were warning him of the mountain lion. Raven hadn't been the hunter—he had been the mountain lion's chase all along.

"Creek!" Raven shouted. He pushed harder at the creature's neck, and then used his left hand to hit it in the side of the head. The beast growled, and he screamed back, doing his best to show the mountain lion he wasn't going out without a fight.

Raven bit at the creature's leg and tore out a hunk of flesh and fur. The beast let out a roar of its own and then swiped Raven's stocking cap off with a paw. He reached for his buck knife, pulled it from the sheath, and slashed at the big cat's white muzzle.

The creature let out another roar, hot blood peppering Raven's face. It reared back, giving Raven an opportunity. He went to jam the knife into the exposed chest, but a paw hit him in the face, slicing his cheek.

Barking sounded in the distance. Creek was coming.

The mountain lion looked up, blood dripping from its maw and yellow eyes focusing on the Akita. It leapt off Raven and bolted toward Creek.

You have to get up, Sam.

Red swarmed Raven's vision as he pushed at the ground, bringing himself to his knees just as Creek and the mountain lion slammed into one another.

Creek was badass, but he was no match for the beast, especially with just one eye and wounds that still weren't fully healed. Raven searched the ground for his knife, but saw his crossbow instead. He crawled over and grabbed the crossbow, bringing it up and trying to focus on a target. But all he saw was a mass of white and tawny fur.

"Creek, watch out!" he yelled.

His vision cleared just long enough to see that the mountain lion had Creek on his back. Raven pulled the trigger.

A yelp sounded.

Raven blinked over and over, his heart pounding like an automatic rifle. He dropped the crossbow and scrambled over the ground on all fours, his hand finding his knife as he moved. He picked up the blade and then pushed himself up, stumbling over to see a massive lump of fur and twisted limbs.

An arrow stuck out of the center of the mass.

"Creek!" Raven shouted. He bent down and saw that the arrow was embedded in the mountain lion's back. It had collapsed onto Creek, pinning the dog to the snow.

Raven pushed the beast off his best friend, and Creek slowly got up on all fours. He wagged his tail and licked at Raven's hand.

"Thank God you're okay, boy."

He wiped the blood from his face and then crouched down to examine Creek's wounds. They weren't bad at first glance, just a slash on his back. That was good, but he was afraid to look at his own injuries. His leg hurt, and his back felt numb, which was a very bad sign.

But they were alive, and that was all that mattered. They weren't coming back empty-handed either. Raven looked at the dead mountain lion and the rabbit lying a few feet away, wondering how they would taste in stew.

"What do you think, Creek? Cat-rabbit stew for dinner?" He chuckled, although his words weren't particularly funny. Raven's head swam, and his vision blurred once more.

His legs suddenly felt numb too, and he fell to his knees. A moment later Raven collapsed to the ground, his face hitting the cold snow.

"Oh shit," he muttered when he saw the Nunnehi warriors at the top of the hill. And they were talking now, too.

"My name is Snake, and this is Badger," said the man on the left. "You

have to get up, Raven. You can't give up, or you will die here."

Creek whined, clearly concerned for his handler.

"Go get help, boy," Raven managed to whisper before the world started spinning.

***

Fenix pulled the cigar out of his mouth and moved over to the rocky edge of the bluff, where he took a knee next to his second in command. The highway in the valley below was covered in a fresh layer of snow that coated the abandoned cars like vanilla frosting. Nothing stirred in the still landscape.

But that was all about to change.

Two miles to the west, an American and Chinese convoy of highway clearers steamrolled down the road. They were right on time.

Fenix raised his M4 scope to his eye and centered it on a pair of trucks at the front. Mounted blades slammed vehicles into the ditches, clearing a path for a convoy containing industrial equipment and supplies for the survival centers. He counted three tan Humvees behind the lead trucks, and three white Chinese pickups packed full of soldiers following the Humvees. Behind those were four semi-trailers carrying supplies to the survival center outside of Denver. Another two American Humvees followed the trailers.

"Pretty light," Fenix whispered. That was good. It drastically reduced the chance of losing a soldier on this raid.

Over the past month, the Sons of Liberty had rebuilt their small army after losing so many of their brothers, first at the Castle, and then the camp where Fenix had been in hiding. Sergeant Horton's divisions, especially their squads of special ops soldiers, had been key in making this comeback.

Fenix turned to look at those men. They called themselves the Brandenburger Commandos, an homage to the elite Nazi soldiers. There were twelve of them up here on the bluff, all wearing camouflaged clothing and carrying automatic rifles.

"Remember what I told you," Fenix said. "We're the resistance now. Our government has betrayed us. The Sons of Liberty are the only thing standing between the foreign invaders and those of us that are still pure."

A dozen hands went up in the air in a Nazi salute. The men then moved into position to set up their weapons. Fenix turned back to the view of the

road. Two more fire teams were dug in with rifles and explosives on either side of the bridge below.

They were well-equipped for this battle, but they didn't have what they needed yet to fight the coming Civil War. That's what made today's raid so important. The semi-trailers at the end of the convoy weren't just carrying boxes of MREs and cans of Dinty Moore beef stew. One of them contained weapons. Heavy weapons he could use to escalate these small raids into very damaging attacks against the traitorous American military and their Chinese allies. Eventually, he would be able to take the fight to the survival centers, and then, after raising a massive army, he could take back the country from President Diego and his bitch, Secretary Montgomery.

Bringing his scope up, Fenix zoomed in and centered his sights on the two trucks at the front of the convoy. The blades slammed into abandoned cars, sending them skidding into the ditch. Snow puffed into the sky, raining down on the vehicles behind the trucks.

He moved his sights to the bridge right below their vantage point. There were dozens of vehicles littering the road between the convoy and the bridge, but it wouldn't take long before the trucks reached it.

Fenix continued scanning the area, pausing where he had seen his men dig in. They had done a hell of a job camouflaging their position. He couldn't see them, but he knew they were there.

"Get ready," Horton said, holding up a balled fist.

The other men were all in position now. A dozen rifle barrels followed the approaching trucks. Fenix centered his sights on the first three Humvees. They were National Guard trucks. The fucking traitors were going to be the first to die. Then he would work on the Chinese, saving them for last. He would show the yellow skins what happened to those that set foot on American soil.

The screech of metal on metal pulled him back to the road, where the two tractors leading the vehicles continued to slam cars aside. They were almost to the bridge, with only about a dozen more vehicles to clear. Horton kept his hand in the air, and Fenix gripped the stock of his weapon tighter, anxious to open fire.

Part of him was hoping for a fight, or at least some resistance, although he had a feeling this was going to be a lot like shooting fish in a barrel. He really wasn't worried about getting hit up here. His only concern was getting out before the Americans or the Chinese sent in reinforcements. Choppers would

do a number on his team, but by the time they got here, he would be long gone. Now, if the military sent jets or Chinese fighters, that was another story. It was much harder to hit a fighter jet with an RPG.

The thought sent a tingle through his nerves. His muscles tightened, and adrenaline emptied into his bloodstream. He inched his finger toward the trigger, keeping the Humvees in his sights.

The tractors continued toward the bridge, smoke bursting from their exhaust pipes. The blades crunched into metal, sending another pair of vehicles into the ditch. When they got to the bridge, they did exactly what Fenix was hoping for. The truck on the left slammed into a car that skidded across the icy road. It hit the guardrail while the truck on the right plowed into a pickup. The result was a jam of five vehicles clogging the center of the bridge.

The convoy slowed to a crawl behind the tractors.

A massive explosion suddenly rocked the center Humvee, sending the truck five feet into the air in a fireball. It came crashing back to the ground, tires blowing out when it landed.

“Give ’em, hell!” Fenix shouted as Horton dropped his hand, signaling the Sons of Liberty to fire.

Gunfire lanced away from the cliff, slamming into the other two Humvees. Another explosion blasted the bed of a Chinese pickup truck. The vehicle came crashing down onto the bed of the next truck.

Chinese and American soldiers piled out of the surviving vehicles and ran for cover. But there was nowhere to go. Another fire-team of SOL soldiers was waiting on the opposite side of the road. They were already standing to fire shouldered weapons at the men, riddling bodies with bullets.

Several of the smarter Chinese and American soldiers dove under vehicles. Fenix aimed for one of the Humvees, where two grunts had taken refuge. He emptied his magazine into the side of the vehicle, pushing helmets down.

As he changed his spent mag, he checked the bridge, where his other team was moving in toward the stranded tractors. The one on the right was attempting to back up, but gunfire peppered the windshield, splattering blood on the shattered glass.

Fenix slammed a fresh magazine home and then directed his barrel at the remaining truck. Holding down the trigger, he painted the passenger door with bullets. The driver continued to reverse across the bridge, heading toward the burning Humvees.

“Don’t let them escape!” Horton shouted.

“Give me the RPG!” Fenix yelled back.

Horton picked the weapon up out of the snow and handed it to Fenix. Hefting the launcher onto his shoulder, he lined up the sights on the truck. A squeeze of the trigger fired a rocket-propelled grenade that streaked toward the vehicle and hit the road to the right of the driver’s door. The explosion slammed into the side of the cab with such force it knocked the entire truck on its side.

“Nice shot, General,” Horton said.

He ignored the sergeant and picked his rifle back up, already searching for his next target. This was fun. Another five minutes of gunfire finished off the convoy. Fenix aimed his rifle at the semi-trailers at the end of the line, where the drivers had jumped ship and taken off down the road.

Gunfire cut the four men down before they could get away.

The noise faded, leaving only the sporadic crack.

“That’s the last of ’em,” Horton said. He stood for a better view of the road, and Fenix moved to the edge of the bluff. Smoke drifted across the winter wasteland, and flames ate at the burned hulls of the destroyed trucks.

Shouting came from the road, and Fenix zoomed in on a trio of his soldiers approaching a pickup truck, where some of the surviving Chinese soldiers were hiding. One of the SOL men lobbed a grenade under the truck, and the three men retreated into the ditch.

A Chinese soldier crawled out when the explosion rammed the truck. The gas tank went up a second later, creating a massive gout of flame and a plume of smoke. Fenix laughed, but then went silent when he saw a burning Chinese soldier running out of the smoke cloud and away from the destruction. Hands waving in the air, he bolted for the ditch.

Horton aimed, but Fenix reached out and pushed his barrel down.

“Let him burn,” Fenix said. “Send in the clean-up crew. It’s on to phase two.”

“You got it, sir.” Horton relayed the order over the walkie-talkies, and the fire teams began moving below, weapons aimed at the remaining vehicles. From the looks of it, they hadn’t lost a single man.

The crack of gunfire a moment later changed that.

Two SOL soldiers dropped to the road, blood splattering the snow. Fenix brought up his rifle and searched for the shooter. He shouted, “Eyes? Who has—”

Gunfire peppered the side of a truck before he could finish his sentence. He zoomed in on a helmeted head under the truck, the bloody face gone slack in the snow.

Fenix lowered his rifle, grinning. Served the son of a bitch right.

“Move in!” he yelled.

Six of his men jogged toward the trucks. He watched them round up several surviving American soldiers and then surround another truck where two Chinese soldiers surrendered their QBZ-95 rifles. They crawled out from under the back and held their hands in the air.

Fenix eyed their black rifles on the ground, and then scrutinized their blue camo uniforms and matching helmets. This wasn’t the first time he had seen them up close, but each time it was still a shock to see the foreign fucks on American soil.

He joined his men on the road and scanned the sky. There was no sign of choppers or fighter jets, but they would have to move quickly to avoid any reinforcements. The distant growl of diesel engines sounded, but those were just the SOL trucks that had been waiting for the ambush to conclude. The pickups stopped near the semi-trailers and men jumped out, preparing to fill them with supplies from the convoy.

Fenix walked toward the two National Guardsmen and two Chinese soldiers. They were on their knees in the center of the road, hands bound behind their backs with zip ties.

Fenix strode past them. He would deal with them soon.

“Jackpot!” someone shouted from the semi-trailers.

Fenix made his way to the back of the truck, grinning from ear to ear at the sight of their biggest score yet. Crates upon crates of ammo were stacked neatly inside. Two soldiers were already going through the crates as Fenix and Horton approached.

“Got M240s, RPGs, and some SAWs, but that’s not all,” one of the men said.

Looking over his shoulder, Horton flashed a rare smile at Fenix. “Christmas has come early, sir. Looks like we got ourselves mortars!”

Fenix looked inside the truck and examined the weapons with trepidation. The tubes were Chinese-built Type 87 mortars, a battalion-level weapon with a decent range.

“What the hell are they doing with these bad boys?” Fenix muttered to himself.

“More evidence the Chinese are here to conquer and not help. What else would they need mortars for?” Horton said.

Fenix ordered his other men to continue unloading the weapons, and motioned for Horton to follow him. They walked back to the prisoners, and Fenix drew his .357 Magnum.

The two Americans looked up at him, and his gun, their eyes pleading for mercy. Both men were young, maybe in their late twenties. One was a staff sergeant, and the other was a corporal. Both were blond with blue eyes—good Aryan features.

Fenix couldn’t tell how old the Chinese men were because they had their heads lowered at the road and hands behind their backs.

That was good. They knew their place.

“It’s your lucky day,” Fenix said. He wondered if the Chinese soldiers spoke English, but decided he didn’t care. He aimed the .357 at their helmets and pulled the trigger twice, blowing their brains onto the pavement.

“As for you two,” Fenix said to the American soldiers, “you get to live.”

The staff sergeant vomited in the snow, but the corporal just kept staring at Fenix, rage in his eyes. He ignored the man, holstered the pistol, and walked away. He flashed a hand signal to the men at the end of the convoy.

A shout stopped him as he made his way toward the getaway vehicles.

“You’re that Nazi prick, aren’t you?”

Fenix pivoted back to the corporal. He stalked over to the prisoner and bent down to check the man’s name. Mark Sussex.

“I’m General Dan Fenix,” he said, scowling. “And now that you know who I am, I guess it’s not your lucky day after all.”

In a swift motion, he drew his pistol, jammed the barrel against Sussex’s forehead, and pulled the trigger. Blood splattered over the road and Fenix stood with a sigh. The staff sergeant screamed and rolled away. He began squirming toward the ditch, his hands still bound behind his back.

Fenix shook his head. “Just when I try to be nice, people have to be pricks. Sorry, staff sergeant.” He aimed and pulled the trigger three times, shooting the man in the back. Then he opened the cylinder of the revolver and dumped the empty cartridges.

Horton stood glaring at him, and Fenix looked up as he reloaded.

“You got a problem, Sergeant?”

A quick shake of Horton’s head. “No sir.”

“Then get your ass moving. We have to get out of here before

reinforcements come," Fenix said. "And remember, make it look like someone else did this. We can't afford to keep painting swastikas on shit, or the military might decide to send more troops out this way."

He snapped the cylinder shut and watched as his men loaded the pickup trucks with the new weapons and ammunition. War was swiftly approaching, and now they had the tools to fight it. It was time to water the Tree of Liberty with blood.

— 13 —

Teddy’s release from the Estes Park hospital should have been a joyous occasion for Sandra. Instead, she was worried sick about her brother. She was trying to keep it together for Teddy and Allie, but Raven had been missing for several hours.

She held the boy’s hand as she walked him out of his room and down the hallway. Allie carried Teddy’s belongings, including his stuffed animals.

“Where is Creek?” Allie asked.

Sandra couldn’t reply. Her heart was beating so hard she couldn’t speak. Raven and Creek had failed to show up at the checkpoint where Dale was supposed to pick them up, and Colton didn’t have the resources to send out a search party this second. He also didn’t think it was necessary—yet.

Still, Sandra’s intuition told her something was wrong. Her brother didn’t get lost. Plus, he had been under the weather the past few days. She had tried to talk him out of the hunt but he wouldn’t listen, which was typical for Raven. Stubborn as always.

Sandra opened the door to the lobby and led the kids out into the waiting area. This was Teddy’s first taste of freedom in months. He let out a happy sigh, and Sandra smiled.

Outside the glass windows, the sun was setting over the Rocky Mountains. The temperatures would plummet soon, and she didn’t want to think about what would happen if Raven didn’t make it back before then. While he could usually take care of himself, if he was injured or worse…no, she couldn’t think about that.

Two figures emerged in the parking lot outside, distracting Sandra from her worries. She loosened her grip on Teddy’s hand as his parents, Marie and Michael, approached the building.

“Don’t forget to come visit,” she said. “Not here, of course, but at Raven’s house. I’m pretty sure you won’t want to come back here for a while, right?”

“No ma’am,” he said, looking up at her. Then he glanced over to Allie and raised his stump before lowering it, his cheeks firing red. Sandra had seen him do this a few times as he got used to the phantom feelings from the missing limb. He gave Allie a quick hug with his other arm. She giggled and smiled.

Sandra waved at Marie and Michael Brown as they walked in. “Teddy’s all ready to go,” she said.

Marie cupped her hands over her face to hide her tears. She lowered her hands and reached out to hug Sandra. “Thank you for everything you’ve done, Miss Spears.”

Michael reached out to shake Sandra’s hand after his wife pulled away. “We can’t thank you enough,” he added.

“You have a very brave son,” Sandra said. “He’s a fighter.”

Allie walked over to the doors, looking at something in the parking lot.

“Mom,” she whispered.

“One second, sweetie,” Sandra replied.

She continued going over the medicines they were sending home with Teddy as his parents listened intently. “He needs to take two of these a day, and then one of these before bed. It will help keep any infection from coming back.”

“Anything else we should be doing?” Marie asked.

“He still needs plenty of rest and good nutrition to help support his immune system. I’ve spoken to Raven and the chief about extra vegetable rations for him.”

“Mom,” Allie said again. Sandra looked over at her daughter and saw Allie pointing out the window.

“Is that Creek?” her daughter asked.

Sandra’s heart pounded at the sight of the dog. He was limping across the parking lot, blood staining his fur. She waited for Raven to stumble into view, but the Akita was alone.

***

Charlize looked out the window of her hotel room as the sun crested the

horizon, spreading its light over Lower Manhattan. Flakes fluttered from the sky, adding to the foot of snow that already covered New York. Several Chinese snowplows were already clearing the area below, but as for the rest of the city, the residents were out of luck.

Her thirtieth-floor hotel room provided quite the view of the city. A few people were already on the streets, but the only traffic she saw were vehicles shipped in from other countries or old clunkers that had survived the EMP blast.

It looked odd seeing the streets so empty. Although New York was one of the few major cities that hadn't fallen into complete anarchy there were still large pockets of lawlessness and several boroughs that were war zones. Even in the relatively calm areas, like Lower Manhattan, things were far from normal. Most residents hadn't gone to work in two months, and were relying on food and water from the numerous survival centers set up across the city.

Rising above the skyline was a beacon of hope—One World Trade Center. At seventeen hundred seventy-six feet, it was one of the tallest buildings in the world. The number wasn't a coincidence, either. It represented the date of the Declaration of Independence. Seeing the building watching over the city reminded her that Americans never gave up. When terrorists knocked down the Twin Towers, they were rebuilt, bigger and better than before.

Part of her mission today was to find a place to relocate the White House to. Maybe she was looking at it now. The building was a fortress, and housed the FEMA offices. It was in a good strategic location, too, which made it a top choice on her growing list.

She finished getting dressed, putting on a pair of black slacks and a plain button-down shirt. Throwing on a coat, she then headed into the hallway, where two Marines were posted. She followed them down to the lobby. Colonel Raymond was already there, waiting with a cup of steaming coffee.

"Thank you, Colonel," she said with heartfelt gratitude.

"No problem." He handed her the cup carefully, and said, "Did you get some rest last night, ma'am?"

"A little."

She didn't bother saying her room was freezing. Raymond had spent the night in the same hotel, and the rooms were all cold despite the generator that turned on every few hours to power the furnace. They walked outside, where it was even colder. Two green Humvees were waiting, and the Green Berets accompanying her on this trip all piled in. She got into the second vehicle

with Sergeant Fugate and Colonel Raymond.

“United Nations building,” Raymond told the driver.

The trucks set off, growling toward a roadblock guarded by more soldiers and several police officers. She was anxious to see the rest of the city, and to hear updates on the recovery process.

The first view of that progress came as the convoy set out and rounded the next corner. Several Chinese electrical trucks were installing one of the new large power transformers. The men were all dressed in white coats and wore blue helmets. A small group of Chinese soldiers patrolled the area with machine guns. It was the first time she had seen a crew this close, and something about the Chinese workers and their soldier counterparts gave her the chills. Maybe that was just the freezing temperatures. Either way, she pulled her coat collar up around her neck.

At the next intersection, two NYPD officers stood on the sidewalk. One of them approached the lead vehicle in her convoy and held up a hand. Charlize drank her coffee as the officer spoke to the soldiers in the vehicle. The man quickly waved them onward.

The officers were just two of the hundreds she had seen on the streets so far. An impressive percentage of the men and women in blue had remained on the job after the attacks. While other cities had major problems with desertion, the NYPD had stepped up to the plate.

On the next street, another crew of Chinese workers came into view. This time they were handing out food and blankets from a truck. They were definitely helping save lives, yet reports were continuing to trickle in about attacks on the supply convoys across the United States. She had just heard about another one from Captain Harris the previous day. She wondered how Harris and Albert were doing.

“We’re here,” Raymond said.

The trucks pulled up in front of the United Nations building. Flags representing dozens of countries whipped in the wind. Charlize stepped out into the snowy street, and followed her entourage to the entrance of the building. The lobby was surprisingly warm, and a handful of staff were waiting to greet her.

“Welcome to the United Nations, Secretary Montgomery. I’m Linda Watts. If you’d please follow me, I’ll take you to the assembly area.”

Raised voices speaking in Mandarin rang out in the distance, and Linda looked over her shoulder with a frown. “They have been arguing for a while

now," she whispered.

The group stopped outside the assembly room, and Linda opened one of the doors to peek in. She then gestured for Charlize and Raymond to enter. They stepped into a chamber ringed with seats looking over a central platform and podium.

General Lin was already inside, yelling at one of his subordinates. The younger officer threw up a salute and then hurried off, passing Charlize, Linda, and Raymond on the way out.

"Ah, Secretary Montgomery," Lin said. "You're early, but this is good. We have much to speak about before the meeting starts. We just got some very bad news."

Charlize walked down the steps and joined Lin at a table on the bottom floor. He gestured for her to sit, but she declined.

"I'd prefer to stand. Thank you, General."

"Very well." He clasped his hands behind his back and pivoted away to look up at the American flag hanging from the wall. "This morning I was informed that three convoys were hit in the past twenty-four hours. One in Washington, one in Oregon, and one in Colorado."

He continued staring at the flag without turning to face her.

"When President Diego agreed to this deal, he promised me we would not have problems like this, but I have lost two hundred soldiers and over a dozen vehicles. This is unacceptable. I have been forced to give the order for my troops to protect themselves at all costs. They will no longer hold their fire when they are attacked."

Charlize swallowed hard. She had known this moment was coming, but now that it was here, she struggled to find the right words.

"While these attacks are regrettable, I would highly recommend not authorizing any sort of violence against Americans. I cannot agree to allow your fighter jets to engage civilians. While I understand your soldiers on the ground need to protect themselves, I must have your word that you won't drop a single bomb or launch a single missile."

Lin scrutinized Charlize for a moment. "I promised President Diego that I would do everything in my power to prevent bloodshed, but if these attacks continue, I will be forced to use air support on these…" He paused to think, and then added, "*Insurgents*, I believe is the word you call them?"

***

Van Dyke sucked on a cigarette. It was cold, and Albert pulled his coat up around his neck and one-handed his gun so he could flex his other hand. Even with his gloves and heavy boots, his extremities were starting to go numb as they walked alongside a long line of train cars packed with transformers, electrical equipment, and supplies.

Chinese workers dressed in white uniforms and blue helmets jogged past them toward the staging area about a quarter mile away, where heavy-duty trucks were being unloaded. American troops surrounded the zone with several armored trucks, including the MATV Van Dyke had been assigned. Twenty American soldiers stood guard, outnumbered ten to one by the Chinese soldiers.

Albert didn't like the ratio, but so far he had to admit the men had been easy to work with. Those that knew English were courteous and polite. The workers especially seemed happy to be here. It was the American citizens that were causing the problems. The airdrops and information the SCs were handing out hadn't calmed the people, who persisted in regarding the Chinese as invaders, not aid workers.

Charlotte, North Carolina, was especially bad. Albert hadn't wanted to return here after his last visit, but it had been the next stop on their list. He looked toward downtown as smoke rose into the sky. The gangs had completely taken over the city.

"Fuckers are still out there," Van Dyke said, following Albert's gaze.

"I'm sorry?" Albert said, not quite following.

"The assholes that killed Sergeant Flint. I'm still hoping Command sends us back in there with some real firepower. Just need a dozen good men, and we'll show the Latin Kings and MS-13 what we're made of."

Albert understood why Van Dyke wanted revenge, but their job was to be Secretary Montgomery's eyes and ears, not go off on some bloodlust mission to kill the gangs that had attacked them the last time they were here.

As a group of Chinese workers passed by, Van Dyke blew a cloud of smoke at them. One of the men turned and glared.

"Watch it!" he said in perfect English.

"What?" Van Dyke said defensively.

"Corporal, chill," Albert said.

Another worker pulled his friend away while Albert yanked Van Dyke

back.

“What’s that all about?” Albert asked.

Van Dyke shrugged, took another puff, and watched the men walk away. He had a major chip on his shoulder today, and it was being directed at the aid workers. He flicked his cigarette on the ground and stomped it out below his boot.

“Come on, man, we’re late,” Van Dyke said.

Captain Harris was at the front of the staging area with his counterpart, a Chinese Captain named Tuan Cao. FEMA was onsite too, along with local and state officials. In a little over an hour, the National Guard had set up an Emergency Operations Center that would help coordinate the movement of these supplies to the people that needed them.

“Van Dyke!” shouted a voice. “Where the hell have you been?”

“Sorry, Captain,” Van Dyke said. He jogged toward Harris, who had emerged from the FEMA tent.

“Need your help with something,” Harris said. He gave Albert a once-over and said, “Not you, though, Officer Randall. I promised Secretary Montgomery I’d keep you safe.”

“Sir, I’m here to help,” Albert protested.

“I know.” Harris sighed. “Just follow me, guys.”

They ducked below the flaps of the FEMA tent and into a room lit by large lamps. A generator provided the electricity here. Albert took off his gloves to warm his hands as he stood in front of a table that sported a map of Charlotte.

Harris waited for Captain Cao to join them. He walked in a few minutes later and nodded politely. Harris cut right to the chase.

“Since losing the survival center, the city has been in chaos. Our job is to restore order before the crews can move in and begin getting the power back on. We won’t be here long, however, as my mission is to continue with General Lin’s convoy.”

“Is there really a train like this in every major city?” Van Dyke asked.

“Just on the coasts,” Cao said. “We will work our way west in a few months to start restoring power to the other regions. FEMA and the military will be evacuating people to the regions with restored power.”

“Poor bastards,” Van Dyke said.

Cao looked at him quizzically.

“I meant the people in the Midwest,” Van Dyke clarified.

“Ah,” Cao said. “They will not be completely on their own. We have a

fleet of ships heading up the Mississippi river to deliver supplies and generators, but most of our efforts are focused on moving inward from the coasts.

"So what's this mission you got for me and my boys, sir?" Van Dyke asked Harris.

"We need you to accompany the Chinese soldiers to take back the streets from the gangs. General Lin and President Diego have authorized a joint effort to go after enemies of the state."

"Enemies of the state?" Albert asked.

"Gangs, raiders, Nazis," Harris said.

A smile formed on Van Dyke's face. "I thought you'd never ask, sir."

"Careful what you wish for," Harris replied. His gaze flitted to Albert. "Before you say anything, you're not going."

Albert nodded again. He'd been out there once, and that was enough for him. Revenge wasn't his cup of tea, anyway. He just wanted to do a good job and then get back to his sister, Ty, and Charlize.

"You sure?" Van Dyke asked. "Randall is good in a fight."

Harris scratched his chin and glanced at Albert. "Will you give us a second?"

Albert tried to ignore the dressing down Harris handed to Van Dyke. Cao followed him and stood beside Albert outside the tent.

"So you are a police officer?" Cao asked.

Albert nodded. "Capitol police."

"You protect important people." He smiled. "I do that too."

"Yeah?" Albert turned slightly to examine the other man. He was in his mid-thirties, maybe a bit older, with a mustache and short cropped hair under his helmet.

"I was a police officer most of my career," Cao explained. "But a few years ago I got this calling to join the army. I wanted to protect more than just my city. I wanted to protect my country. I am glad I did. Now I get to help protect yours, too."

Albert was slightly taken back at the soldier's story. For the past few weeks, he had doubted the Chinese were really here to help. He still wasn't sure what to think, but hearing things like this made him optimistic that things would get better.

Van Dyke stepped out of the tent a moment later. "You ready, Cao?" he asked.

Cao dipped his helmet at Albert and then followed Van Dyke away from the tent.

“Catch ya’ later, Big Al,” Van Dyke called over his shoulder.

Albert raised a hand to wave goodbye when a gunshot rang out. At first, everyone froze. But when the next shot came, they all hit the dirt, knowing this wasn’t some random potshot. Albert dove for cover behind a bulldozer and brought his gun up to search for the source of the fire.

A Chinese worker dropped to his knees a few feet away, hands clamped around his neck, eyes wide with fear. Blood trickled from between his fingers as he slumped over. It was the same man Van Dyke had exchanged words with fifteen minutes earlier.

Albert crawled next to the edge of bulldozer blade and saw several riflemen approaching along the tracks to the west, firing at the Chinese workers, who were running for cover. More gunfire came from the east, and Albert twisted to see a Hispanic man with a shotgun running into the staging area. He was close enough to see the Latin Kings symbol tattooed on his arms.

The man fired the shotgun point-blank at an American soldier, and then let out a scream as he turned the gun at one of the Humvees. Bullets lanced into his body, jerking him back and forth before he finally went down.

More gangbangers ran into the staging area from the buildings at the edge of the tracks, shouting and firing weapons. This wasn’t just a few raiders: this was a small army. Van Dyke and company didn’t need to go out to find the bastards that had killed Sergeant Flint after all. The gang was already here.

“Not today,” Albert said. He got on one knee and aimed his M4 at the men on the tracks. A squeeze of the trigger sent a burst of 5.56 mm rounds downrange. They went wide, and he refocused his aim. This time, the bullets clipped the neck of a man wearing a hoodie. He stumbled away, and Albert roved the barrel to the next target. Someone took cover next to him, and he twisted to see Van Dyke.

“Shit, shit, shit,” the corporal muttered as he jammed a new magazine into his rifle. “They’re everywhere!”

The mounted M240s barked to life. Albert snuck a glance around the bulldozer blade. The gunners in the Humvees were raking the big guns back and forth at buildings to the south, where more of the thugs were trying to flank the staging area. Chinese soldiers joined the fight, firing at the raiders.

Albert focused his fire on the men running down the train tracks. Several

of them had opened one of the cars. He watched as they climbed inside and then began tossing boxes out.

“There,” Albert said, pointing.

Van Dyke stood, fearless, holding the trigger down and painting the train car with bullets. Several rounds ricocheted off, but two found a target. A thin man in sweatpants and a matching sweatshirt fell out of the open car door and hit the ground. Three of his friends took off running, one of them holding a box.

The M240s died down in the background, and the automatic gunfire ceased a few minutes later. The fight was already over.

“Hold your fire!” Captain Harris shouted. He stood in the middle of the staging area with his rifle cradled.

That’s when Albert saw the bodies. He lowered his rifle in shock. Four workers and several Chinese soldiers, as well as three Americans, lay in the dirt, blood pooling around their corpses.

“Medic!” someone shouted.

Albert turned back to the tracks and raised his rifle at the escaping hostiles, anger raging through his veins. He and Van Dyke stood side by side and aimed at the thugs. A few trigger pulls took down the three men, leaving the box of supplies on the tracks near their dead bodies.

Van Dyke spat on the ground and then yelled, “That’s right, you rats!”

Pained screaming came from all directions in the respite of gunfire. Albert moved back into the staging area to see if there was anyone he could help, while Van Dyke stood yelling profanities.

— 14 —

Colton threw the Volkswagen into gear and peeled out of the hospital parking lot. Creek looked up from the floor, shivering from the cold.

"It's okay, boy," Sandra said. She sat in the passenger seat fishing out supplies from a medical bag on her lap to help Creek.

Colton was more worried about her than the dog. Tears welled in her eyes, and her hands were shaking.

"Those teeth marks?" Colton asked.

"Looks like it," Sandra confirmed.

"Probably one of those damn coyotes."

"You think a coyote attacked my brother?"

"I don't know, but we're going to find out," Colton said. He steered onto Highway 34, heading west into Rocky Mountain National Park. The area where Dale had dropped Raven off wasn't far, just a few miles off Trail Ridge Road. There was only one roadblock out this way, and he barely stopped when he got there.

Creek yelped as Sandra put ointment on his wounds.

"He going to be okay?" Colton asked.

"He might need stitches when we get him back to the hospital."

The damn dog has been through a lot, but he's tough. Almost as tough as his handler. He looked to the alluvial fan turnoff and remembered the night of the attack. The memory sent a chill up his spine. He suddenly felt certain something bad had happened to Raven. The man was an expert tracker, so how could a coyote get a drop on him and Creek? That simply didn't make any sense.

Colton spotted the red Chevy pickup on the side of the road. Dale was already here. He pulled over. Sandra finished putting the bandage over

Creek's back, and opened the door.

"Show us where Sam is," she said.

Creek jumped out and took off. Flashlight beams flitted through the forest to the east of the road, and Colton set off with his rifle. He took in a breath, picking up the scent of smoke. It could be from one of the cabins out here. They had assigned several refugees to the old Forest Service cabins, but it could also be a fire Raven had built for himself.

"Dale!" Colton shouted. "Dale, can you hear me?"

There was no response.

"Stay close to me," Colton instructed Sandra. He handed her a flashlight.

The lights penetrated the inky black and flitted over the spindly trees making up the winter wasteland.

They hiked for fifteen minutes, keeping quiet and listening for Creek. The dog had long since vanished into the forest, but he barked somewhere up ahead. The scent of burning wood grew stronger as they made their way deeper into the woods. Colton was hesitant to raise his light to the sky to check for smoke. If someone had attacked Raven, he didn't want to draw their attention. He cursed himself for shouting earlier. He wasn't thinking properly.

The bitter cold slowed Colton and Sandra down. She was wearing a coat, gloves, and stocking cap, but didn't have proper gear on to be out here for an extended period of time. Colton wasn't faring much better, if he was honest.

Fifteen more minutes into the hike, Colton saw the glow of a fire. It was faint, nothing more than a dot of orange in the woods. Sandra saw it, too, and she gasped.

"Is that him?" she asked.

A bark sounded, as if in reply.

"Let's go!" Colton said.

Sandra followed him through the woods toward the light. Dale was already there, hunched down to rebuild the fire. Lying curled in a fetal position near his feet was Raven. Creek nudged him with his muzzle, but Raven wasn't moving.

"Raven!" Sandra shouted, running over with her medical pack.

Colton slowed on the approach, raking his light over what looked like a gruesome scene. Crimson crisscrossed the ground in splatter marks. He focused his beam on the source of the blood.

Not a Coyote after all.

A mountain lion was sprawled in the snow, an arrow sticking out of its back.

***

Raven heard distant voices, but he couldn’t make them out. He was cold. Freezing. But he was also paralyzed, unable to control his body.

He looked ahead at the two Nunnehi warriors. They were still tracking the eight-point buck. They stalked the beast through the woods, the sun shining on their half-naked bodies.

It was a dream, Raven realized, but he couldn’t seem to wake up.

He followed the two warriors, Snake and Badger, as they moved silently through the forest. A spring breeze rustled the trees around them. Despite the warm weather, his body felt cold, like he was in a snowstorm.

His eyes flitted to the dirt ahead, where he saw deer tracks.

They were fresh.

Snake and Badger both stopped near a clearing ahead. They turned and raised their hands at him, signaling for him to continue.

Raven pulled an arrow from the quiver slung over his back. A meadow of purple and blue wild flowers waited just beyond the warriors. Mountains with snow-painted peaks rose above the majestic land. The soft trickle of a stream sounded over the rustle of the afternoon wind.

Keeping low, Raven walked around the trunk of a ponderosa tree rising toward the sky. He then climbed a small hill, which provided a lookout over the meadow and the creek meandering through the middle.

Standing near the water’s edge was the eight-point buck. It lifted its rack of antlers, ears perked.

Raven froze behind the two Nunnehi warriors and held a breath in his chest. Why did his breath feel cold?

This wasn’t like most of his dreams. It almost felt real.

The deer went back to drinking from the stream, and Raven made his way up to Snake and Badger. The men simply nodded at him, and although they didn’t speak out loud, he could hear their thoughts.

This is your spirit to take, Raven. Do it honorably and swiftly.

Raven took a moment to admire the beautiful creature, recalling the Cherokee story of how deer got their horns. Long ago, it was said, deer did

not have antlers. A messenger started a game between a rabbit and a deer to see who could go farther in a race. The deer could run faster, but the rabbit was a better jumper, so they were evenly matched. The winner would get antlers. The rabbit, however, did not play by the rules during this race, and was caught cheating. Thus, the horns went to the deer.

Raven had never seen a beast with such a beautiful rack of antlers. He placed the arrow shaft on the rest of his bow. Then he attached the knock to the string. Making sure his shoulders were perpendicular with the beast, he pulled the string back, closed one eye, and aimed the arrowhead at the buck's heart. After a short mental prayer for a speedy kill, he let the arrow fly.

The animal's ears flicked, and it focused dark eyes on Raven just as the arrow hit its chest. His aim was true, and the arrow struck it in the heart, killing the buck instantly. The creature collapsed on the ground, kicking once with a muscle spasm.

Snake and Badger were on the move before the deer went limp. Raven followed them out into meadow, where the sun hit his skin. But even the radiant glow couldn't take away the freezing chill that seemed to be gripping his bones.

He got down on his knees next to the dead deer, praying again for the gods' forgiveness. The two Nunnehi warriors looked over at him, and he grabbed the bone handle of his sheathed buck knife. He'd use the blade to carve the deer and cut out the tongue to throw into a fire for sacrifice. The Cherokee used all parts of the deer but the sinews and hamstrings, which were left in respect for the spirit.

Raven got right to work, expertly skinning the deer, while Snake and Badger stood to watch. The sun slipped behind the clouds over their shoulders, and darkness suddenly spread over the land. The purple and blue flowers vanished, and a snowy wasteland took their place. When Raven looked back at the deer, it was nothing but bones.

The Nunnehi warriors both dipped their chiseled jaws.

"The hunt is over," Snake said.

Badger pointed to the east. "You must go now, Raven. An enemy is coming. Only you can stop this evil."

Raven blinked, and the world changed again. In a split second, the warriors disappeared, along with the bones, but the wintery landscape remained. The moon was high in the night sky, and there was a small fire near his body. The wood was burning, but he could hardly feel any warmth. In fact, he could

hardly feel anything at all.

Someone was hovering over him, but his vision was too blurred to make out the face. He saw other shapes, and then felt something furry against his cheek.

He snapped alert as he abruptly remembered his fight with the mountain lion. The beast was a few feet away, yellow eyes open and staring at him.

Raven let out a gasp of icy air and reached up, grabbing the arm of the person hovering over him.

“Raven, it’s me. It’s Sandra,” said a voice.

Dale and Colton were there too, both of them looking at Raven with wide eyes.

“He killed a damn mountain lion,” Dale said, laughing.

“Raven,” Sandra said, snapping her fingers in front of his face to draw his attention.

He focused on her and smiled. “Hey, sis.”

She batted a tear away and snorted. “This is the last time I’m coming after you, Sam Spears.”

***

Charlize and Colonel Raymond walked along the edge of Central Park with their Green Beret escorts. Aside from the military company, this moment reminded her of the time she had strolled through the gardens with her husband. It seemed like just yesterday that Richard and Charlize had spent the better part of a Sunday walking through the park and eating at a local seafood and chip restaurant. Those had been happy times, and Charlize wished she’d appreciated them more in the moment.

But today she wasn’t here for leisure. She was here to check out the final location on the list President Diego had given her of potential places for the White House, and to meet with the Chinese delegation one last time.

“There it is,” Raymond said, pointing at the building situated on the corner of Fifth Avenue. Crews had restored power here just days earlier, and most of the windows of the Plaza Hotel were lit up.

Charlize took a moment to appreciate the architecture, which imitated a medieval French château. Hundreds of windows with gold trim provided guests with a panoramic view of Central Park. A green arched roof crested

the white building.

“It’s big, but that could be a good thing,” Charlize said. “We need to house all the branches of government that were lost in D.C., so if we are able to contract with the current owners, we could use this as our central hub during the recovery efforts.”

“Let’s take a look inside,” Raymond said.

The street had been completely cleared of stranded vehicles and snow, and they crossed easily. Several NYPD officers mounted on horses patrolled the area. The sidewalks weren’t as busy as they would have been two months ago, but there were still pedestrians. They weren’t tourists, though. These people were all on a mission.

Charlize was impressed by the grandeur of the hotel. It would make a beautiful place for the seat of the federal government, but strategically, it would be difficult to defend.

A representative of the Chinese delegation waited in the lobby, which was decorated with ornamented pillars and archways, a marble floor, and gold fixtures. Charlize followed her escorts down a hallway and took the elevator to the tenth floor, where they were led to a meeting room.

Inside sat General Lin and two staffers, an older man with gray hair and glasses, and a woman around Charlize’s age. She remembered them from the United Nations building.

“Good to see you again, Secretary Montgomery,” Lin said, rising to his feet. You’ve already met Wan Shi and Liu Yaping.”

“Yes,” Charlize said. “Nice to see you.”

Wan and Liu both bowed, and Lin gestured for Charlize to take a seat. She and Raymond took up positions across from General Lin.

“I’m connecting us to Constellation,” Liu said. She swiveled a laptop screen so everyone in the room could see it. Between the working lights and the internet connection, for a fleeting moment it almost seemed like things were back to normal. President Diego’s face emerged on the monitor a moment later, reminding her things were far from normal.

“Good afternoon,” he said.

“Good afternoon, Mr. President,” Lin said.

“How are you liking the Plaza Hotel?” Diego asked.

“It is a beautiful building,” Lin said.

“Not my favorite on your list, sir, for strategic reasons,” Charlize said.

“I’m looking forward to talking more when you get back,” Diego said. “In

the meantime, we have a few other items to discuss. Water supply has become the biggest problem in the survival centers."

That got her attention. Charlize had expected the meeting to start with the attack in Charlotte, where Albert and Captain Harris were currently monitoring a mission to re-take the city.

"Bringing the water treatment centers back online has been one of our main priorities since we landed," Lin said.

"Doctor Price is spearheading the effort, but we're going to need your help, General," Diego said.

"Liu will connect with Doctor Price as soon as possible," Lin said. "We are painfully aware of how important—"

A raucous boom cut the general off before he could finish. The entire room shook, and a piece of gold trim fell to the floor. For a moment, everyone just sat there, rattled and confused.

"Was that an explosion?" Diego asked.

"One moment, sir," Raymond said.

A fire alarm rang out, and then a second boom snapped Charlize into action. The noise was definitely an explosion.

Both of the doors swung open, and Sergeant Fugate entered. "Everyone stay calm, but we need to move."

Two of the Chinese soldiers posted in the hallway moved over to General Lin, speaking in Mandarin. The two groups left together for the hallway and were led to a stairwell opposite to the one where they had come in.

"What the hell is going on?" Raymond asked.

"The building is under attack," Fugate said. He stopped and held up his radio as it squawked.

"Multiple contacts," said the voice on the channel. "Shooters on the west and east sides of the building." There was a pause, with more white noise. Then the speaker came back and said, "Hunker down until we can figure out the safest way to get you out of there."

Faint but rapid gunfire sounded in the distance. This was a multi-stage attack, Charlize realized. First bombs, now shooters. But who would mount such a brazen attack on a relatively secure building?

"This way," Fugate said. He hurried down the hall, rifle shouldered, while the other Green Berets held rear guard. The two Chinese soldiers flanking the officials followed close behind.

The group moved into a stairwell and was instructed to stay put. Fugate

pulled out his radio again to listen to the chatter. One of the Chinese soldiers was doing the same thing. The clash of languages made it incredibly difficult to hear anything. From what Charlize could make out, the attack had started when vehicles broke through a barrier a block away.

The gunfire continued below, echoing up the stairwell, getting closer by the minute. General Lin stood next to Charlize. If the man was frightened, he sure didn't show it. He had his fingers wrapped around a pistol. Both of his soldiers were iron-faced, emotionless. Even Liu and Wan appeared undeterred by the violence.

Fugate lowered the radio and jerked his chin up the stairwell. "We're headed to the roof. It's the only way out of here. The building is being overrun."

He looked to Staff Sergeant Thoreau, the kid with peach fuzz on his face, who stood below Charlize.

"Thoreau, you and Sammie cover our escape," Fugate said.

Thoreau nodded at Fugate, and then at Charlize, before moving back down the stairs with the other soldier.

"Good luck," Charlize whispered.

"Let's go," Fugate said.

The climb to the rooftop took five minutes. Fugate opened the roof access door, and then moved out with two of his men to clear the area. He returned a moment later and ushered everyone outside.

The cracks and pops coming from the street below told her the fight was far from over. The sound of a chopper rose over the din of gunfire. To the west, a Black Hawk was coming in fast.

"Come on!" Fugate shouted. He waved them over to the center of the roof. The pilots would have to hover, since there was no place to put down here.

Fugate and his men all raised their rifles and pointed them at the open doorway while Raymond, General Lin, and his staff moved over to where the pilots were lowering the chopper.

Charlize paused to listen. It sounded as if a battle was being waged inside the stairwell where Thoreau and Sammie had remained. The rotor drafts hit her, whipping her jacket violently. The pilots got as close to the roof as possible, and then the crew chief reached down to help Charlize into the bird. General Lin went next, with Liu and Wan following.

The two Chinese soldiers remained below with the Green Berets, all of them still pointing their weapons at the doorway. It swung open just as

Colonel Raymond climbed into the troop hold, and an American soldier stumbled onto the roof, blood soaking his right arm and parts of his neck. It was Sammie, Charlize realized. So where was Thoreau?

The young man yelled something at Fugate before crashing to the ground. The leader of the Green Berets turned and waved the pilots off before turning back to help Sammie and drag him away.

The bird pulled away from the roof, ascending quickly. Charlize watched as the Green Berets and Chinese soldiers took up defensive positions with their rifles aimed at the closed door. The pilots banked to the west, providing a view of the chaos below.

The warped black hull of a vehicle burned in front of the destroyed lobby. The once-white façade had caved in. A black field of debris surrounded the outside of the building, and on the rim of the destruction were dozens of bodies. Most of them seemed to be wearing blue and green uniforms.

“Are you okay, ma’am?” Raymond asked.

Charlize managed to nod, but she was still breathing heavily. She tried to catch her breath as the chopper pulled away, leaving the terror behind. Charlize caught a glimpse of the One World Trade Center as the pilots flew to safety. With the Plaza Hotel in ruins, it would most likely become the new site of the White House.

But she wasn’t so sure New York was the best choice for the seat of government after all. Whoever had attacked the Plaza had done so in a coordinated and brutal way. Nowhere was safe anymore.

— 15 —

Fenix took a sip of whiskey. The liquid both warmed and cooled his throat.

“Damn, that’s good sauce,” he said.

Sergeant Horton raised his glass. “To the general!”

“To the general!” shouted a dozen men.

The twelve Brandenburger Commandos brought their glasses together, the clank echoing through the concrete bunker. The soldiers downed their glasses and then began filing out of the armory, where they were celebrating their newest addition—a dozen crates of weapons, explosives, and fully automatic weapons.

Fenix continued to admire the stacked boxes around him. Every bullet would help him accomplish his goal of taking Colorado back from the bureaucrats and the Chinese invaders.

He downed the rest of his glass and wiped his lips with a sleeve as the footfalls of the men who would help him succeed in this mission faded down the hallway. They were headed back to the central gathering, where a game of poker and more liquor awaited.

Horton, however, remained behind. He flashed a sly grin at Fenix and patted one of the crates.

“We’re almost ready to fight our crusade against the insurgents,” Horton said. “Just a few more raids like the one today, and we’ll have everything we need.”

Fenix found his lips cracking into a smile as well. The thought of the coming fight gave him chills, and the whiskey warming his stomach only helped intensify the feeling.

“We’re going to take our country back,” Fenix said.

“Damn straight, sir.” Horton’s smile widened, revealing perfectly white

teeth.

Fenix wasn’t used to seeing the hardened war hero showing so much emotion. Most of the time, it was difficult to get him to laugh at a joke.

“I couldn’t have done any of this without you, Sarge.”

It wasn’t often he gave praise, but this time it was well deserved. Over the past three weeks, the Brandenburger Commandos had freed Fenix from captivity, taken out Nile Redford and stolen his supplies, and successfully hit three Chinese convoys. On top of that, they had doubled the Sons of Liberty numbers and opened up three new bases in Colorado.

They were now at their new headquarters at Titan Missile Silo, the abandoned Cold War facility Sergeant Horton had taken over just days after the North Korean attack. It was located east of Denver, about an hour drive from the Rocky Mountains.

Tonight, the men were taking a break to celebrate their wins. It was time for the soldiers to sit back, drink, and relax. For Fenix, though, there was never time to relax. He had already lost enough time in Redford’s prison cell. Besides, Fenix was expecting company shortly.

He walked into the command center, where his men were starting a game of poker at the metal table. Beer cans littered the area where maps had been earlier. Horton watched with his arms folded across his chest while Fenix poured whiskey from a bottle into his flask.

“Have fun, gentlemen,” Fenix said, raising the flask.

“Not staying to lose your money, sir?” asked one of the men.

“Maybe next time.” Fenix grinned, took a slug, and retreated to his quarters, deciding he didn’t want to be too drunk when his new friends arrived.

When he got to his small room, he propped his feet up and nursed the flask in silence, listening to the hum of the generators. The noise was calming, and he rested his eyes.

Sometime later, he woke up and looked at his watch, cursing when he saw the time. He had to get topside, and fast. He hurried back to the area where his men were still playing cards. Two of them were shouting over a hand. Horton was standing between them to intervene. All three of them stood to attention when they saw Fenix. The room went silent.

“What the hell are you waiting for, Sergeant?” Fenix asked. “Are you ready or what?”

“Yes, sir. Sorry, sir. I lost track of time.”

Fenix gestured for the men to return to their game. Normally he would have broken balls, but not tonight. These men deserved a break. They needed it. Even Nazis could get burned out on killing.

Horton hurried into the passage, and they took the first right to the stairs. Fenix went first, and fifteen minutes later he was at the top, his chest heaving and his head spinning from too much liquor. The door opened onto another passage, where a sentry named Miles was guarding the metal hatch that led outside.

Miles stiffened and raised his baldhead when he saw Fenix and Horton approaching.

“Good evening, sir,” Miles said. A patch dotted with blood covered the new tattoo on his neck. The tattoo gun was getting passed around at their base a lot these days.

Horton opened a small metal hatch that allowed him to peer outside. After a quick scan, he closed it and opened the door, letting in a gust of cold air. Fenix offered Miles the flask.

“Thank you, sir, but I’m on duty,” Miles said.

“It’s okay,” Fenix said, holding it out again.

Miles hesitated, took a slug, and passed it back to Fenix. The two men drank while they waited. A few minutes later, Horton returned.

“They’re here,” Horton said.

Fenix put his flask back into his pocket, then pulled out a cap and slapped it over his thick, slicked-back hair. He stepped out into the frigid air, taking in a breath to remind himself what freedom tasted like.

Horton continued down a rocky path leading around a bluff. Three more guards were posted at the end of the trail, crouched behind a rocky wall with their rifles and night vision goggles. They were all focused on the silhouette of a single pickup about a quarter mile away.

“That’s them, sir,” Horton said.

“They came alone,” one of the sentries reported.

“Good, but watch our backs,” Fenix said to the other men. He set off around the lookout with Horton following. The moon was out tonight, spreading a soft glow over the white landscape. He wasn’t worried about an ambush, but he was always wary. Secretary Montgomery was still on his trail, and wouldn’t give up until he was dead or in captivity. That’s what made tonight’s meeting so important.

It was time for the Sons of Liberty to ally with others fighting for the same

cause—to bring down what was left of the federal government, and fight the damn Chinese.

Several flashlights flickered on as he approached the pickup. Three men, all dressed in black tactical clothes, walked toward Fenix and Horton.

One of the men stepped out in front of the others. “General Fenix?” he asked.

“That’s me,” Fenix reached out to shake his hand. “Welcome to our humble nuclear missile silo, Sheriff,” he said.

***

Albert took the satellite phone from Captain Harris and brought it to his lips.

“Hello, Secretary Montgomery, this is Albert,” he said.

“Good to hear your voice. I heard about the attack. Are you doing okay?”

“Yes, ma’am, I’m fine. How is New York?”

“There was an attack here, too. I’m already back at Constellation, and General Lin has been moved to a secure location. He won’t be returning to the staging area there for the foreseeable future.”

Albert took a deep breath. He hated the idea of Charlize being in danger when he wasn’t there to shield her. “Were you hurt, ma’am? What happened?”

“This isn’t public yet, but the attack was orchestrated by a group of North Korean sleeper agents. We’re still trying to collect more details, but what we know now is that these terrorists were targeting Lin and I.”

“Are you hurt?” he repeated.

“I’m fine, but we lost a lot of good people, and so did the Chinese delegation.” She paused and then said, “I’m pulling you out of Charlotte. I need you here with me. There’s a chopper heading that way tomorrow, and I want you on it. Captain Harris will continue his mission without you.”

Albert looked to Harris, who nodded.

“Okay, ma’am,” Albert said. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Stay safe, Big Al.”

“You too.”

Albert handed the phone back to the captain. Outside the HQ tent, American and Chinese soldiers were preparing for an assault on Charlotte. Van Dyke ducked under the flaps.

“Captain, the teams are ready to move out,” he said.

“I’ll be right there,” Harris said.

Van Dyke shifted his gaze to Albert, and grinned. The corporal didn’t look as nervous as the last time they had gone out there. He had excitement written all over his features.

“Be careful, Van Dyke,” Albert said. “You may have the numbers this time, but don’t underestimate the enemy. Remember what happened to those National Guard soldiers.”

“That’s part of the reason I’m anxious to go out there, brother. We’re going to make these fuckers pay for what they have done.”

“Just watch your six, man. I’m headed back to Constellation tomorrow, so if I don’t see you before you get back, good luck.”

“Thanks.” Van Dyke reached out to shake his hand. “Take care of yourself, Big Al.”

“I’ll do my best.”

Van Dyke wiped the smirk off his face and grew serious. “And do me a favor. Tell Secretary Montgomery to keep them Chinese on a short leash. I don’t trust ’em.”

“I’ll pass along your message, but I’d highly recommend dropping the attitude. So far, they have fought, bled, and died with us.”

“Just wait until one of ’em shoots an American soldier. Mark my words, Al, it’s going to happen.”

Albert didn’t know exactly how to respond to that, so he simply held Van Dyke’s grip until the corporal let go and walked out of the tent.

Harris and Albert followed him to the staging area between the industrial zone and the train tracks. Dozens of vehicles were lined up outside the warehouses, and hundreds of American soldiers were loading Humvees and trucks with gear and ammunition. Most of the Chinese soldiers were remaining behind to protect the FOB and the supplies still being brought in by train. They patrolled the area, weapons cradled, eyes roving. Everyone was still on edge after the last attack.

Two Apache choppers and a trio of Black Hawks sat on a dirt landing pad about a quarter mile to the west. More American soldiers were preparing outside the aircraft.

“It’s the biggest operation on American soil yet,” Harris said.

“Two months ago, I would never have believed it was possible,” Albert said.

“Makes two of us, Officer Randall.”

Harris walked away to talk to one of his subordinates, leaving Albert watching the troops. The convoy and choppers moved out a few minutes later, the growl of diesel engines and chop of helicopter blades filling the afternoon with the din of pre-battle noises.

As the sound faded away, Albert looked around to find that most of the American troops were gone, aside from Captain Harris and his small entourage. Chinese soldiers passed Albert by without muttering a single word.

He suddenly felt completely out of place, but it still beat heading into Charlotte to fight gangs that would happily cut his throat and hang him from a pole.

Captain Cao nodded at Albert as he passed. With twenty-four hours to kill before his ride arrived, Albert decided to make himself useful.

“Captain?” he called.

Cao smiled politely at Albert. “Officer Randall, you didn’t go with the other Americans?”

“No sir. I’m supposed to head back home tomorrow, so figured I might pick your brain while I wait for my ride.”

Cao looked back with a confused look on his face. “Pick my brain?”

“It’s a figure of speech.”

“Oh. What you mean is you’d like to talk.”

The distant crack of automatic gunfire commanded their attention toward the downtown skyline. The Apaches were circling, and the Black Hawks were dropping troops into the fire zone.

“Good luck to them,” Cao said.

Albert said a mental prayer for the soldiers as well as the innocent civilians that could get caught in the crossfire. He stood there for several minutes listening to the thump of what sounded like mortar fire exploding in Charlotte. It didn’t take long before the entire area sounded like a war zone.

“Follow me a moment, will you?” Cao asked.

Albert and the Captain walked toward the tents, stopping for a truck filled to the brim with potatoes that had come in on the train. Once the battle was over, the food would be distributed in the city.

Cao held up the flaps to the Chinese HQ tent for Albert. A small heater warmed the space, which was furnished with a desk, table, and two cots.

“Would you like some tea?” Cao said.

Albert nodded. The Captain fired up the burners on a small gas stove set up on the table. A few minutes later, he poured Albert a cup and sat it in front of him. Albert brought it to his lips to take a sip while Cao took a seat behind his makeshift desk. The sound of war continued as they drank their warm tea.

Cao was the first to speak. “I know why you and Captain Harris were assigned to our division,” he said bluntly.

Albert lowered the cup.

“You’re here to watch us and make sure we don’t use unreasonable force against your citizens.” He held up a finger to forestall Albert’s protest. “And you’re here to make sure we have no connection to the North Koreans.”

Albert settled back into his seat, waiting for the Captain to continue. He liked the man, especially what he had said about why he joined the military, but he needed to be careful of what he said.

“You don’t need to respond,” Cao said. “The reason I am telling you all of this is because I received intel this morning about the North Korean attack in New York. It is not going to be the last attack.”

Albert raised a brow and broke his silence. “How do you know?”

“Because I know the North Koreans. I was born there. My parents defected when I was five years old. They smuggled me across the border into China.”

Cao took another sip of tea, and then continued. “My parents never wanted me to be ashamed of where I came from, as long as I understood what it was like living in North Korea.”

The distant sound of an explosion distracted Cao for a moment. The blast faded away.

“As long as there are North Koreans out there, they will continue hating America, and will not give up until your way of life is destroyed. I, like many of my Chinese comrades, may not agree with your form of government, but we still respect it, and will give our lives to help America and China succeed together. But I wanted to warn you that things are going to get worse before they get better… So you can tell your Secretary of Defense when you return home.”

Albert sat his cup of tea on the desk, a chill running through his body. The two messages he was returning home with from Van Dyke and Cao were far different. One was a message of division, the other a message of unity.

But Cao also had another message, if Albert was understanding the Captain.

“Are you saying the war with North Korea isn’t over?”

“Yes.” Cao stood and pulled down on his uniform. “We are fighting two enemies now, Officer Randall. The Americans that don’t want us here, and the North Korean sleeper agents that were activated after the attack.”

Cao grimaced at the sound of another distant explosion, and then said, “I can assure you, we are not the enemy. The North Koreans are, and they always will be until they are all dead.”

Outside, the sound of raised voices and engines filled the staging area, effectively distracting both men. Albert left his tea and went to look.

Chinese soldiers had surrounded the American Humvee and were helping unload the wounded. The first American soldier was conscious, and reached up toward a Chinese medic with a blood-soaked hand. They rushed him to the medical tent, then pulled out a second soldier, who had severe burns on the right side of his face.

It took Albert a long moment to realize the man was Van Dyke. He rushed over to help. The corporal’s left eye flipped open and blinked several times, but the right was swollen completely shut. He tried to speak, mumbling something that Albert couldn’t make out.

“You’re going to be okay, man. Just hang in there,” Albert said, but it was a lie. It would be a miracle if the man survived, and even if he did, it would be a long recovery with those burns.

Van Dyke’s gaze flitted from Albert to the Chinese soldiers carrying him. For a moment, there was a look of confusion on his burned face, then fear. His eye slowly closed, and his breathing became raspy.

Albert watched the medics carry Van Dyke off to the medical tent. The corporal might not trust their Chinese counterparts, but those soldiers and medics were doing everything they could to save him.

— 16 —

Sandra was sitting next to Raven's bedside a week after the mountain lion attack. He appeared to be sleeping peacefully, but his body was covered in a slick sheen of sweat.

Across the room, Allie slept in a chair with Creek at her feet. The dog had his remaining eye on his handler. Every now and again Creek would close the eyelid, only to snap it back open a moment later. Sandra wasn't the only one worried about her brother; the dog could also sense how close Raven was to death.

After surviving gunshots, knife wounds, and multiple beatings, a bacterial infection had finally taken him to the edge of life and death. He was fading right in front of her, and there was nothing she could do about it but try and ease his suffering. He wasn't going to survive more than a few days if they didn't get him some powerful antibiotics.

The only hope for her brother was standing in the hallway. Marcus Colton, Dale Jackson, and Lindsey Plymouth waited outside the room, discussing a mission that could save her brother's life.

"I'll be right back," Sandra whispered to Raven, although he probably couldn't hear her. He stirred, and his eyelids fluttered, but he didn't wake up. She gently shut the door behind her.

"What's the plan?" Sandra asked.

Lindsey stepped closer to Sandra and, keeping her voice low, said, "This is confidential, so keep it quiet, okay?"

Sandra felt her heart skip, knowing she was about to get some very bad news. It was no secret that the government wasn't going to make it this way for a year or even longer. The pamphlets had stated as much, and everyone in the town had heard the news.

“We don’t have enough food to get everyone through the winter. Especially if we can’t count on any help from the Feds. There are simply too many mouths to feed, and the elk and other game have moved deeper into the park, making them more difficult to track and bring back. We’re low on gas, low on food, and low on meds,” Lindsey said.

“We’re not even going to make it through the winter?” Sandra asked.

“Not so loud,” Colton said, bringing up a finger to his lips.

Sandra checked the hallway behind her. No one was nearby, but she dropped her voice anyway. “What are we going to do?”

“This winter will be a struggle unless we make something happen, and that’s exactly what I’m going to do,” Colton said. “I’m taking the special squad Raven and Lindsey put together for a raid on Fort Collins. We’re going to take our supplies back, plus some.”

His tone was confident, but Colton massaged the grip of his pistol nervously. After what Sheriff Thompson had done to him, Sandra didn’t blame him for being anxious about returning to Fort Collins, even though the sheriff was dead.

“If all goes to plan, we will be back before tomorrow morning with the meds to save Raven’s life,” Colton said.

“How do you know where to go?” Sandra asked.

“I just got back from scouting out the warehouses Colton marked on a map from his time in captivity there,” Dale said. “Going back to find medicine is the least we can do for him after all he’s done for Estes Park.”

Sandra couldn’t believe her ears. Dale, of all people, was risking his life to save her brother.

“Thank you,” she said. “Thank you so—”

A voice cut her off. “Chief, that you?”

Everyone turned to see Nurse Jen walking side by side with John Palmer. Colton’s face went white at the sight of the bandaged stumps where the firefighter’s arms had been.

“John! Hey buddy, how are you doing?” Colton said.

Palmer raised his stumps to give everyone a better view of what was left of his arms. “I’m bored as hell and want to get back to work, but can’t do much without hands.”

“Looks like you’re making a great recovery. You’ll be back to work in no time,” Lindsey said. “You can help at the station.”

Palmer’s eyes lit up at the suggestion. “Help with what?” he asked.

Lindsey looked to Colton. “I was thinking you could be the watchman out at the Crow’s Nest.”

“Yeah…yeah I could do that,” Palmer said. His lips curled with a slight smile, the first Sandra had seen in weeks. He looked over at her and asked, “How’s your brother?”

“Not so good.”

“Keep this to yourself, John, but we’re headed to Fort Collins tonight to get medicine and supplies,” Colton said.

Palmer’s smile vanished. “If you see Jason Cole, put a bullet in his head for me.”

“He’s a dead man. I can assure you of that,” Colton said darkly.

“Good luck, Chief, and stay safe out there,” Palmer said. He and the nurse continued down the hallway.

“We really going after Jason Cole tonight?” Dale asked quietly.

“If we see him, hell yes,” Colton said.

“You’re the boss, Chief.”

The door to Raven’s room creaked open, and Allie looked out. “Mom, Uncle Raven is awake.”

Creek poked his head into the hallway, sniffed, and then retreated into the room.

“I’ll be right back,” Sandra said to the officers.

She moved back to Raven’s bedside. He reached for her hand, eyes alert and wide.

“The Nunnehi said… They said the evil is coming,” Raven mumbled. He licked his lips. “They said I have to stop it. They said…”

Sandra grabbed the bowl of cold water and dipped a rag inside. Then she dabbed his forehead. “Calm down, Sam. You’re okay. Everything is just fine.”

But everything wasn’t fine, and he wasn’t okay. This was the second time he had spoken of the Nunnehi warriors, which told her he was continuing to hallucinate. Raven’s dark brown eyes flitted back and forth. He wasn’t truly awake, and he wasn’t sleeping; he was somewhere in the middle, a mixture of reality and fantasy.

As she went to dab the rag back into the water he grabbed her arm, and squeezed her wrist, hard.

“Ouch,” Sandra said.

“Adsila,” he whispered.

The word took Sandra's breath. She locked eyes with her brother, but he seemed to be looking through her, not at her.

"Adsila," he repeated.

"No," Sandra said. "It's me, Sandra. Your sister."

Allie hugged Creek. "You're scaring me, Uncle Raven."

Raven kept his gaze on Sandra, and again called her by their deceased mother's name.

"Adsila, I'm sorry for lying. I'm sorry for not taking care of you. I'm sorry…" Raven's eyes rolled up into his head as he once again slipped back into a dream state, his hand falling limply away from Sandra's. She took in a deep breath, trying to understand what had just happened. Raven had never spoken of their mother like that.

"What the hell was that all about?" Colton said.

Sandra twisted to see the chief and Lindsey standing in the open doorway.

"Go get those meds, Marcus," Sandra said. "My brother doesn't have much time left."

***

Colton flicked the safety off on his suppressed AR-15 and took point as they moved into position around the warehouse. The hard part was over. They had safely snuck into Fort Collins using the moonlight and their single pair of night vision goggles. Both of their trucks were stashed about a mile away.

Dale hunched down next to Colton, wearing a rucksack and also carrying an AR-15. The intel he had gathered was going to save Raven's life and help Estes Park survive the winter.

But not without a fight.

They had come prepared, with ballistic vests and plenty of ammunition, and Colton had a feeling they were going to need every bullet. He did another scan of the area with his night vision goggles. To the west, a junkyard provided plenty of cover. Their sniper, Susan Sanders, had taken up position there behind a rusted-out Chevy Nova with her bow and a high-powered rifle at the ready. He couldn't see her, but he knew she was there.

To the east and south were two roads leading back to the city. If anyone was headed their way, they would see them long in advance. Captain Plymouth, Detective Ryburn, and Todd Sanders were a mile back with the

two trucks, ready to move in at a moment's notice. John Kirkus had provided a dozen of his own people to help with the escape, in exchange for a percentage of the supplies they were able to retrieve.

The plan from here on out was simple. Neutralize the guards. Steal the medicine, food, and supplies. Then book it back to Estes Park, sealing the road behind them. If any of Thompson's crew gave chase, they would be stopped at one of four checkpoints. If one of the barriers fell, everyone would retreat.

Colton focused on the two grunt sentries outside the warehouse. He flipped the night vision optics up to scan the area with his naked eyes. The two men were dressed in camouflage and wearing baseball caps. They had smoked three cigarettes so far, which told Colton these guys had plenty more inside. He was going to replenish his own supply, if they had room, although Kelly would not be happy about that.

For another fifteen minutes, Colton watched and waited to make sure they hadn't missed any patrols earlier. He balled his hands, flexed his forearms, and wiggled his toes to keep his circulation moving while they waited.

When the guard on the right lowered his rifle and moved out of the wind to light another cigarette, Colton finally gave the order. An arrow streaked away and hit the man holding the cigarette in his neck, pinning him to the side of the metal wall. By the time the second man realized what had happened, he had an arrow sticking out of his chest, just above his heart. The near miss gave him just enough time to let out a muffled cry and look down at the shaft. Susan let another arrow fly a beat later, hitting him in the heart this time.

Colton and Dale were moving before the corpse hit the ground. They ran at a hunch, rifles shouldered and aimed at the entrance of the warehouse. When they got there, Dale took up position to the right, and Colton took up a stance to the left.

He nodded at Dale, and the veteran kicked the door open.

Colton moved in first, sweeping the barrel around the interior of the warehouse. It was lit by lanterns on the first and second floors. Another guard sat with his feet propped up on a desk in front of a row of metal shelves. The man scrambled for his pistol, but Colton put two bullets into his chest before he could draw the gun. The guard fell backward in his chair, hitting the ground with a thud.

A shotgun blast punched the wall near Colton, and he dove for cover behind a shelf, peering up at a contact on the second floor. The man was

searching for Colton with the barrel of his shotgun, but Dale found him first, squeezing off three shots into the man's chest. He let out a cry and tumbled over a railing. His body hit one of the shelves, knocking it into the next one and creating a domino effect. In seconds, all ten shelves had slammed into one another, spilling their contents on the ground.

"Clear," Dale said.

Colton already had his walkie-talkie in hand. "Lindsey, we're good to go," he said.

"On my way, Chief."

Colton and Dale quickly made sure the hostiles were dead. Then began the search for medicine. That was priority one; the food and other supplies would come next.

"Over here," Dale said a few minutes into the search.

Colton hurried over to find Dale looking through a box of pill containers. "This is the one on the list, right?"

Colton examined the bottle and nodded. "Bring 'em all, just in case."

"This shit was easier than I expected." Dale tossed the bottles into his rucksack.

"We still have to get out of here, and we need to hurry."

"Don't worry. Susan's got our back, Chief."

The two men spent the next five minutes stacking up the medicine and crates of MREs near the garage door. He flung the garage door open and shielded his eyes from bright headlight beams. When they dimmed, he saw a Jeep Cherokee parked outside. Not just any Jeep. It was Raven's baby. The sons of bitches had stolen her the last time Colton visited Fort Collins.

Before he could raise his rifle, a voice called out, "Drop your guns or she's dead."

Susan Sanders was on her knees in the dirt with a pistol pointed at the back of her head. Two men stood behind her, the second holding an AK-47 angled at Colton.

For a moment Colton considered his options. He could tell Dale to open fire and risk getting Susan killed, or they could surrender and hope the men didn't kill them before Lindsey got here with reinforcements.

"Easy," Colton said, slowly lowering his gun to the ground to buy time. He instructed Dale to do the same thing, but Dale shook his head, which was exactly what Colton thought he would do.

"No way. These men will kill us," Dale said.

The man with the AK-47 angled it at Dale. “Drop your gun, or my buddy spills her brains,” he said. “And don’t think about trying anything funny. The sheriff is on his way.”

“Do it, Dale,” Colton said. He wasn’t sure who had taken over for Thompson, but maybe the man would listen to reason, maybe he would…

Colton’s faint hopes died when the moonlight illuminated the face of the man with the machine gun.

It was Jason Cole.

Colton resisted the urge to pull his holstered pistol and blast the bastard in the face. Jason would definitely kill them both, especially after what Colton and Raven had done to him in the Estes Park jail.

Dale slowly set his rifle to the ground, and Jason grinned. He nodded at his friend, who pulled the hammer back on the revolver pressed to Susan’s head.

“NO!” Colton shouted.

His words were shattered by the crack of gunfire.

But the sound wasn’t from the pistol or the AK-47.

A muzzle flash came from the connecting road, where two pickup trucks suddenly flashed their lights, blinding Jason and his comrade. Susan hit the dirt, and Colton scooped his rifle off the ground.

“Ambush!” Jason yelled.

Colton fired off a burst as Jason dove for cover under the Jeep. The other man took several rounds to the chest from Dale’s rifle, jerking back and forth before hitting the dirt and going still.

Jason crawled away while Colton fired bullets that pinged off the undercarriage of Raven’s Jeep. He got down to his belly and prepared to fire, but Jason was already running into the junkyard, his AK-47 lying in the dirt.

Lindsey and Todd pulled the trucks in front of the building and Colton got back onto his feet.

“Load ’em up!” he shouted. “I’ll deal with this prick.”

Colton ran around the Jeep and into the junkyard, cautious even though Jason had dropped his rifle. Slowing down likely saved Colton’s life. Two bullets zipped past his face. One hit the window of a car right behind him, shattering the glass.

Crouching down, Colton looked for his target. He saw the man, now holding a pistol, duck behind a truck.

I got you now, you piece of shit…

Slowly rising, Colton fired off a volley with his AR-15. The bullets hit the

rusted pickup truck Jason was hiding behind. He took off running, and Colton followed him deeper into the junkyard.

A cloud crossed over the moon, and Colton slowed his pace. He scanned the darkness for shadows and shapes, his rifle up and ready. His boot caught the edge of a tire and he almost lost his balance, but righted himself and fired off a shot at a shadow that moved behind an old tractor.

Another flash of motion came from the left, and Colton sent a burst in that direction. He crouched down to listen and watch for movement.

“Hurry up!” Dale shouted. “We’re about to have company!”

Colton waited there another few moments, his heart pounding. He hated to leave without Jason. Turning his back on a man like that was a big mistake, but they were running out of time.

Just as he got up to move, a crunch sounded behind Colton’s back. A rush of fear raced through his body. He stood and whirled, to find Jason had gotten the drop on him.

“Hey there, Chief,” he said. His lips twisted into a satisfied smile as he raised a pistol at Colton’s head.

A razor-sharp arrowhead suddenly burst through his open mouth. Colton flinched as a bullet whizzed past his ear with a deafening crack. An instant later, Jason crashed to the ground face first, feet jerking. The back of the arrow protruded from the base of his skull. Susan bent down to snatch it out, placing her boot on his back, and then giving the bolt a good tug.

“Thanks,” Colton said, unable to hear his own words.

She nodded, and they hurried back to the trucks, where Dale, Lindsey, and Ryburn were finishing loading the crates into them. Raven’s Jeep was packed too. Colton moved his fingers through the air in a circle, signaling it was time to move out. He jumped into the Jeep with Lindsey, while Susan and Todd took one of the trucks. Dale and Ryburn got into the other truck.

The convoy sped off, heading west at breakneck speed. Colton watched the warehouse in the rearview mirror. Part of him had been conflicted about taking supplies from people who might need them, but not these men. All he felt was satisfaction. The best part was that they hadn’t left any witnesses behind to point in the direction of Estes Park.

Lindsey pounded the steering wheel and whistled. “We did it, Chief. We really did it!”

“We’re not out of the woods yet,” Colton said. He ducked down for a better view out the windshield, scanning the road for vehicles or ambushes.

Then he shifted his gaze to the rearview mirror to check on the two trucks packed full of supplies. Seeing them brought a rare smile to his face—a smile that faded when he saw three pairs of headlights moving on a road to the west that would intersect with their own road soon.

"More company," Colton said, cursing. "Gun it, Lindsey."

She pushed the pedal to the floor.

Colton alternated his gaze between the vehicles to the west and the rearview mirror, cursing again when he realized their trucks were falling behind. He pulled his walkie-talkie out and said, "Todd, Dale, we got three hostiles at nine o'clock."

"We see 'em," Dale said.

Colton changed the magazine in his AR-15, and then climbed into the back seat. He rolled down the window and jammed the barrel out.

"This is going to be loud," he said to Lindsey.

She nodded without taking her eyes off the road. He pressed the rifle butt against his shoulder, and aimed for the headlights of the front vehicle. The gunfire rattled the windows from the staccato of semi-automatic bursts.

The convoy continued flying down the road, the drivers undeterred. They were quickly coming up on the intersection, and while Colton was pretty sure Lindsey and Dale would make it through, he wasn't sure about Todd's truck. It was falling even farther behind.

Colton focused on the incoming convoy and continued firing. The lead vehicle finally swerved off the road and into a ditch, the beams flitting skyward, but the second two kept coming.

"They aren't going to make it!" Lindsey shouted in the respite of gunfire.

Colton slapped in another magazine and held in a breath. He could see the details of both vehicles now. The lead appeared to be a pickup truck, and the second was an old-school muscle car.

He squeezed off burst after burst at the truck. One of the headlights blew out, draping the left side of the road in darkness, but the driver kept speeding onward.

"Colton, they aren't stopping!" Lindsey shouted.

She let off the gas and swerved around an abandoned van, then pushed the pedal back down. Colton squeezed off another volley at the approaching vehicles as they neared the intersection.

He moved away from the window at the last second as gunfire flashed from the passenger window of the pickup truck. Bullets hit the back of the

Jeep, punching through the metal and into the seats next to Colton. He turned to watch Dale's truck power across the intersection, but Todd's vehicle was t-boned. The truck tipped over onto its side, and then flipped several times.

"No!" Lindsey shouted.

Colton felt his heart climbing into his throat. The headlights of the enemy vehicles remained back at the intersection. Men with rifles jumped out and moved toward the wreckage. A wheel continued spinning.

"Todd, do you copy?" Colton said into his walkie-talkie.

"We have to go back," Lindsey said.

Muzzle flashes lit up the road, and Colton slowly lowered his radio. It was too late to save Todd and his wife. Even if they had survived the crash, they were dead now.

It was a hard pill to swallow, considering Susan had just saved his life in the junkyard, but he couldn't put everyone else in jeopardy to bring them home.

"Keep driving, Lindsey," he said.

"But Marcus…"

"That's an order, Captain."

Colton climbed back into the front seat and tried to keep his eyes off the mirrors. Looking back wouldn't do them any good now. They sped away from muzzle flashes and crack of gunfire. Lindsey sobbed, and Colton worked on managing his breathing. Neither of them said a word for several moments.

The road curved, and Colton focused on the mountains in the distance. They would cross over into friendly territory soon, but the trip had come at a dire cost.

Squawking from the radio made him flinch, and he looked down at the device as a voice crackled over.

"Marcus, you listenin'?" came a very familiar voice.

Lindsey looked over, confused, as Colton pushed the radio up to his mouth.

"Who is this?"

"I'm hurt you don't know," said the same deep voice. "It's your favorite neighborhood sheriff."

Colton blinked, trying to make sense of what he was hearing. He knew who it sounded like, but there was no way it was Sheriff Thompson. He'd watched him die.

“Next time, aim for the face, Marcus,” Thompson said. “Or at least make sure your man isn’t wearing a vest.”

Colton thought back to the day he’d gunned Thompson down on the side of the road. He’d shot him in the chest, but had never checked his pulse or ensured he was dead.

“Shit,” Colton whispered.

“I’ve been waiting for this day a long time,” Thompson said. “You messed my plan up tonight, but I promise you that you’re dead, and so is everyone you love. Enjoy your present when you get home.”

The radio shut off, and Colton looked to Lindsey.

“What does he mean?” she asked, fear gripping her features.

“Drive, Lindsey. Drive like the lives of everyone you love depend on it.”

Colton had a feeling they did.

— 17 —

Fenix sat in the shotgun seat of a Humvee on Highway 7, just three miles south of Estes Park. The heat from the vents warmed his face as they waited. He reached up and adjusted his helmet, then patted his ballistic vest.

Armed with a brand new M4 and “four eyes” night vision goggles, he was fully prepared for battle, and so were the Brandenburger Commandos. They were positioned on the side of the road, waiting for a radio update from his scouts.

“You sure about this, sir?” Horton asked from the driver’s seat. “Why the hell are we the ones attacking tonight? Why isn’t Thompson sending men?”

“Goddammit, Horton, we’ve been through this. You just don’t get politics, do you?”

Horton looked over, his jaw set.

“Don’t get your panties in a wad,” Fenix said. “We’re softening the defenses, and getting the intel Thompson will need for his attack tomorrow. Think of this as just a recon mission. A very fun recon mission that will net us that damn Indian and his family.”

The new radio they had plucked from a Chinese vehicle barked to life.

“Sir, looks like the town militia has mostly been moved to beef up their defenses on Highway 34. The vehicles that left earlier were heading to Fort Collins.”

Fenix raised a brow at that. “What the hell are they doing in Fort Collins?”

“Raiding a warehouse owned by Sheriff Thompson. I just got off the horn with him. He’s fucking pissed, sir, but he said to proceed with your mission. He needs that intel for his attack tomorrow.”

“Roger that.”

“Good luck, sir.”

Fenix tucked the radio back in his vest and dipped his helmet at Horton. “Let’s roll, Sergeant.”

Horton put the vehicle in gear and pulled back onto the road. Fenix shouted up to the soldier manning the turret. “Miles, trade me spots.”

As soon as the young commando came down from the turret, Fenix took his spot on the big gun. Grabbing the M240, he roved the pintle mount into position. Fenix blinked at the green hue of his night vision goggles and waited for his eyes to adjust.

The other two vehicles were following them at combat intervals, just in case Chief Colton had ambushes set up out here. Fenix doubted the man was that cunning. He might actually be dumber than Fenix thought, trying to raid a warehouse owned by Thompson.

The sheriff owned everything east of Estes Park now. After taking down the FEMA camp, he had also taken over Loveland. In just two months, Thompson had built quite the empire for himself. That’s part of the reason Fenix had decided to join forces. They needed each other.

He turned to look at the pickups following the Humvee. Both of them had once belonged to the Chinese, but now sported fresh black paint. He smiled proudly at the Sons of Liberty logo on the hoods. Then he swiveled the mount back to the front of the vehicle, the wind blasting his exposed face as Horton picked up speed. They weren’t far now.

Around the next turn, two trucks and a minivan had been pushed up against one another to block the road. Concrete barriers were set up in front of them, with a barbwire gate serving as a makeshift doorway. Framing the road was a ditch, blocked with more vehicles and debris. There was no way to pass on the shoulder. He counted five figures standing behind the barriers, but only one of them was pointing a weapon at the road.

He’d already been warned that there would be women here, but when he saw that one of the five people was much smaller than the others, he held his fire. Even in Iraq, he’d done his best to avoid killing children.

The hesitation lasted only a moment. War was war.

He squeezed the trigger while they still had the element of surprise, sending tracer rounds lancing through the night. They slammed into the concrete barriers and clipped one of the men standing guard. A geyser of blood shot into the air, and he dropped like a tree.

Return fire was almost instant, and Fenix roved the barrel of the big gun toward the muzzle flashes coming from behind the barriers. Two more guards

had come into view. Both of them were firing from behind a pickup truck.

Horton stayed the course, driving full steam ahead even as bullets pecked at the hood and windshield. One of them pinged off the armor surrounding the M240, but Fenix too remained steady. He fired bursts that slammed into the bed of the pickup truck and punched through the metal and into the flesh of the guards. Both men spun away.

Fenix quickly roved the barrel back to the concrete barriers, where three of the four remaining hostiles were firing rifles. A bullet whizzed close enough to his head that he flinched. Then he fired a burst that took down two of the men just as they popped up to fire again, leaving two remaining hostiles.

Horton slowed the vehicle when they were a few hundred feet away, and coasted to a stop while Fenix unloaded on the blocks. Rounds pockmarked the sides, breaking away chunks of concrete.

The small figure darted away to the side of the road, and a woman raised an arm to reach after the child. Fenix took her arm off with several rounds, and then finished her off with one to the torso.

He eased off the trigger and scanned the roadblock, his heart pounding with excitement. Another gunshot cracked from under the mini-van and pinged off the armor surrounding his gun. Fenix ducked down as more shots hit the armor. When they stopped, he grabbed the gun and unloaded on the mini-van, taking out the tires and pinning the shooter underneath.

The echo of the gunshots faded away, leaving only the whistle of the wind. Steam rose off the dead at the barriers, their blood pooling on the frozen road.

Fenix ordered the teams out of the vehicles. The men approached slowly, rifles shouldered, scanning for movement while he slowly raked the barrel back and forth.

He could see most of the dead sentries from his vantage in the turret. Two men and a woman lay on the concrete near the barriers. One of the men was missing most of his head, and the other had taken three rounds to the chest, opening up gaping holes. The other bodies were all back near the vehicles, and none of them were moving, except for the man pinned under the van. The chassis had crushed his back, but he still moaned and tried to get away as the SOL soldiers approached.

Miles aimed a pistol point blank at the man’s forehead, firing a round that shattered the silence. Fenix continued searching for other hostiles. The kid was long gone, from what he could tell.

“Move the barriers,” Fenix ordered.

Working together, the SOL soldiers pushed the concrete barriers out of the way, opening a gap for the Humvee and the trucks to pass through. Horton would do the rest by slamming into the mini-van and pushing it off the road.

Fenix suddenly glimpsed motion in the ditch to the right of the roadblock. A girl was hiding in the bushes, a knife held in one hand and a pistol aimed at Miles.

“No you don’t, kid,” Fenix whispered. He fired a blast of rounds into the dirt at her feet, kicking up debris.

“Drop it!” Fenix yelled.

His men whipped around and centered their weapons on the bush. The girl remained there, apparently thinking she was invisible. His next shots were closer this time, tearing over the top of the foliage.

She finally tossed the gun over the bush and onto the concrete.

“The knife too!” Fenix shouted.

The knife came next.

“Put that kid in one of the trucks,” Fenix ordered.

His men grabbed her, and then dragged her kicking and screaming to one of the black pickups.

“Horton, let’s go,” Fenix said.

The Humvee rolled forward, and the cow guard crunched into the mini-van, metal scraping metal. It took a few minutes, but Horton managed to push the vehicle perpendicular to the others, opening a gap for the convoy to continue.

Horton gunned the engine, leaving the dead behind without a second thought. Reaching up, Fenix flipped his NVGs off and stared up at the dazzling, star-filled sky. He took in a deep breath of fresh, freezing air. Prospect Mountain rose into the sky. They weren’t far now, and in an hour or less, he would have what he came here for.

A flare suddenly streaked away from the crest of the mountain. Fenix watched it climb toward the moon before exploding and spreading a red glow over the town. They had been spotted, but it didn’t matter. The Brandenburger Commandos were ready for a fight.

He plucked the radio out of his vest and gave orders for the three vehicles to split off to their destinations. Then he opened the private channel to Sheriff Thompson.

“Crow 1, this is Eagle 1. Do you copy? Over.”

A few seconds later, an enraged voice came over the channel. “Roger,

Eagle 1, this is Crow 1. What's your fucking status? Over."

"We just took out the first roadblock and are heading toward Prospect Mountain."

"You see Colton, you don't touch him. Got it?"

Fenix didn't like Thompson's tone, but he held his tongue. After all, Colton had shot Thompson and his men, leaving them for dead on the side of the road. That'd make anybody touchy.

"Roger that, Crow 1. Proceeding with the mission. In a few hours, I'll have that Indian's head on a pike, and you'll have the intel you need to add Estes Park to our expanding territory," Fenix replied.

***

Raven stopped at the edge of the river, his bare feet sinking into the mud. Teepees lined the riverbank to his right. Smoke fingered out of the pointed tops. The scent of sizzling meat hit his nostrils, and he walked toward the river camp. Hissing wind and chirping crickets filled the warm night.

He knew it was another dream, but this one was peaceful, unlike the nightmares. Raven continued walking next to the river, calmed by the sound of rushing water.

The peace was shattered by a high-pitched scream.

And then he saw them.

The figures emerged from the water on the riverbank below the camp. They were naked men, six of them, their pallid flesh dripping in the moonlight. Sinewy muscles glistened across their bare flesh as they climbed the steep slope on all fours, like animals.

At the top, they stood, then moved at a crouch toward the teepees. One of the men remained behind, his shiny skull tilted up at the moon. He suddenly twisted and looked in Raven's direction. His face was not the face of a man. Jagged teeth rimmed his carmine gums, and eyes as black as obsidian fixated on Raven's location.

These were Water Cannibals, and they were here to kidnap children and bring them back to their underwater lairs, where they would feast on the tender flesh.

Raven felt the paralyzing fear that always came with dreaming about the monsters. He remained behind the bush, staring through the spindly foliage as

the Water Cannibals snuck into the village.

Another scream finally snapped him from the dream, and his mind reverted back to reality. His eyes focused on a dimly-lit space, with only a small lantern illuminating the sheets covering his body. Across the room was a medical chart.

He remembered, then. He was in the Estes Park Medical Center.

But had the last scream come from his dream, or had it been real?

Raven squirmed in his bed, trying to wake up and focus on the room. The chair Allie had been curled up in earlier was empty. In her place was Creek. The dog was by his side, tail wagging, whining at him as if to say, “Get up.”

Raven’s gut knotted. He knew something was wrong. But he could hardly move or think. His entire body felt numb, like it didn’t belong to him, and his mind was in a muddled fog.

A scream came from outside his door, and a gunshot followed. He knew the sounds were real from the way Creek reacted. The dog’s back went rigid, and he bared his teeth at the door.

The hospital was under some sort of an attack, and his family was missing.

Raven tried to move again, and this time managed to roll onto his side and throw a leg over the side of the bed. Creek nudged up against it, his way of trying to help.

Another scream, and a flurry of gunshots. Raven swung his other leg over the bed. He stood on bare feet and reached out for the wall, palming it to keep his balance.

Breathing heavily, he held there for a few seconds, trying to get his breath and focus. He was dressed only in green pants. Shoeless and shirtless, he stumbled over to the door. He grabbed the handle and slowly opened it to peer out into the dim hallway. A lantern set up halfway down provided just enough light to see the passage was empty. Creek wedged his body next to Raven to look out.

“Back,” Raven whispered.

A wave of light-headedness passed over him, and he forced his eyes closed to prevent himself from passing out. Then he opened his eyes and stumbled out into the hallway.

The gunfire had ceased and the screams had faded, but Raven could make out the sound of crying somewhere in the distance.

He grabbed the railing attached to the wall. He had no weapon to defend himself, but there was no time to look for one. He had to find Sandra and

Allie.

Creek trotted ahead, sniffing the tile floor. His nose stopped at the edge of a red streak. Raven's heart thumped at the sight of blood.

He stopped to look in the nearest room. This was where John Palmer had been staying, and Raven could see the bed was empty. Martha Kohler, the doctor refugee, wasn't in her room either.

Raven continued slugging along, using the railing and the lantern light to guide him. His body tingled, numb and distant. For the first time in his entire life, he truly felt as light as a feather.

That's a good thing, Sam, he tried to tell himself. *Just keep moving. One step at a time.*

Creek followed the trail of blood to an intersection, where his tail dropped behind his legs. A figure backpedaled around the left corner, nearly bumping into the dog. The man slowly turned, revealing black eyes and a mouth full of jagged teeth in the dim light. Raven knew what he was seeing couldn't be real. He blinked, and the man's face changed from that of a Water Cannibal into something worse…

A swastika and other black tattoos in the shapes of Nazi symbols covered his neck. The dark mustache hanging over his lips curled into a grin when he saw Raven and Creek. He quickly raised an M4 rifle, but Creek was faster.

"Attack!" Raven said, his voice nearly a shout.

Creek leapt onto the unsuspecting man. The dog tore a chunk of flesh away from his neck, pulling a vein with it and silencing the man before he could scream for help. The rifle clattered to the ground, and blood painted Creek's fur red.

Raven staggered forward and leaned down to pry a knife from the man's belt as Creek continued tearing strings of flesh away from the man's neck. An awful gurgling sound came from the Nazi's lips as he tried to scream. Somehow, he continued squirming as his neck gushed blood.

"You piece of shit," Raven whispered. He got down on his knees and rammed the blade deep in the man's gut. He jerked and focused wide eyes on Raven.

That's right, Raven thought. He continued jabbing the knife into the man's side, holding his gaze the entire time until the man went limp.

Raven stopped to look at his handiwork, but stars floating before his vision blurred his view. When they cleared, he saw Creek's muzzle was dripping red onto the tile, and strands of gristle were hanging from his teeth.

“Back,” Raven muttered.

The dog retreated. Raven went to stand, but slipped in the puddle. He reached over to grab the railing, and hoisted himself up with one hand, the knife in the other.

A muffled scream sounded in the distance.

Raven scooped the rifle off the ground and rounded the corner with the blade in his left hand, the gun in his right. As soon as he stepped around the corner, he saw bodies. Doctor Newton was sprawled on the ground, his white uniform splashed with red and his eyes staring at the ceiling panels. Two patients were face down, their backs bloody messes from what looked like knife wounds.

The man Raven had just killed must have done this, and Raven had a feeling he wasn’t alone. He set off through the scene of carnage, his naked feet leaving tracks in the blood.

This hallway was darker. The lantern lay on its side, its glow partially obstructed by the floor. Raven stopped when he heard a stifled scream. It had come from behind him. Laughter followed, and then a voice Raven recognized.

“Let her go!”

Was that Allie?

Hearing his niece in distress made Raven’s blood boil. He didn’t need the railing to keep moving now; adrenaline fueled his actions. He turned around and strode down the hallway, gun shouldered, with the knife pressed up against the grip of the handle. When he got to the operating room doors, he waited.

“My brother is going to come for me!” Sandra shouted.

More laughter followed. Then a deep voice. “Your brother is passed out like a drunk. He ain’t coming for you, bitch! We already made sure of it, but don’t worry. I already sent Greg back to kill his dog. When we’re done with you, we’ll bring your unconscious brother to the General.”

“NO!” Sandra screeched.

Raven clenched his jaw, and Creek moved into position, his single eye focused on the door as if he could understand what was happening on the other side. Raven adjusted his grip on the rifle and the knife, then slowly shouldered the door open and brought the barrel up, freezing at the sight that greeted him.

Sandra was on the floor in the middle of the room with two Nazis holding

her down. A third stood watching, with arms folded across his chest. Her features were swollen and bloody.

In the corner, Allie was curled up with a nurse who also had cuts on her face. All three men looked at Raven, eyes widening when they saw he was holding a rifle.

“You just made the biggest mistake of your lives,” Raven said. He pulled the trigger before they could respond, hitting the bald man on the left in the chest with two rounds. The man with folded arms took four rounds before the magazine went dry.

The third thug got up and barreled toward Raven, screaming, a vein bulging across his forehead right above a swastika symbol. Sandra raised a foot, tripping him before he could get to Raven. He crashed to the floor and slid toward Raven and Creek. They both descended on him like Water Cannibals.

Creek clamped down onto his neck while Raven jammed his blade into the man’s back so hard the blade penetrated the other side and clicked on the tile floor. Raven yanked the knife out and continued stabbing him, over and over.

Raven went to work on his chest and stomach, carving him up like a Thanksgiving turkey. After he was finished with the torso, he stuck the sharp edge into the cheek and jaw, and finally the eyes. By the time Raven and Creek were done, the man was gushing from a dozen puncture wounds.

A voice finally stopped him.

“Sam!”

It was Sandra, and she had crawled over to grab him by the arm.

Blood pulsating in his ears and lungs wheezing, Raven pushed himself back up and tried to blink away the stars crossing his vision. He crashed to the floor with exhaustion, dropping the blood-streaked blade. His vision went in and out again as the adrenaline began to fade.

There were other voices, and then blurred shapes appeared all around him. He blinked to the sight of someone crouched by his side. At some point he lost consciousness, only to be snapped back to reality by a smack to his face.

He felt that, and saw a second smack coming, but he reached up to grab the hand.

“Don’t,” Raven grumbled.

Hands gripped him under his armpits and helped him to a sitting position on the floor. He blinked rapidly, trying to focus on the figures surrounding him. There were voices in the distance, cries for help and frightened shouts.

He let go of the arm and focused on the person it was attached to. It was Chief Colton, and his face was also streaked with blood. Dale moved in behind him and helped Allie to her feet.

“You’re okay, Sam, but don’t close your eyes,” Colton said. “We need you for the coming battle.”

— 18 —

“The battle for Charlotte is over,” Captain Harris said. “We won the day, but took heavy losses.”

Charlize stood at her desk in Constellation with the satellite phone clutched to her ear. She had been waiting for this call all morning.

“One hundred American soldiers are KIA. The surviving gang members have scattered, and we’re planning to retake the SC in a few hours. I’ve already got the convoy of equipment and food ready to move to get distributed to the people who need it.”

“Good work, Captain,” Charlize said.

“It’s not over yet. Hold on just a moment, ma’am.”

Charlize looked over to Albert, who stood in the corner, his arms folded across his chest and eyes downward, although he was clearly listening to the call. He had just returned back to Constellation an hour earlier, and still had blood on his clothes. Chinese and American, according to him. He had been there when Corporal Van Dyke died in the medical tent.

“Sorry, ma’am, I just got word the Chinese are preparing to move out,” Harris said. “I don’t have any updates for you besides what you already know. Captain Cao and his team have been a great help here, as I’m sure Officer Randall will attest.”

“I’m about to speak to him now,” she said. “Stay safe out there, Captain.”

“You too, Madame Secretary.”

Charlize set the phone down on the desk and smiled at Albert. “Are you glad to be home?”

“Not sure I’d call this place home, but I’m glad to be back.”

She gestured at the chair in front of her desk, and he took a seat.

“How are you?”

“I’m okay.”

“Big Al, you can talk to me. Tell me how you’re really doing.”

He shrugged his linebacker shoulders. “Things were pretty bad on the road, especially in Charlotte, but I’m optimistic about the partnership with the Chinese. Captain Cao seems to be an honorable man. He told me the real enemy to worry about is North Korea.”

“After the attack in New York, I’m going to have to agree with the Captain.” She sighed and took a seat.

“Is that how many we have lost?” Albert asked, pointing at something behind her.

“Lost?”

Albert got out of his chair and walked over to a chart hanging on the wall, which showed the estimated death toll across the United States.

“Yes,” she said.

“How is that possible?” He turned away from the wall to look her in the eye. “Seventy-five million people dead?”

“That was a few days ago,” Charlize said. “That number will continue to rise, especially in the Midwest. It’s projected to be closer to one hundred million.”

Albert grimaced. “I’ve seen how ugly it is out there, but it’s still hard to imagine that many people gone.”

“I know, and that’s why I’m relieved to hear things are going relatively smoothly with the Chinese so far. With their help, we will have the power back on for most of the country in a year. The aid we’re getting from our NATO allies, combined with theirs, will save over a hundred million lives.”

“That’s if the North Koreans don’t have another trick up their sleeve. What if they have a backpack nuke or—”

“I’ve already put a plan in motion to protect the country from further attacks. Every functional law enforcement agency is being warned to be on the lookout for terrorists. And we’re going after domestic terrorists too, like we did in Charlotte. Fenix is next. Mark my words, we’re going to find his weasel ass soon.”

Albert nodded. “I’m glad you’re in charge, ma’am, and I’m glad to be back with you.”

“Thanks, Big Al, it means a lot to hear you say that.” She stood and gestured toward the door. “Let’s go see the boys and get something to eat for lunch, shall we?”

“Sounds good to me, I’m starving.”

An hour later, they were in the cafeteria with Ty and Dave. The kids both peppered Albert with questions.

“What’s it like beyond the walls?” Dave asked around a mouthful of green beans.

“The walls?” Albert asked.

Charlize smiled at Dave. “I think he means Constellation.”

“No, this is Helm’s Deep.” Dave stopped chewing and stared back at her with a very serious look.

“Just play along,” Ty whispered.

Dave’s gaze flitted to Ty, and they both laughed. The sight warmed her heart.

“Big Al, I have a question,” Ty said.

“What’s up?”

“Are the Chinese good people?” Ty asked, tilting his head.

Albert responded quickly. “Yes, I think they are.”

“Will they help us find Fenix?” Ty replied.

Charlize and Albert exchanged a look.

“The Chinese are helping us turn the power back on and get our country up and running again,” Charlize said. “And yes, they are helping us track down men like Fenix.”

Dave shoveled another forkful of vegetables in his mouth, chewing and listening intently to the conversation. “Are the Chinese like the Elves?” he asked.

“They are our allies, if that’s what you mean,” Charlize said.

After swallowing his food, Dave asked another question. “Then who are the Dwarves?”

“You just don’t give up, do you, kid?” Albert said with a chuckle. He wiped his mouth politely with a napkin. “I’m going to go check on my sister, ma’am.”

Charlize nodded. “I hope she’s doing okay today.”

“She’s much better, thank you.”

Footfalls tapped on the cafeteria floor, and Charlize twisted in her chair to see Colonel Raymond walking through the mostly empty room. She sighed. Of course she couldn’t have a single meal without an interruption.

“Secretary Montgomery, I’m sorry to bother you, but there’s something I think you’re going to want to hear,” Raymond said.

“Excuse me, I’ll be right back.”

“I’ll stay here with them,” Albert said.

The kids continued talking to the officer as she followed Raymond out of the cafeteria. She heard Dave ask if Albert had brought him back the DVDs he’d promised. She stepped into the hallway before Albert gave an answer.

They stopped at a small room manned by two military officers listening to radio equipment. One of the officers handed Charlize a headset. She put it over her ears and waited for the message.

“This is Police Chief Marcus Colton of Estes Park, Colorado.”

Charlize raised a brow.

“We have been attacked by soldiers from the Sons of Liberty and need assistance. When you get this, please contact me immediately.”

The message ended, and she plucked the headphones from her head. “When did this come in?”

“We just discovered it a few minutes ago, but sounds like it came in last night,” Thor said.

“Christ,” she replied. “Do we have confirmation?”

“Working on that,” Raymond said from another station.

Charlize glanced at the Colonel. “Tell our pilots to get ready. If this is real, I want to be on the first flight to Estes Park.”

***

Colton wiped the tears from his face as he looked out over Bond Park. Snipers were setting up shop on the rooftops of buildings around town square, and civilians were building defensive positions on balconies and porches overlooking the mountains.

It was late morning the day after the raid on Fort Collins and the attack by the Sons of Liberty soldiers. Smoke still drifted across the sky. Colton stood in front of town hall, one of the buildings targeted in the attack. His boots crunched over the skirt of glass around the front entrance. He couldn’t bear to go back inside, where Margaret and several members of the militia lay dead.

It was his fault. He had pulled most of the defenses away from town and placed them on Highway 34 to back him up on the raid.

Outside, civilians were milling around the square. Some of them were looking for loved ones, and others just wanted news. Some of these people

didn’t even know what had happened. Truthfully, Colton was still trying to put together the pieces himself.

What he did know was this: Sheriff Thompson was still alive, and had teamed up with General Fenix. They were each dangerous enough on their own, but put them together, and the two sociopaths would leave behind a trail of devastation.

The violence that had hit Estes Park the previous night was just the beginning.

The broken front door to town hall opened behind him, shards of glass raining to the concrete.

“Chief, I’ve got the most recently updated numbers,” said Lindsey.

He didn’t want her to see him with wet eyes. His people needed to know he was strong, that he could still lead them. “Go ahead,” he said, trying to steel himself.

“Seventy-seven dead, and one hundred and five wounded,” she said, choking up. “Doctor Newton is dead, and Doctor Duffy and the nurses are overwhelmed with patients. We have a few med students helping with the worst of the trauma, but they are overwhelmed.”

“God help us,” Colton whispered. Another tear fell from his eyes. Part of him felt like this was his doing—that he had caused this. But the attack last night from General Fenix had clearly been in the works before he’d decided to raid Fort Collins.

He walked back toward the building, stopping to stare at the blood-splattered lobby, and thinking of the horror that had occurred here when the SOL soldiers barged in. Margaret had gone down firing her Glock, giving the other civilians in the station enough time to escape out the back while the militia battled the Nazis.

Lindsey patted him on the back.

“It’s okay,” she said. “Everything is going to be okay.”

“Yeah.” It was the only thing he could say. He walked inside, to where several men were standing and talking in low voices. Dale Jackson, Detective Ryburn, Officer Matthew, and John Kirkus turned to face him.

“We’ve moved the deceased out of the station, and have taken a tally on the weapons that are left,” Ryburn said.

“It’s not good, Chief,” Dale cut in. A ring of sweat surrounded his collar, and blood coated the front of his sweatshirt. “Those Nazis took most of our weapons in the safe room.”

Colton grimaced. “Fenix didn’t just come on a shooting spree last night,” he said. “He came for intel and to take our weapons, opening the door to a major attack from Thompson.”

There was a moment of raw silence in the lobby, leaving only the chatter of civilians outside. Lindsey was the first to speak.

“What do we do, Chief?”

Colton put his hand on the grip of his Colt .45. He was all out of tricks, and exhausted emotionally and physically. There was only one thing they could do.

“We fight,” he said. “I told you to prepare for war when I got back from Fort Collins. I made the mistake of not making sure Thompson was dead. That’s on me. These deaths, are on…” he choked before the final word, and then added, “*me*.”

“No, they’re not, sir,” Lindsey said firmly.

“She’s right, Chief,” Dale said. “This isn’t your fault.”

“It doesn’t matter right now. All that matters is keeping these people safe and figuring out a way to survive the winter.” Colton pointed to the crowd outside.

There were several nods.

“So here’s what we’re going to do. Lindsey, get out the bullhorn and drive through the streets, telling everyone to go to the high school where we sheltered after the North Korean attacks.”

Colton shifted his gaze to Dale. “Dale, I’d like you and John to handle security on Highway 36. That’s where Thompson will likely try to bring his vehicles.”

“What about 34?” Kirkus asked.

“I’m going to flood it and destroy the road,” Colton said. “That will cut off a major artery and force Thompson to either use Highway 36 or come in from the south, on Highway 7. We will concentrate our forces there, and put snipers along the road. If he wants to add Estes Park to his territory, we’re going to make him pay dearly for it.”

Kirkus inclined his white cowboy hat. “Same goes with Storm Mountain. Thompson’s going to bleed if he wants our land.”

“Do we know how many men he has? How many weapons? How many working vehicles?” Ryburn asked.

The soft-spoken detective looked at Colton with fear in his gaze. Officer Matthew was also clearly rattled, his right hand shaking by his side.

“Dale, can you answer that?” Colton asked.

“He’s got about a dozen vehicles, and soldiers in the hundreds as best I could tell. Not sure on weapons, but my guess is he’s got us outgunned.”

“That’s close to what I saw when I was in captivity, but this new alliance with Fenix could change things. There’s no telling how many soldiers Fenix might add to the cause,” Colton said.

Shouting came from outside as citizens flooded over the lawn and streets. Colton’s family would be joining them soon. He had told Kelly to gather the neighbors and head to the station in Jake’s Chevy pickup.

“You better say something, Chief,” Lindsey said.

“Get me the bullhorn.”

She retreated into the station to grab the loudspeaker while Colton stepped back outside. He scanned the crowd of hundreds that was making its way toward the building. Some of them were crying, while others were shivering from the cold. Most of them were women, children, and the elderly. Those that could fight had already been deployed to the roadblocks.

Lindsey returned with the bullhorn.

“Any word from Secretary Montgomery?” Colton asked.

She shook her head.

“Ryburn, back inside and try getting another message through,” Colton said.

“You got it, Chief.”

Colton stepped outside with Lindsey to address the civilians. There were hundreds here, maybe even a thousand. He lifted the bullhorn to his lips as he saw his wife and daughter emerge from the crowd.

He waved them over, but then realized they’d see the gore-stained floor inside the building. Kelly wrapped her arms around Risa, who looked at Colton with wide eyes.

“It’s okay, sweetie,” he said although he knew it wasn’t okay. What else could he say? He could no longer shield his daughter from the horrors of this world. Kelly took his hand, showing her support, and he stepped out to address the growing crowd.

“Everyone, I know you’re scared. What happened last night was an act of terror. But today we must come together as one. Neighbors, friends, family, and above all, Americans.” Colton paused as more people joined the crowd on the streets.

“The attack last night won’t be the last. Soon, the men that perpetrated it

will come back, and this time they will come for everything we have," he said.

Almost everyone in the crowd seemed to begin talking all at once, hundreds of voices ringing out.

"Please listen," Colton said over the murmurings. "We must band together and fight. Our very future depends on it."

The civilians quieted in the park and streets, hundreds of eyes fixated on him. "Everyone that's able to fight, please come forward. The rest of you will be taken to shelter at the high school," Colton said.

"What if we surrender?" someone shouted.

"Yeah, why can't we just lay down our weapons?" another person yelled. "Surely the Sheriff of Fort Collins won't slaughter us if we act reasonably."

"Like last night?" Colton said, his response was firm and quick. "Surrendering is not an option against this enemy. We must fight and defend our town. If they want it, we must make them pay dearly."

He lowered his bullhorn and looked back at Kelly, his rock. They had been through some tough times, but she had always stood by his side. She smiled, and he raised his bullhorn back to his mouth. Everyone was focused on him, hoping to hear something reassuring or hopeful, but they needed to hear the truth.

"Some of us will die protecting Estes Park in the coming days, and I may be one of them. If I fall, I will die proudly to protect the people and the town I love."

***

Twelve hours after taking the first of the antibiotics, Raven was finally starting to feel better. His back still hurt, but his fever had broken and he didn't look like a ghost anymore. But even better, he had plenty of energy to interrogate the one surviving member of the Sons of Liberty raiding party.

"You up for this?" Colton asked.

Raven answered by grabbing the door handle and walking inside. Colton followed and closed the door behind them. They were inside the utility room in the Estes Park Medical Center where they had Miles, a member of the Sons of Liberty, handcuffed to a metal pipe. They had found him hiding in a ditch a few hours earlier with a broken leg.

“I’m going to make this really easy,” Colton said. “You’re going to tell us where General Fenix is hiding, and I will allow our remaining doctor to set your leg.”

“If you don’t tell us where Fenix is, then things are going to be… interesting.” Raven used his boot to push down on the young man’s left leg, where the bone had split through the skin.

Miles let out a scream as Raven applied pressure. He eased off a moment later, and bent down next to the soldier. His shaved head glistened with sweat that streamed down his pale forehead and youthful features.

“How old are you?” Raven asked.

Miles whimpered. “I just turned seventeen.”

Raven looked up at Colton, who shook his head. Miles was just a kid. But he was still the enemy.

“I’m sorry, I really am. I only shot at people that were armed. I promise. I could have killed the girl we took on the road, but I didn’t.”

Raven leaned down. “What girl?”

“Sarah, I think.” Miles adjusted his cuffed hands so he could look at Raven. “Please, please don’t kill me.”

They already knew Jennie, Sarah’s caretaker, had been killed on the road, but learning Fenix had taken the girl was a shock. When Dale Jackson found out, he would be furious.

“Tell us where Fenix is,” Colton said.

Raven knew the chief already had his mind made up about the fate of the young man in front of them. It didn’t matter how old Miles was. He was a Nazi, and he had made his choice. Any conflict Raven felt about his age ended when he remembered the three men who had beaten, and were preparing to rape, his sister in front of Allie the night before.

“Tell us,” Raven said. He stood and prepared to push his boot against the wound again.

Miles stared up at Raven. “He’ll kill me if I tell you.”

“We will kill you if you don’t,” Colton replied.

Wincing, Miles straightened his back against the wall.

“He’s got an FOB not far from here. He’s preparing to use it when Thompson attacks Estes Park.”

Miles’s eyes flitted toward Raven. “He will come back, I promise you that. He wants you.”

Raven swallowed hard. Once again, his actions had put his family at risk.

He knew then that he couldn't wait for an attack. He had to go to Fenix before his men could attack.

Colton pulled out a folded-up map and placed it on the floor in front of Miles.

"Show us where," Colton said.

"Promise you'll let me live?" Miles asked.

Colton unlocked the handcuffs so Miles could point out the location. He winced in pain and rubbed at his wrists as he studied the map.

"You help us, and we will help you," Colton said. He drew his Colt .45 and pointed it at Miles and added, "You lie to us, you die."

Miles swallowed. "This is where Fenix is," he said, pointing.

Raven looked down to the spot. "Lily Lake? That's only a couple miles south of town."

"How many soldiers are up there?" Colton asked.

Miles squinted in pain. "Only about thirty. But he did bring the big guns. M240s and some mortars we picked off a Chinese convoy."

"Jesus," Colton said.

Raven stood and scratched at the stubble on his face as he thought of the implications. Thompson and Fenix were preparing to launch a full-scale attack on Estes Park, and they were going to do it from two different directions.

Miles slowly wagged his head. He sighed when Colton lowered his gun and motioned for Raven to meet him back at the door. When they got there, Colton aimed his pistol at Miles.

"No!" the teenager shouted.

The shot hit him in the center of the forehead, slamming his head back and painting the ceiling with blood and brains. Colton holstered his gun like nothing had happened, and stepped outside with Raven.

"We have to get this message to Secretary Montgomery," Colton said.

Raven closed the door so he didn't have to see the dead boy's destroyed head.

"There might not be time for that," he said. "We have to stop Fenix on our own."

"No, we need to stay here and man our defenses."

Raven shook his head. "Chief, we do that and we die. He's got fucking mortars. I'm going out there to stop him."

"You're going to fight thirty men?"

“I know someone that will help. You heard Miles—they have Sarah. Dale will get her back.”

“I really need you both here,” Colton said, frowning. He gave Raven a side glance. “You’re right, but you two aren’t going alone.”

Raven shook his head. “Let us go. You need everybody on the barriers. I’ll take one of the working radios and report back. It’s close enough you can deploy some militia if needed.”

Colton thought on it, and then nodded. “I’ll keep trying to reach Secretary Montgomery with this new intel. In the meantime, you two go see if Miles was telling the truth. I’ll hold the fort down here.”

Raven reached out with his fist, and Colton bumped it back.

“Keep my family safe, Chief.”

“Keep mine safe, too,” Colton replied.

— 19 —

The front door to the Estes Park Medical Center opened, and a young woman with freckles and crystal blue eyes stepped inside the lobby, taking off her scarf and hat.

“Who’s in charge here?” she asked.

Sandra waved a hand. “You’re Rea?”

“Yup.”

She directed the young med student toward the doors to the hospital. She would join the other five already working inside.

“Doctor Duffy will get you started. I’ll be right there to help,” Sandra said.

Rea nodded, swallowed, and headed for the doors. Sandra couldn’t help but wonder if this was the first time the student had actually seen a patient. But right now, they needed all the help they could get.

Sandra turned back to her family. Raven’s dark skin had regained some color, and he was walking unaided, but he still looked like death warmed over. Allie stood to his right, stroking Creek’s coat. She hadn’t said much at all since the attack, and it broke Sandra’s heart to see her daughter once again terrified. She brushed a strand of brown hair from her bruised face with a shaking hand.

“I know you have to fight, Sam, but you need to rest at least another day,” Sandra said.

“I’m almost back to normal,” Raven said, revealing his snow-white teeth in a half grin.

“Bullshit. Those antibiotics may have kicked in, but you’re weak. You need—”

“So give me something to make me strong,” he said. “You guys got new meds last night from the raid on Fort Collins, right? Let’s put ’em to good

use. Don’t you got some stimulants or something I can have?”

Sandra sucked in a deep breath and looked out over the families sitting in the lobby. They were clustered in the small room like animals, the scent of sweat filling the stuffy space. Many of them were sobbing and clutching one another as they waited for word on their loved ones.

“I have to get back in there, Sam,” she said.

“I know, and I have to get out there to make sure more people don’t end up here.”

Sandra let out her breath in a sigh. She was doing everything possible to hold it together, but after the attack, she was a nervous wreck. They had several volunteers working in the operating area, including Doctor Meyers, who had helped save Creek at Storm Mountain, and Doctor Martha Kohler, who was nearly fully recovered from her own wounds. But even with Rea and the other med students that had shown up, it wasn’t enough. It would never be enough.

She looked back to her brother, and then Allie and Creek. Her heart longed to stay with them, but she knew her duty was to help here with the injured and dying. She also knew Allie would be safer at the designated shelter—and that Raven had to go out there to fight.

“Sandra, you with me?” he asked.

She nodded. “I’m sorry. I was just thinking.”

“We’re alive, and that’s all that matters. But in order to make sure we stay alive, I need to fight. I think you know that.”

“I don’t want you to fight anymore,” Allie said, speaking for the first time in hours.

Creek let out a whine.

“Uncle Raven has to fight,” Sandra said, crouching in front of Allie. “And you have to go to the shelter with Teddy and the other kids.”

“No, Mom, I want to stay with you.”

Sandra wiped a fleck of dried blood off Allie’s face that the tears hadn’t washed away.

“I will join you when I can, sweetie. But for now, you have to go.”

Allie looked up at Raven. “You’re taking me to the shelter?”

“Yes, *Agaliga*.”

Sandra almost smiled at the Cherokee word for “sunshine.” Even now, when all seemed lost, her brother’s love for Allie warmed her.

“I love you, Sam. Please, please be careful out there,” she whispered.

“I love you too, sis.” He put his hand on Allie’s head, ruffling her hair. Allie giggled at that.

A flash of red and the clank of an ancient metal truck came from outside. Jake’s 1952 Chevy pickup pulled up in front of the doors with Lindsey behind the wheel. She had several families in the back that were heading to the shelter.

“See, there’s Teddy and his parents,” Sandra said, pointing. A dog’s head poked up in the pickup bed.

Allie smiled. “Hey, that’s Teddy’s dog!”

“Yup, and that truck’s our ride, kiddo,” Raven said.

Sandra gave him another hug, holding him an extra few seconds and praying this wasn’t the last time they would embrace. When they let go, she told him to wait for a minute. She hurried back into the hospital, the sounds of moaning patients and the scent of bleach overwhelming her. She forced her way past the overflowing beds. Some of the patients reached out for help.

“I’ll be right back,” she said. “I promise.”

She raided the pill cabinet, found the stimulants she was looking for, and then raced back out to the lobby. She handed the bottle to Raven.

“If you get drowsy, take these. They will help with the pain and help keep you alert.”

“Thanks,” Raven said. He turned to Allie. “Time to go, kiddo.”

“I love you, Mom,” Allie said.

“I love you too, baby,” Sandra said. Normally, she would have shed tears as she left her family. But today she didn’t have any tears left to shed.

***

The sun was high in the sky by the time Charlize made her way to the tarmac. A V-22 Osprey was waiting in the shimmering heat. Sergeant Fugate and his team were finishing their final gear checks and loading crates into the back of the tiltrotor military aircraft.

She counted ten of the Green Berets. Thoreau and Sammie, the two men who had helped hold the stairwell in New York, had both been killed during the North Korean terror attack.

“This better be worth the trip across the country,” Colonel Raymond said as they took seats in the Osprey. Albert sat next to Charlize and strapped in.

“Colton is a good man,” she replied. “My brother trusted him, so I trust him.”

“I’m not doubting that, ma’am. I’m just concerned about this standoff he’s reporting with the Sheriff of Fort Collins. We can’t get caught in conflicts between communities like this.” There was anger in his voice, the first time Charlize had heard him ever speak with anything but respect.

“I understand that, Colonel, but if what he says is true—if this Sheriff Thompson has teamed up with Fenix—then I’m inclined to step in.”

Raymond still wasn’t backing down. “But do you have to go there personally? This could end up being a disaster if we don’t catch Fenix.”

“We *will* catch him this time.”

“I’m certainly going to do everything to ensure that happens, ma’am. I’ve already got several military assets on their way.”

“What assets?” she asked.

“A Black Hawk out of Denver, plus a Marine fire-team that’s been guarding a Chinese crew,” he replied. “Chinese and American air support is also standing by.”

“Good, but I don’t want a single weapon fired until we’re positive it’s Fenix.”

“Understood.”

“We got your back, Secretary Montgomery,” Fugate said from his seat.

“I know you do, Sergeant. Thank you.”

The ring of her satellite phone sounded, and she fished it from her pack as the lift gate of the Osprey began to close.

“This is Charlize Montgomery,” she said.

“Secretary Montgomery, this is Captain Harris. How are you?”

“I’m good. How are things in Charlotte?”

“Good, ma’am. We’re setting up shop at the SC again, and then I’m moving out with the convoy to the next location. I wanted to let you know that things have improved greatly since you were here last, thanks to our Chinese counterparts.”

“Excellent news, Captain.”

“There is some bad news, though.”

Her heart fluttered. The overhead and bulkheads hummed as the pilots flipped on the engines of the Osprey.

“I’m getting word of several white supremacy groups popping up on the east coast, attacking the Chinese and American convoys. They are killing

workers, too. Apparently they are being told to rise up by a man they call The General.”

Charlize cursed under her breath. If that was true, then Fenix was extending his reach beyond Colorado. She wasn’t sure how that was possible, but she couldn’t let his racist tendrils spread through the platform he was using to convey his message of hate.

“Don’t worry about that, Captain Harris. You just keep doing your job, and I’ll take care of this General,” she said.

“Roger that, ma’am. I’ll talk to you soon.”

The Osprey pilots took off vertically from the small tarmac, and pulled the bird into the air as she hung up the phone. She patted Albert on his forearm and then looked over at Colonel Raymond.

“Hope you’re ready for this, because I’m not coming home without Fenix this time,” she said.

***

Colton had done everything he could to prepare for battle, including reaching out to the Secretary of Defense. But while her people had promised to check out the location Miles had given, she hadn’t agreed to send any support to Estes Park to fight Sheriff Thompson. He guessed the federal government didn’t want to get involved in skirmishes like this.

He took a slug of water and tried to focus through the exhaustion. He hadn’t been this tired since the time he and Jake had spent thirty-six hours on patrol in Afghanistan—the same night Colton shot and killed his first Taliban soldier.

I wish you were here with me, buddy, Colton thought. He stood on the cliffs above Highway 34 with Lindsey. Like Jake would have done, she was standing by his side, ready to fight anyone that would threaten Estes Park or the United States of America.

The war in Afghanistan no longer seemed much different than the one they were fighting now. In both cases, innocent people were going to die at the hands of evil men, and good people would die defending them. All Colton could do was keep fighting and hoping the bloodshed would end soon. He centered his binoculars on the road to watch the refugees fleeing the canyon below.

“Why haven’t they attacked yet?” Lindsey asked.

“Waiting for night is my guess.”

The mountains were preparing to swallow the sun, and when the light was gone, Colton had a feeling Thompson would make his move. It was a fatal error on the Sheriff’s part, giving Colton time to prepare. Everyone living along the highway had been evacuated over the course of the day, and with night falling, Colton was preparing for the first part of the battle for his city.

“That’s the last of them,” Lindsey said.

Colton moved his scopes to the south, where a caravan of armed civilians conscripted into soldiers were heading down Highway 36 to man the new barriers at the intersection with Mall Road. That’s where he would be going next.

He pivoted to look over the town. His family and most of the other civilians were holed up at the high school, where Detective Ryburn had organized over one hundred fighters to protect the building at all costs. To the south, another two hundred people were set up along various places along Highway 7.

“We’ve done all we can,” Lindsey said.

“If Miles was telling the truth, it won’t matter,” Colton replied. He lowered the binoculars to look at the captain. “Do you know what mortar fire and an M240 will do to our defenses? What it does to a human body?”

“John Palmer,” Lindsey said quietly.

Colton dipped his head. “Let’s hope Raven and Dale find Fenix before they can do any damage.”

Lindsey looked to the south, where Raven and Dale were heading out on horseback. She didn’t say a word, but Colton could tell she was worried. Over the past two months, she and Raven had become close—close enough that Colton wondered if they might have developed into something more than friends under different circumstances.

“Raven can look out for himself,” Colton said.

“Yeah, but he’s still not one hundred percent better. He was just on his death bed a few days ago.”

“He’s been near death before.”

“Yeah, but…”

A flare suddenly streaked to the east over Big Thompson River. Colton followed it into the sky. The flare bloomed over Storm Mountain.

“It’s begun,” he whispered.

Colton brought the walkie-talkie up to his lips and counted silently. In his mind's eye, he could picture Thompson's vehicles racing up Highway 34 along the river. They were about to get one hell of a greeting.

He centered the binos back on the canyon. John Kirkus and his men were camped out on Storm Mountain, hoping that Thompson's attack would pass them by, but if that didn't happen, they would escape out the back route and meet up with Colton's forces along Mall Road.

Headlights confirmed the enemy vehicles had indeed passed by Storm Mountain. Thompson's eyes were on the prize—Estes Park. Colton centered his binos on the first of the vehicles, a truck with metal plates soldered over the windows and the back bed to protect the soldiers. Another three trucks were moving up the canyon behind the lead vehicle.

"Matthews, blow the dam," Colton ordered into the radio.

He lowered his binos and hunched down with Lindsey. They both looked over at the Estes Park Lake, where hundreds of millions of gallons of water were about to come gushing into the canyon.

One by one, the blocks of explosives went off across the dam wall, moving left to right until they reached the center. Water gushed out of the gaping holes. Spider-web cracks raced across the concrete wall as more water burst through gaps. In a minute, the entire wall collapsed, letting out the frigid water.

Colton stood and watched in awe as the flood raced down the road, churning toward the convoy of vehicles. The trucks had all stopped on the road while the drivers tried to figure out what was going on. The lead truck attempted to turn around, but it was too late. The wall of water slammed into the side with such force it knocked the entire convoy away like toys.

"Hell yes!" Lindsey shouted.

Colton simply watched and waited, knowing this was just the beginning. He wanted to believe Thompson had been in one of the first vehicles, but he knew the man was smarter than that. This was just the first wave. Colton knew, because it's what he would have done.

"Come on, Captain, let's get into position," he said.

***

The explosions had startled the horses. Both of them paced on the narrow

path, snorting the cold air.

“Easy, girl, easy,” Raven said to Willow.

Dale looked over from his mount, Rhino. “Was that the dam?”

Raven pulled out his radio. “Hawk 1, this is Akita 1. Do you copy? Over.”

“Roger, Akita 1, this is Hawk 1. We just blew the dam. What’s your status?”

“On our way to the coordinates. Will report in shortly.”

“Good luck, Akita 1.”

Raven gave Willow a gentle kick to the ribs and gripped the reins tighter, urging her down the windy path carved through the thick forest. Branches reached out across the path, scratching at his coat and the ballistic vest stuffed with extra magazines. They were about a mile away from Lily Lake, and a soft snow was fluttering from the dark sky.

It was the first time Raven had been outside since the mountain lion attack, and he had finally accepted his body wasn’t ready for this. His head pounded, and his back burned. For the past hour, he had held off on taking any of the pills, but as they neared the potential location of Fenix and his men, Raven decided to take one.

Dale nudged his large horse next to Willow as the path widened.

“You feeling good, boss?” Dale asked. He watched Raven down the pill with a slug of water.

“Boss?” Raven said with a raised brow. “I’m fine, just got a headache.”

“Good. I need you frosty. When I find the fuckers that killed Jennie and took Sarah…” His angry words trailed off.

“We’re going to find Sarah. Don’t worry, brother.” Raven adjusted the strap of the crossbow slung over his shoulders. It had caught on one of the hatchets sheathed behind his back. His AR-15 was hanging over his chest, and he grabbed the grip once he’d finished with his crossbow strap.

Creek bolted through the woods ahead, tail up. The dog had picked up a scent.

“Let’s go, girl,” Raven said, giving Willow another nudge.

The two horses took off after the dog. Raven scanned the terrain for movement in the green hue of his NVGs. Colton had given them the precious optics for this mission.

They were coming up the back way to get a better view of the lake and the highway on the other side of the water, which was where Raven suspected Fenix and his men were camped out with their heavy weapons. But so far, he

didn’t see any fresh tracks from man or machine.

Spindly pines lined the bluff on the right side of the path. Raven directed Willow up the slope, her hooves crunching the snow. At the crest, Dale and Raven dismounted and followed Creek to a ridgeline that looked over the lake. The rocky terrain stretched about a quarter mile around the lake.

Raven checked the ridgeline, and then got down on his belly to crawl to the edge, where they propped their rifles up and scanned the lake below.

“See anything?” Dale whispered.

Raven did a quick scan without his scope, looking for movement or anything out of the ordinary. All he saw were some abandoned cars covered in snow on the highway, and another few parked near the lake. That was it. No trucks or Humvees. Nothing to indicate the presence of SOL.

“The fucker lied to us,” Raven mumbled.

What if this was a trap? What if Miles was trying to get Colton to send men south of town?

“We have to get back,” Raven said, pushing himself to his feet with a grimace. His head was still acting up, and he felt light-headed.

Dale cursed. “Maybe he wasn’t lying after all. Look at the highway again.”

Raven brought his scope up and zoomed in on the highway one last time, where he saw something he’d missed earlier due to his damn head. The tire tracks on the road were fresh enough that the snow hadn’t covered them yet.

Creek growled, but Raven kept his eyes on the tracks. They were heading north, directly toward Estes Park.

He took his right hand off the rifle stock to reach for his radio, but then he saw another set of tracks. These were boot prints leading away from the lake, up the slope, and into the trees about a tenth of a mile from their position.

Creek growled again.

“What the…” Dale begin to say.

Raven was already bringing his rifle up. He moved it to the right and held it on a figure in white camouflage, holding a shotgun and moving at a hunch along the rocky ridge.

“Dale, get down!” Raven shouted.

The boom of the shotgun sounded before Dale could move, peppering the ground with pellets. He rolled away, and Raven stood with his rifle shouldered. A trigger pull sent three rounds punching through the center of the shooter’s white coat, splattering it with carmine. He crumpled to the ground, bleeding out onto the snow.

Muzzle flashes came from the trees a hundred feet away from the fallen man. Raven hunched down behind a rock with Creek while Dale found cover. Bullets cracked off the rocks all around them.

“Two hostiles in those trees,” Raven said. “I’ll draw them out, and you take them down.”

“No, you’re the better shot. I’ll go.”

Raven agreed, and raised his gun over the rock, firing a three-round blast to give cover. Dale took off running, drawing fire instantly.

Holding in a breath, Raven aimed for the trees. His first shot lanced into bark, but the second clipped the arm of a shooter. The man stumbled away from cover, and Raven put a bullet in his neck. He then trained the barrel on the final hostile and put a three-round burst into the right side of his chest. The man spun away from the tree, hitting the dirt on his side.

“Clear,” Raven said. He did a final scan, and then looked for Dale. The big man was panting behind a rock and gave a thumbs up.

The gunshots faded away, leaving the two men in silence. The cold wind rustled their clothing as they waited to make sure there weren’t any other snipers on the ridgeline. But every second they held position was a second closer to Fenix storming Estes Park with those M240s and mortar rounds.

Dale moved over at a crouch. “That all of ’em?”

“I think so,” Raven said, looking over at Creek. The dog sat on his haunches, relaxed.

Raven pulled out his radio. “Hawk 1, this is Akita 1. We took down three wolves, but the rest of the pack is on the way to the pasture.”

“We’re about to have company here, too, Akita 1. Get your ass back here and find the pack.”

“Roger that.”

“Let’s check those dead guys. Then we get to the horses and hightail it back to town,” Raven said.

Rifles shouldered, Dale and Raven made their way across to the ridgeline at a cautious trot. The first man lay sprawled in the snow on his back, eyes open and staring at the moon. Raven bent down to pull his stocking cap off, revealing a shaved head.

“Definitely a Nazi.”

Dale was already on his way to the trees. “Got a live one,” he said.

Raven hurried over.

The man was squirming on the ground, holding his guts where Raven had

shot him with a 5.56 mm round. Dale had picked up his dropped M4. Raven picked up the other M4 from the third shooter, who was already cold to the touch.

"Hurry. Police up their ammo," Raven said to Dale. Then he bent down next to the dying man to look him in the eyes.

"Where is Fenix?"

The man's eyes flitted to Raven. He winced in pain and tried to speak, but all that came out was a bloody bubble that popped on his blue lips.

"Tell you what. I'll give you a few of these if you tell me. It's going to ease your pain." Raven reached into his pocket and pulled out the bottle of pills Sandra had given him.

The SOL soldier reached up with a gloved hand, but Raven pulled the pills back. "Not until you tell me where Fenix is."

A distant chopping noise sounded to the south, drawing the man's attention. Raven and Dale both turned to look at the sky.

"You hear that?" Dale asked. He hurried back over holding two grenades he had taken from the corpse.

Raven slowly stood and put a boot on the man's arm so he couldn't move. Creek trotted over and sat next to Raven. The sound grew louder into a *whoop, whoop, whoop* that left no doubt in Raven's mind. He knew that noise like a gunshot. The black bird came into focus a few seconds later, the helicopter carving through the clear sky like a boat in calm waters.

"It's a Black Hawk," Dale said.

"Yeah, but is it one of ours, or is this more SOL backup?"

Dale and Raven hunched down, just in case.

The man reached out for the pills again. "Please," he muttered. "It hurts…"

"Tell me where they are," Raven said.

"Mo…" Blood bubbled from his mouth again, coating his lips in red.

Raven pulled out his water bottle and brought it to the man's lips, earning a frown from Dale. He coughed and tried again to speak, but the Black Hawk drowned out his voice. Looking over his shoulder, Raven saw it had veered toward the lake. The bird did a quick circle and then flew northeast, toward Fort Collins.

"That was one of ours," Dale said. "Must have been Secretary Montgomery's people checking out the coordinates."

Raven snorted. Charlize had sent the pilots to this location to see if Fenix was really here, but the man had already bugged out to a new location.

Smart son of a bitch.

Raven looked back down at the SOL soldier and put his finger into the stomach wound, expecting a scream. But the man didn't make a single sound. His eyes stared at the sky, cold and dead.

"Fucking hell," Raven said.

Dale handed out one of the grenades. "Take this. I have a feeling we're going to need them."

— 20 —

The cold wind stung Colton’s eyes. They had adjusted to the darkness, and the vibrant moon provided just enough light to make out the terrain beyond the roadblock. He crouched behind a concrete block with his AR-15 aimed down Highway 36.

The barriers were set up at the intersection with Mall Road. There were a dozen vehicles blocking the road ahead, and then a wall of concrete blocks covered with barbed wire as a second barrier. Mall Road was clear, giving John Kirkus and his men from Storm Mountain passage to come from the north when the battle started.

Sporadic coughing and whispers came from all around him, and he took a moment to look at the silhouetted shapes. There were thirty civilians-turned-warriors positioned here, and another twenty at the roadblock a half mile behind them. There were snipers posted on every street, just in case Thompson’s men made it past the barriers.

All throughout Estes Park, men, women, and teenaged boys and girls pointed weapons. Colton imagined many of them were praying it wouldn’t come to violence. But he knew it would. After seeing the Black Hawk, he too had hoped it wouldn’t come to war, but the bird had kept flying, and hadn’t returned.

Now that the military had decided not to intervene, Thompson would roll right into town, sacrificing his own people for a shot at expanding his territory.

This was where the heart of the battle for Estes Park would occur, now that Highway 34 was washed away.

“Shit, it’s cold out here, but at least the snow stopped,” Lindsey said. She was crouched behind the barrier to Colton’s right, looking up at the spotter

that had climbed the transmission line. “Jack’s got to be freezing up there.”

Colton snuck a glance at the high school baseball star perched high in the tower that had once distributed power to Estes Park. The boy had volunteered to climb it and watch for hostiles. His friends Alex and Gordon, both track stars, had also volunteered as scouts on Highway 36.

“Any word from Gordon?” Colton asked Lindsey.

She shook her head. “He’s still not answering.”

“Try him again.”

Lindsey spoke into the radio, but a different voice came over the channel. It was Alex this time.

“I see light,” he said at a whisper. “Looks like about twenty vehicles. Maybe fifty…no, seventy men.”

“Give that to me,” Colton said, heart racing at the news. Seventy men? That was a small army. How could his people stop so many with their shotguns and pistols?

“Alex, you hide until those vehicles pass,” Colton ordered. “When it’s safe, you get back here, got it?”

“Yes, sir.”

Colton contacted Raven next.

“Akita 1, this is Hawk 1. What’s your status?”

It took several moments for Raven to respond, and Colton used the time to check the roadblock to the east. He was already considering pulling people off that one, but he needed them there just in case Thompson had ground troops moving toward town.

“I read you, Hawk 1,” Raven said over the radio. “We’re following those tracks. Looks like they took a detour around the roadblock here on Highway 7. Must have Humvees or something heavy duty.”

Colton cursed. They were already being flanked. “How many vehicles?” he asked.

“Four.”

Colton gritted his teeth. “Find ’em, Raven. Find ’em before it’s too late.”

“On it, Chief.”

Colton put the radio back in the pouch and rose very slowly to take in the faces of those around him. They came from all walks of life. There was the owner of the Stanley Hotel, Jim Meyers, next to Rex Stone. Even Tom Feagen was here, holding a shotgun to his chest.

Missing were all of those who had perished in the past two months. Colton

took a moment to think of everyone from Captain Jake Englewood and Major Nathan Sardetti, to refugees like Susan and Todd Sanders.

Colton would not allow their sacrifices to be in vain. He would not allow his town or country to fall into anarchy.

“Listen up, everyone,” he said.

Every set of eyes focused on him in the low light. Cold breaths puffed out of mouths as the civilians waited for him to say something reassuring or profound—something that would encourage them to stand their ground when the bullets started flying.

“We are the town’s first defense,” he said. “What happens here could very well determine the fates of our loved ones in the high school. Make no mistake, the men that are coming will not show mercy. I saw what they did to residents of the FEMA camp. We must hold them here at all costs. We must make them pay for every foot of asphalt.”

“Every foot,” Rex Stone growled. There was anger in his voice, and pain. Colton could tell he was ready to die to protect the only thing he had left in this world: his wife.

“When they come, we must stand our ground. We are stronger together,” Lindsey added.

Colton imagined the terror of the gunfire that would be on them shortly. Some of these people, like Tom Feagen, had never even fired a gun, let alone been shot at. Truthfully, Colton was more worried people like Feagen would accidentally shoot him in the chaos.

But he needed boots on the ground here. Numbers meant everything.

“Remember to conserve your ammo and fire on the vehicles. We can’t let any of them get past these roadblocks,” Colton said.

A crack sounded, and the black cowboy hat Jim Meyers was wearing flew up into the air, part of his head flying off with it. There were screams, but Colton’s mind was still trying to process what had happened.

Jim slumped to his knees, and then fell face first into the ground, gore spilling from his broken skull.

“Sniper!” Colton finally yelled. “Everyone down!”

Lindsey and Colton hunched behind the barrier. Return fire came from the roadblock. That was good; at least his people were fighting back. But the noise made it impossible to hear where the next shot came from.

“Hold your fire!” he shouted.

Most of the firing ceased.

“Does anyone have eyes?” Lindsey yelled.

Several cries rang out as another gunshot cracked, pinging off the barrier Lindsey was hiding behind. Colton gestured for her to crawl over to his position. Another flurry of gunfire came from the blockade, but it quickly ceased.

Silence claimed the night.

“Did anyone see where it came from?” Colton asked. His radio crackled with a message from Officer Matthew, but Colton ignored it.

Another shot broke the momentary quiet, and a cry of pain followed. Judging by the noise, Colton put this weapon at a high caliber, and judging by the gaping hole where Jim’s hairline had been it, was probably a 30.06.

“Who has eyes?” Colton said, louder this time.

“Came from the trees at three o’clock,” someone yelled back. Colton looked to the right of the road. Someone had snuck into the timber without them seeing.

“Covering fire,” he said to Lindsey.

She nodded and got to one knee, preparing to fire at the pine trees, while Colton moved into position. As soon as she fired off a burst, he came up at a crouch and fired a blast into the woods. Rex fired with him, and they painted the trees with enough rounds that branches fluttered to the ground.

Colton went to crouch back down when he saw something streak toward the barrier of vehicles blocking the road in front of their barricade. The projectile hit the center of the junked vehicles, exploding in a brilliant flash of light.

“Down!” he yelled.

Shrapnel and shards of glass whizzed through the air, slicing into several of the sentries that hadn’t gotten down in time.

Someone had fired an RPG at their first line of defense, blowing a gaping hole in the wall of cars they had pushed together. He heard engines a beat later, and then saw the small armada of vehicles rounding the corner of Highway 36.

“Open fire!” he shouted.

The gunner in the bed of the lead vehicle fired first, filling the night with the bark of an M240. Gunfire lanced into the concrete blocks and cut down several people in front of Colton, splattering him with fresh blood.

He hunched down and looked up at the distribution tower behind them.

“Jack, get down!” Colton yelled up to the boy. Then he rose to scan the

road. The man with the RPG was standing behind a ditch, attempting to reload. A muzzle cracked from the tower, and the man dropped with his launcher.

“I got him!” Jack yelled.

The boy’s bravery attracted tracer rounds from the vehicle barreling toward the roadblock. Several bullets cut into Jack and slammed into the tower. He dropped limply to the ground like a fried bird.

Colton closed his eyes, gripped by a messy combination of fear, anger, and despair. When he opened them, he saw people staring at him on both sides. Terrified people with wide eyes, shaky hands, and sweat dripping down their cold skin as 7.62 mm rounds slammed into their defenses.

You have to lead these people.

“Aim for that truck!” he shouted, standing to set the example.

He let out a war cry, and aimed at the muzzle flash of the mounted gun on the first truck. All around him, the militia stood and opened fire, sending a stream of rounds into the convoy. Someone to his right dropped, screaming in pain. Lindsey shouted an order, and someone else moved to take the fallen person’s place.

The gun on the pickup went silent, and the truck skidded to a stop just in front of the smoldering hole where their roadblock had been. Colton finished off his magazine and reached for another when he saw another flash from the woods. There was more than one sniper.

He palmed a new mag home and aimed at the trees, waiting for the next flash. It came a second later, and he squeezed the trigger. Something stung his shoulder, jerking him to the right, as he fired off a shot. He grunted in pain, then found his target again and fired two bursts into the bushes where the sniper lay.

Pain ripped up his arm and neck. The bullet had missed his ballistic vest and cut right through his flesh. He could feel the blood flowing. His first thought was of Kelly and Risa, but he didn’t have time to worry about what they would do without him. His priority was saving them.

Pushing the butt back into position, he squeezed off another barrage of shots at the incoming convoy. An old tow truck with a cow guard was screeching toward what was left of their blockade of vehicles. It hit the flaming mini-van and pickup truck with such force they skidded into the ditch, providing a window for Thompson’s trucks to drive through.

“Fire,” Colton yelled. “Keep firing!”

He waited several seconds, and then nodded at Lindsey. She pulled out her flare gun and aimed it at the ditch to the right of the destroyed vehicle wall, and Colton aimed his flare gun at the left.

The trucks squeezed through the smoldering gap in the vehicles, and then stopped to let their soldiers out. This was it; if they made it through the barrier Colton was holding, then they would be able to drive right into town.

He squeezed off his flare, sending it streaking into the ditch, where it caught fire on the pool of gasoline. The men jumping out of the trucks screamed in horror, several of them going up in flames as the fire spread across the road.

“Don’t let up!” Colton yelled. He tossed the flare gun aside and brought his AR-15 back up to fire. The flames provided plenty of light to find his targets by, and he took down hostiles with quick squeezes.

All around him, his people killed to protect their loved ones. War brought out the rawest emotions, and Colton saw it happening all around him. The screaming, the distorted faces, the rage-filled eyes of people who had never harmed a fly.

It was then he realized he was screaming too as he cut down the burning men trying to take his town.

He changed his magazine and raised the gun again when a raucous blast sounded from the east. The ground rumbled under his boots. For the third time in as many minutes, his heart skipped a beat. He bent down behind the barrier and caught Lindsey’s gaze. Then he turned back to Estes Park, where a massive explosion had erupted in the center of town. A second blast quickly followed, sending flames catapulting into the air.

The mortar barrage had started.

Colton pulled out his radio. “Raven, where the fuck are you?” he shouted over the din. Gunfire drowned out the response, and he pushed the radio up to his ringing ear, grimacing in pain from his shoulder.

“We’re almost back to town, Chief,” came Raven’s reply. “I’m tracking Fenix and his men right now. That mortar fire is coming from somewhere on Prospect Mountain.”

“Hurry and find them!” Colton yelled into the receiver. Then he opened a channel to Ryburn. “Make sure everyone is hunkered down and hold the line there at all costs.”

“I will, Chief.”

Colton transmitted a final message to Officer Matthew, who was in charge

of the two roadblocks at Highway 7, telling him to abandon the posts and head for Prospect Mountain. Then he looked back at the next roadblock a half mile away. Several figures were already running toward his position.

He snorted when he saw them. They were supposed to stay put. And where the hell was John Kirkus and his men? Colton looked down Mall Road and saw nothing.

He came back up on one knee to continue firing at the survivors holding position behind the first wave of parked vehicles. Another set of lights flipped on around the corner up Highway 36, as Thompson deployed another wave.

Shit, shit, shit. We're going to be overrun.

"No," Colton said. "Hold them here!"

Empty shell casings rained down on the pavement, and more civilians fell to the ground as the second wave of vehicles drove toward their position. Tom Feagen raised his shotgun to fire and took a bullet to the leg. He screamed in pain and fell to the ground, gripping his thigh and screeching in agony.

As more of his fellow townsfolk dropped, Colton pulled out his radio and turned to the channel he'd been using to communicate with Charlize Montgomery's people.

"Secretary Montgomery, this is Chief of Police Marcus Colton. If you're listening, the Sons of Liberty and Sheriff Thompson are slaughtering civilians in Estes Park, Colorado. We need help!"

Colton nearly dropped the radio as he went to put it back in the pouch. Once it was secure, he placed a hand on his wounded shoulder and scanned the battlefield.

Lindsey was still firing, raking the barrel back and forth and taking hostiles down like a veteran combat soldier. Colton did his best to ignore the explosions coming from the town, and aimed for the metal armor covering the turret on one of the new pickup trucks driving toward their flaming wall of bodies and vehicles.

He took his time to line up the sights and finished off his magazine. The gunner slumped out of the bed and hit the pavement. A second man jumped up to take his place, but Lindsey took him down with a shot to the head.

After ten minutes of fighting, Colton and his captain found themselves side by side. He looked over, trying to focus past the stars in his vision. Rex Stone was still in action, as were three other men to his right, but their numbers

were thinning by the minute, and Kirkus and his men still weren't here yet.

"Fall back," Colton said. "I'll hold them here."

"Hell no," Lindsey said.

"Get these people out of here!" Colton shouted.

She looked at him, her face distorting into a mask of fear and sadness. Gunfire suddenly came from Mall Road, and Colton turned to see a group of men on horseback and an old black Chevy car clanking along the road. Four old-school snowmobiles followed the hillbilly convoy. Two dirt bikes also sped over the snowy asphalt.

"Kirkus!" she shouted.

Colton almost smiled, but a round zipped over his head and he grimaced instead. He rose to his feet, aimed at Thompson's vehicles, and squeezed the trigger again. More rounds narrowly missed his face, but he remained standing, undeterred.

Another bark of an M240 came from the timber to the left of the road, far behind the dying flames. The sight seized the air from Colton's lungs.

Tracer rounds spat out of the trees and cut into Kirkus's men, knocking them down like bowling balls. The spray hit the Chevy next, punching through the old metal. The snowmobiles swerved to avoid the gunfire, and both drivers on the bikes lost control.

Colton watched as a man with a white cowboy hat climbed off his fallen horse and stood to fire a long rifle at the M240 in the trees. It was Kirkus, and his aim was true. He killed the gunners and limped over to the roadblock with several of his surviving fighters right behind him.

"Sorry we're late," Kirkus said, wincing in pain.

"You're hurt," Colton said.

Kirkus glanced over at Colton. "You're hit too, Chief."

"I'll be fine."

"You got a plan?" Kirkus asked.

Colton was trying to devise one in his mind, but all he could focus on was the mortar rounds raining down into his town. Buildings burned around town hall, and several houses in the residential areas were flickering plumes of orange.

He could only hope Raven found Fenix and stopped him before the Nazi bastards took out the high school.

Thompson's second wave of trucks made it through the barrier, and Colton did the only thing he could do.

“Retreat to the next barrier!” he shouted. “Everyone, fall back!”

Feagen yelled out for help as the militia soldiers began to run. Colton, Rex, and Lindsey provided a wave of covering fire as the first group escaped down the road.

She looked over at him between bursts. “We can’t leave Feagen.”

Colton agreed with a nod. “Cover me.”

“Go!” she shouted.

Colton ran over to Feagen’s position and bent down to help him up. Rounds zipped all around them, but somehow Colton managed to escape with the man leaning on his left side as a crutch.

“Thank you,” Feagen panted.

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Fenix brought his binoculars up to watch a mortar shell explode in the middle of the intersection at Elkhorn Avenue and Riverside Drive. Several civilians cartwheeled through the air like miniature rag dolls.

He let the binos hang around his neck, and clapped at the sight of burning buildings below. From his vantage point on the tramway station cresting Prospect Mountain, he had a gorgeous view of the battlefield.

So far, everything was going as planned.

The military had passed the town by after checking out the fake location Miles had given his captors. He could still remember the young man’s leg snapping.

“It’s your duty as a soldier of the Sons of Liberty,” Fenix had said right before stomping on Miles’s leg and then leaving him behind.

He wasn’t sure what had happened to Miles, but the kid had done his duty. Now that bitch Charlize Montgomery wouldn’t have any idea what SOL was doing, and by the time she did, Fenix would be long gone.

Until then, he was going to have some more fun. His field mortar crew wasn’t far. They were using the Chinese-built Type 87 mortars. He didn’t like Chinese built products, but these were going to go to a good use.

A shell thumped away from the field on the western slope of the mountain and into the town, at targets his spotters had identified with their scopes. Most of the targets were high value targets, like snipers, or nests where militia soldiers were hunkered down. After all, Fenix had promised

Thompson he wouldn’t destroy the town.

But that didn’t mean all the rounds hit their targets.

Fenix laughed as a house exploded south of Elkhorn Avenue. Another shell took out the top of a building, eliminating another potential hostile for Thompson to deal with once he broke through the barriers on Highway 36. It wouldn’t be long now. The sheriff was using the weapons Fenix had loaned him from raids on the Chinese convoys: twin M240s, an RPG launcher, and grenades. But Fenix and his men still had plenty of toys to play with.

“Horton, you got a SITREP?” he shouted.

Another shell curved overhead and into town, destroying a building on Big Horn Drive in a spray of metal, glass, and wood.

Fenix clapped again. “Nice shot!”

Sergeant Horton jogged over from the railing, where he was supervising the mortar crew. He made his way past the corpses of the dead Estes Park militia soldiers that had been posted on the tramway lookout. The bodies were riddled with bullets.

“Big mistake on their part,” Fenix muttered to himself. Leaving only two men as lookouts had been a devastating error by the chief that would cost him the town. The two spotters could have warned Colton, but Fenix and his men had cut them down before they could get off a flare.

Fenix turned back to the railing to look out over Lake Estes, which was now more of a puddle, the majority of the water having flowed down Highway 34. The ambush had cost Thompson his first wave of vehicles and bought the Estes Park militia extra time to fortify their defenses on Highway 36—and apparently lay another trap.

The gas-soaked ditches framing the highway were still burning below, having already taken out the second wave of Thompson’s trucks. The third wave was slowly making their way toward the barrier that was being abandoned by the militia soldiers.

“Colton’s not as dumb as I thought,” Fenix said to Horton.

Horton shrugged. “Thompson’s not going to like taking this many losses, but we will take this town.”

“Bring up the M240s, Sergeant.”

“Yes, sir.”

Two teams of Brandenburger Commandos lugged crates out of the trucks parked behind the tramway shops, and moved them over to the railings overlooking the eastern side of the town. Fenix instructed them where to put

the big guns after scanning the battlefield a third time. He brought his pocket watch up as the men worked.

It was going on nine o'clock, and he wanted to be out of here in an hour. After they finished with the mortar and M240 fire, his mission would be complete. He could then return to his silo for a good night's sleep. At this rate, he'd be there shortly after midnight.

"Hurry that shit up!" he growled.

He gripped the railing with his gloved hands and studied the fight on Highway 36. The Estes Park militia had retreated to a second roadblock, and Thompson's vehicles were preparing to maneuver out of the flames to pursue them. Mortar fire continued to pound the town square, destroying buildings and blowing hunks of concrete out of the street.

"We've got contacts on the northern slope!" someone suddenly shouted.

Fenix leaned over the railing to see a dozen silhouettes making their way up the mountain.

"Take them out," Fenix said, pointing.

The M240 gunners moved the guns, and Fenix clamped his hands over his ears. The cry of the gun rattled his body as the men unleashed a volley of 7.62 mm rounds into the trees below. Adjusting the spray, the soldiers found human targets, coating the slope with steaming blood.

Fenix raised his M4 and picked off several of the stragglers, the gunfire ringing in his ears. When it ceased, the gunners moved the M240s back into position and waited for his order to fire again.

Bringing up his binoculars, Fenix checked the roadblock on Highway 36 again, using the moonlight and glow of the flames for light. He had wanted to wait for the team to abandon the second barrier, but Colton's forces were still holding their ground and looked pretty well dug in.

"Fuck it," Fenix snarled. "Open fire."

"That's too far, sir," Horton said.

"I gave you an order."

"Sir, yes, sir."

Fenix clamped his hands back over his ears and scanned the sky for any sign of the military, but the cloudless sky was still void of any blinking craft. A mortar round arched overhead like a shooting star moving in slow motion. It slammed into a house on the north side of town, blowing the roof into splinters.

He let his binoculars hang from his neck and looked out over the landscape

with grim satisfaction. The snow-brushed town almost looked like something from a Christmas card—aside from the burning buildings, of course.

But they could pass for Christmas lights, he thought with a smile.

— 21 —

Raven could feel his pulse beating in his neck. The mortar barrage coupled with the explosions from RPGs and the bark of M240 gunfire brought him back to the chaotic mission behind enemy lines in North Korea, where a raid to save two American girls had ended in a bloodbath.

But this was America, home of democracy, and the brave. It wasn't some foreign authoritarian regime.

How could any of this be real?

He focused on the patrols and troops holding sentry around the mortar crew launching rounds into Estes Park. He and Dale had abandoned their horses and were hiding behind the thick trunk of a ponderosa, their night vision goggles allowing them to see without being spotted. There were ten soldiers on patrol, another ten in the mortar firing area, and more on the platform above.

"Where's our backup?" Dale asked quietly.

"I don't think they made it," Raven said. He looked up at the area where the M240s had been positioned a few minutes earlier. The guns were now out of sight and firing somewhere to the east.

"It's just us," Raven said.

"Us against twenty heavily-armed Nazi soldiers?"

"We have Creek," Raven said. That didn't seem to inspire confidence in Dale, who looked over at the dog sitting calmly on his haunches.

"We have no choice, brother," Raven said. "Sarah is probably up here."

Dale swallowed so hard his Adam's apple bobbed. "I had a good run in this life. Let's go kill us some Nazi pig-fuckers."

"That's the spirit," Raven replied. "It ain't over until the fat lady sings…or something like that."

The line got a grin from Dale, but Raven remained stone-faced. He too was prepared to die for those he loved.

“You go north and I’ll go south. Creek will hunt with me. We’ll meet back in the middle and then work our way up to the tram to take out those guns. Use your blade until we’re spotted,” Raven said.

Dale reached out with a gloved hand. “Good luck, Raven. It’s been an honor.”

Something about the other man’s words seemed so final, and as Raven looked back out at the enemy they were facing, he realized it was likely this would be the last time the two men would shake hands.

“Honor is mine, brother,” Raven said, gripping Dale’s hand firmly.

Dale let go and began to creep around the base of the tree. Raven drew in a breath, thinking of Sandra and Allie, and then of Lindsey and Colton. Their lives all depended on his actions.

Light as a feather, he thought. The stimulant he had taken a few minutes earlier was starting to kick in, and he indeed felt light. But more importantly, his brain was clear. He was in tune with nature. He motioned for Creek and rose into a hunch. Adrenaline warmed his veins as Raven moved away from the tree, separating from Dale.

There were four Nazi commandos patrolling under the tramway concrete platforms to the south. They were setting off again to comb the area. Those were his targets. Each wore black tactical gear with facemasks, and carried M4 rifles.

Raven had his own M4 slung over his back, looted from the dead Nazi back at Lily Lake. He moved cautiously through the fence of aspen trees jutting out of the slope. He brushed against snow-covered boulders as he passed, and he stayed close to them just in case he needed to duck for cover. Creek had already vanished, hunting solo in the frozen terrain.

The group of soldiers began to move into a thick area of ponderosas, and Raven stopped to aim his crossbow at the Nazi holding rear guard, and squeezed off an arrow that thumped through his neck. The man dropped his rifle in the snow and fell to his knees while the other three men continued walking in the opposite direction.

Raven placed another bolt in the weapon and followed them, waiting for his next opportunity. When he got to the fallen Nazi, he used his knife to finish the job, jamming it into the squirming man’s temple.

One down, twenty to go.

He started for the fence of trees, seeing two of his chases had vanished from view. The third man stopped behind a tree, his body partially hidden by the bark. Raven aimed at the exposed part of the soldier's head and fired an arrow into it. The commando stumbled a few feet. By the time he hit the ground, Raven had already dropped the crossbow and pulled out both hatchets.

He stalked the next two Nazis, moving in the shadows while they walked unknowingly down a path. The amateurs didn't look over their shoulders, and neither of the men had stopped to see where their buddies were.

Big mistake, buckos.

In just over two minutes, Raven made it within throwing range of the final pair of chases. But then he made his own mistake—crunching a stick under his boot. The sound gave away his position, but by the time the first Nazi turned, a hatchet was in the air.

The blade planted itself in the man's forehead with a crack. As he slumped, Raven ran toward the fourth soldier, holding his other hatchet in his knife hand. He got all the way behind him without being seen, and brought the edge down on the back of the commando's skull with a dull ringing noise that echoed through the night.

Creek had taken down a fifth soldier on patrol that Raven hadn't seen earlier, and Raven ran over to help finish the man off. The dog's jaws were latched on to the man's throat, and Creek had already torn out his vocal cords. Raven brought the hatchet down on the soldier's nose so hard it got stuck.

Grunting, Raven pulled it out and fell on his back. He quickly got back up. Covered in steaming blood, he gestured for Creek to follow. They hurried back to the mortar crew, stopping only to pluck his other hatchet out of the corpse and grab his crossbow.

He loaded a bolt when he saw the edge of the mortar firing area. The men were continuing to load rounds in an organized manner, listening to the spotters who were yelling down from the concrete tramway platform.

The chatter of the M240s continued in the distance, the sound drowning out the crunch Raven's boots made over the snow. The guns were firing from the same platform where Raven had killed Brown Feather nearly two months prior. His decayed corpse actually wasn't far from here.

The irony wasn't lost on Raven. Prospect Mountain was cursed with evil by Nazis, Water Cannibals, and a half-Cherokee, half-Sioux Indian that had

committed more sins than he could count. Raven shook away the chilling thoughts and continued toward the field area, where six soldiers manned the mortar tubes. Another four stood sentry. The other soldiers they had seen earlier were out of sight, aside from one spotter.

Raven still didn't like the odds, but they were better than before. But that was assuming Dale took down five of the other men.

Where the hell are you, Dale?

Creek nudged up next to Raven, keeping watch while Raven searched for his partner. The gunfire and explosions in the distance rose into a crescendo, and Raven grew more impatient by the second, knowing each one that passed meant another dead civilian. He aimed his bow at the closest Nazi. He couldn't hold here much longer—he had to stop them.

Raven finally spotted Dale moving between two trees. In his right hand he gripped a long, saw-toothed bowie knife glistening with blood, and in his left hand he held the butterfly knife Raven had given Sarah. They had found it on the roadblock earlier when they were looking for the girl.

Dale waved the bowie knife at Raven and then pointed toward the pickup trucks on the road. Raven brought up his crossbow scope and zoomed in on a small figure in the front seat. It had to be Sarah. He confirmed it by zooming in with the scope on his bow. Then he changed weapons, unslinging his M4. Dale did the same thing, but Raven changed his mind when he saw the pile of mortar rounds next to the firing area.

Maybe there's a better way…

Raven balled his hand at Dale and then lowered his rifle. Instead, he grabbed the grenade they had taken off the dead soldier back at Lily Lake. He pointed with his bow at the pile of munitions. Dale nodded back and pulled out his own grenade.

They both pulled the pins and lobbed them like baseballs toward the mortar rounds. The grenades rolled right between the launchers and the soldiers manning them.

Only one of the sentries seemed to notice. He walked over and tilted his head like a curious dog. Raven reached back for his own dog, and shielded Creek with his body, pushing the Akita against the snow.

A moment later, the explosions boomed through the night. The ground rumbled beneath Raven as the mortar rounds went off in a massive blast. He could feel hunks of trees sailing overhead. Dirt and small chunks of shrapnel rained down on his body as the explosions rocked the field.

Creek squirmed under Raven, but he held the dog down, waiting until the final blasts. The boisterous noise faded into an echo, and Raven slowly got up, his ears ringing. He picked up his M4 and directed it at the smoke swirling across the devastation.

A crater was all that remained in the center of the mortar firing area. The soldiers were gone, their body parts littering the snow all around Raven. Two boots remained where a soldier had stood moments earlier, the ankles still sticking out, but the legs and rest of the body were missing.

The smoke cleared, and the ringing subsided in Raven's ears. That's when he heard Creek's growl. Four commandos had moved onto the platform above, looking over at what was left of their comrades. Dale fired his M4 at the men, and Raven brought his barrel up, but froze when he saw more soldiers move up to the railing.

Not just four.

There were a dozen men.

The squad trained their fire on Dale and painted the area with bullets, several of which hit the big man. He moved behind a tree, fell to his butt, then pushed himself back up against the bark.

Raven sprayed the platform with rounds, hitting three men. One of them fell over the ledge. Then Raven dove for cover and crawled behind a tree.

Dale peered around his tree and squeezed off several shots, killing another two soldiers and bringing their numbers down to six or seven. But the survivors were fanning out and firing at both Raven and Dale.

They were pinned down on the slope, and the SOL commandos had the perfect vantage point.

We have to flank them.

Raven knew that was going to be next to impossible for Dale. The big man was hurt, and hurt bad. He shouted over at Raven, "You have to take out the big guns and then get Sarah!"

Raven held his position against the tree.

"Go, Sam. I'll distract them!"

Dale stared back with his NVGs still over his features. Raven closed his eyes for a moment, exhaled, and then did what any soldier would do. He took off to finish his mission.

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The mortar fire had stopped after a massive explosion, but Colton's people were being cut down by the M240s on the aerial tramway. Unless someone pulled off a miracle shot, they didn't have much of a chance of taking the gunners down.

He cursed himself again for leaving the Crow's Nest undefended. The two sentries must not have seen the attack coming.

It didn't matter now. The mistake was his, and it had cost them dearly.

Every team he had pulled off the other roadblocks had been cut down on their way up the mountain. And he wasn't going to risk pulling anyone away from the high school. There were just twenty survivors of the original sixty militia soldiers on Highway 36 now. Most everyone had some sort of injury, from sprained ankles to gunshot wounds. And the enemy was closing in from all sides.

To the east was Thompson's small army, all of them hellbent on getting to the roadblock to kill those responsible for burning and shooting their comrades. To the west, the Sons of Liberty were using M240s to spit rounds from the top of Prospect Mountain.

One of them streaked by Colton's head and slammed into the door of the van he was crouched behind. The pickup truck to his left had been taking the brunt of the gunfire, but a few rounds punched through the truck and hit the van he was up against.

He got down to his belly and snuck a glance under the vehicle to see that Thompson's trucks were now free of the flaming first barrier. Several veered off into the town.

He'd lost control of the situation.

You never had control!

An explosion suddenly rocked the barriers about twenty feet from the van, blowing the three militia people stationed there into chunks of gore. Colton shielded his face from the heat with his arm, and Lindsey screamed out in pain. He pulled his hand away to see her gripping her wrist, a shard of metal sticking out like an arrow.

"I'm okay," she said, tears welling up in her eyes.

Colton gritted his teeth, trying to keep his rage in check. He wanted to get up and squeeze off his magazine, but instead, he pulled out his radio and reported the vehicles to Officer Matthew, who was now the last hope at stopping them.

"On it, sir," Matthew replied. "I've got another team moving into position

to take out those M240s. We've got a few snipers left."

"Hurry, and do *not* let them get to the high school," Colton said, his voice cracking. He tried to contact Raven again, but he didn't answer. Finally, he decided to try the channel to the Secretary of Defense. Gunfire continued around the barrier, his people still putting up a fight while he tried to save them with a final plea.

"Secretary Montgomery, this is Police Chief Marcus Colton. We're being slaughtered by the Sons of Liberty and Sheriff Thompson. Please, if you get this, send help!"

He put the radio away and then pressed the gauze back onto the gunshot wound. The blood loss was starting to make him feel queasy. Kirkus scrambled over and put his back next to the van. He was in bad shape too, after taking two rounds, one to his right bicep and the other to his hip. Feagen was still alive, somehow; he was resting with his back to the van a few feet away. Rex was to his left, firing shots off to the east.

"Can you fight?" Colton asked, looking at Kirkus and then over to Lindsey. They both nodded grimly.

The torrential downpour of 7.62 mm rounds from the aerial tramway suddenly ceased. Colton slowly rose to look over the pickup truck riddled with bullet holes to see that the muzzle flashes had stopped. It was too dark and too far away to see movement, but the M240 had stopped. Now he could hear the sound of rifles on the other side of the mountain. Finally, his people had made it to the top.

"Everyone up!" Colton shouted. He pushed the barrel of his AR-15 through the broken van window to fire, but what he saw took his breath.

The trucks and cars had all made it through the barrier, and had moved into position. Over forty men were standing behind the parked vehicles, their rifles aimed at the roadblock.

"Drop your weapons!" someone shouted.

Colton looked for the source of the voice, and saw Sheriff Thompson standing behind one of the trucks, his muscular arms folded across his chest.

"I just want Chief Colton," Thompson said. "The rest of you, lay your weapons down and I'll let you live."

"Don't do it," Lindsey said. "He will kill us all."

"That you, Plymouth?" Thompson said. "I've got special plans for you."

"Fuck you!" Lindsey looked like she wanted to charge the barrier, but Colton grabbed her by the arm. He looked over at Kirkus, who was struggling

to stand.

Kirkus said, “Let me handle this. Bastard killed my brother and my son.”

Colton could tell by the sad resignation in his eyes that Kirkus had given up on life. And, judging by his condition, he didn’t have much time unless they got him to a doctor.

“We’re all ready to die here, Thompson,” Colton shouted. “If you want to take this town you are going to have to take—”

“What are you doing!” Lindsey shouted, silencing Colton.

He looked to his left to see she was talking to Feagen, who was pointing a pistol at Colton.

“Do us all a favor and turn yourself in.” Feagen wagged the barrel of the revolver. “Go, or I’ll shoot you myself.”

“You don’t know what you’re doing,” Lindsey said. “Thompson will not let the rest of us go.”

Colton stared at the heavy-set former town administrator in shock, but then he realized he shouldn’t be shocked at all. Even after Colton had saved Feagen’s ass earlier, the man was only thinking about himself.

“You got one minute before we open fire,” Thompson yelled.

Feagen pulled back the hammer on the revolver, and Colton could see by the crazed look in his eyes he was ready to kill him right here and right now.

“Don’t, Chief,” Lindsey said.

Colton locked eyes with her. In that moment, they came to an understanding on what had to happen next.

“Time’s almost up!” Thompson yelled.

Feagen followed him with the barrel as Colton began to walk around the van. He halted at the bumper to pull his Colt .45 out and slip it into the wide sleeve of his coat. He crossed his arm over his chest and put his hand on his bloody shoulder to hide the lump in his sleeve and appear he was gripping his wound.

Then he walked around the van and set off through the barriers, his stomach churning at the sight of his people. Colin and Tim, both insurance agents, were slumped over their concrete barrier, orange-sized holes in their backs from the 7.62 mm rounds. Sally and her brother, Jeff, were face down next to a sedan, their bodies torn apart by the weapons. Then there was the area where Mike and Thomas had been hunkered down. There wasn’t much left of either of them but limbs after the RPG had ripped them to charred pieces.

Colton focused on the man responsible. The fire still blazing in the ditches behind the parked vehicles illuminated the crazed smile on Sheriff Thompson's face.

"There he is!" Thompson yelled. He moved from behind the truck and looked over Colton's shoulder.

"I said put down your weapons," Thompson shouted. His eyes flitted to Colton. "Tell your people."

"You said you'd let them go," Colton said.

Thompson shrugged.

"I'm not telling them to do that until you give me a guarantee."

The grin on Thompson's face widened. "Remember what I told you?" he asked.

Colton snorted, and Thompson let out a laugh. He turned to look over his shoulder, and Colton seized the opportunity.

"NOW, Lindsey!" he yelled as he pulled the Colt .45 from his sleeve. By the time Thompson turned, Colton had the barrel pointed at the sheriff's head.

"You said to make sure I shot you in the face next time," Colton said.

He waited a split second for Thompson to take in his words, and then pulled the trigger. The bullet slammed into the sheriff's broken nose, and exited out the back of his head in a spray of blood, bone, and brain matter.

The gunfire that followed came so fast Colton didn't even have a chance to dive for cover. A round hit him in the left arm. The impact jerked his entire body and threw off his next shot. Another round hit him in the right leg, bringing him to one knee, and a third hit him in the upper right of his ballistic vest, knocking him on his back.

He rolled over to his stomach and searched for cover. The first thing he saw was Feagen's dead body under the van they had been hiding behind. Lindsey must have shot him in the head before turning her rifle on Thompson's men.

"Colton, stay down!" she screamed.

Next, he saw Kirkus limping toward him, but the man was quickly cut down with three rounds to the chest. The leader of the prepper community fell to both knees. He pushed himself up using his rifle as a crutch, and locked eyes with Colton just as a bullet hit him in the head.

Colton let out a shout of rage and aimed his Colt .45 at the men behind the vehicles. There were dozens of them, all firing at his people. He picked a

bearded man with glasses and shot him in the neck.

Another bullet hit Colton in the shoulder, and a second shot him in the left leg. He screamed out in agony and tried to raise his gun at the shooter. The man lowered his rifle to change the magazine, giving Colton a moment to take aim.

He squeezed off a shot that went wide. The second shot also missed. The gun clicked. He reached for more rounds, his entire body numb and on fire at the same time.

The man with the ski mask brought his rifle back up to shoot Colton, but went down from a headshot before he could pull the trigger.

“Hold on!” Lindsey shouted again.

Colton fumbled for more bullets, dropping several onto the ground in the process. He bent down to grab them, and caught sight of his ruined body in the process. His legs were both bleeding out, and he could feel the heat from the blood gushing on his shoulder and arm.

There was no coming back from this. Even if they could get him off the road, he was losing too much blood.

I’m sorry, Kelly. I’m sorry, Risa. God, I love you both so much.

He flipped the break open and put in several more rounds.

“You won’t hurt my family. You won’t take this town!” he shouted as he squeezed off more shots. In the respite of gunfire came the squawk of the radio in his vest.

“Chief Colton, this is Colonel Raymond. Do you copy? We have fighter jets on their way to Estes Park. ETA five minutes. Please advise as to where SOL is located, over.”

Colton lowered his pistol and reached for the radio. Another shot hit him in the left leg. He screamed in pain and dropped the radio. Gritting his teeth, he reached over and grabbed it again.

“Colton!” Lindsey shouted. “Colton, hang on. I’m coming!”

Gunfire lanced all around him.

“Stay put, Captain!” he managed to yell.

He lay there bleeding out, gasping for air, knowing he only had a few more seconds of consciousness. But he couldn’t die yet. He still had one final mission. Bringing the radio up to his lips, he choked out his response.

“Prospect,” he croaked. He licked his lips and tried again. “Prospect Mountain. They’re on the tramway.”

“Copy that, we’re on our way. Get your people out of there if you have any

on the mountain.” Raymond hesitated and then added, “Are you all right, Chief Colton?”

Colton felt the darkness sweeping him. He changed the channel to the one he used with Raven, struggling for air. He used his last breath to relay his final message.

“Raven, get off the mountain. If you make it, tell my family I love them.”

— 22 —

Fenix couldn’t hear anything aside from a dull ringing in his ears. Over the years, his hearing had been damaged from being too close to explosions, but this was the worst it had ever been.

I’m deaf. I’m fucking deaf!

Although he couldn’t hear the gunshots, he could see his men on the platform overlooking the area where his mortar crew had been just moments before, firing at hostiles. Smoke swirled into the sky, obstructing his view to the west. The smell of burned flesh was overwhelming.

He was still trying to piece together what was happening. His first thought was one of the shitty Chinese mortar tubes had blown up, causing a chain reaction. But seeing his soldiers at the railing, this was no accident.

Some of Colton’s people had made it up the slope and past his commandos. As he waited with Horton next to the aerial tramway shops, he had a feeling he knew exactly who it was—the same man who had ambushed the Sons of Liberty at the Castle a month earlier.

Damn that fucking Injun!

His soldiers were supposed to have taken care of Raven Spears the night before, and Thompson had promised Fenix the Indian’s head after today’s battle, but sometimes you just had to do things yourself.

Fenix crouch-walked around the corner of the concrete ledge with his M4 at the ready. The gunfire from the platform, where his remaining men were in prone positions near the edge overlooking the western slope of the mountain, continued. Smoke shifted away from the firing zone, revealing the crater where his mortar crew had been.

He looked over at Horton. The sergeant’s lips were moving, but Fenix still couldn’t hear anything.

“What?” Fenix shouted, unable to hear his own voice. Horton pulled Fenix back behind the wall and then used his hands to tell the story. There were two hostiles over the slope. Horton pointed at the sky, which told Fenix they were going to have more company soon.

“Get to the trucks,” Fenix said.

Horton nodded with understanding, and motioned for Fenix to follow him. They began to move along the concrete walkway curving away from the platform and toward the area where tourists had once boarded the red tramway cars. To his right, a staircase led to a coffeehouse, a gift shop, and the second lookout.

They took a path around the building to the south side, where multiple walkways had provided tourists with gorgeous views of the town, lake, and mountains. The trucks were on the other side of the building, disguised with camouflage tarps.

Both of the M240 guns remained in position overlooking the eastern side of the town, but Fenix didn’t stop to grab either of them. The tides had changed on the Sons of Liberty, and he was once again feeling the vise clamping down.

He did pause to sneak a glance over the railing to see the battle on Highway 36. From what he could see, the fight was starting to die down. Fires still burned at the first barrier along the highway, and sporadic muzzles flashed from the second barrier. Return fire came from a cluster of vehicles where Colton’s militia was making its last stand, but most everyone was dead or injured, from what he could see. Bodies littered the road.

His hearing began to return as he followed Horton around the building and onto a dirt path. Fenix glimpsed the outlines of their camouflaged trucks at the end of the path. The silence gave way to a ringing sound, and then the muffled noise of gunfire.

Fenix looked to the west, where his men were still firing at the two hostiles. Judging by the rapid fire, he had a feeling there were more Estes Park militia soldiers out there. No way could a single Indian and his friend could keep his men so busy.

Horton suddenly stopped in the path and balled his hand.

Raising his rifle, Fenix searched for whatever had spooked the sergeant. He scanned the trees framing the path, looking for any movement. Horton did the same thing, sweeping the left while Fenix swept the right.

A flash of white darted between two ponderosas, and Fenix squeezed off a

burst that slammed into the bark of the second tree. He followed the direction of the movement and fired again.

Shadows darted back and forth around the two men, and Fenix followed them with the barrel, moving from left to right and then back again. He exhaled an icy breath and tightened his grip on his rifle. His fingers were freezing, and he could hardly feel the stock.

Horton bumped into Fenix as he backpedaled and fired off his own shots into the forest on the other side of the road. The bullets pinged off rocks and slammed into the base of a tree.

Over the gunfire, Fenix caught the sound of a growling animal. He saw the dog a moment later, stalking them from behind a row of rocks.

“I got you now,” Fenix said. He lined up his sights on the animal. He had never really liked dogs, and had no problem killing this one.

The animal walked slowly, giving Fenix a chance to line up a shot on its head. Before he could pull the trigger, Horton bumped into him again, sending the shot off target.

“You dumbass!” Fenix yelled.

Horton suddenly dropped to his knees, his hands behind his back as his fingers fished for the grip of a hatchet buried between his shoulder blades. Fenix quickly whirled to fire on the man that had thrown the blade.

The bullets lanced into the sky, narrowly missing the enraged face of Sam ‘Raven’ Spears, the Indian Fenix had been tracking for months.

Raven plowed into him with such force it knocked Fenix off his feet. On his way to the ground, he saw the dark eyes of the former Marine that wouldn’t die.

The snow padded their landing, but Fenix still hit dirt hard enough that the wind escaped his lungs. He managed to wrap his arms around Raven’s back and hold him down before the Indian could hit him in the face.

“I’m going to enjoy killing you,” Raven growled.

“Good luck,” Fenix snarled back, bringing his head up to hit Raven in the nose. The Indian reared back and brought one hand up to his face. He kept his other hand on Fenix’s chest.

“Help!” Fenix shouted, hoping some of his men would hear. He craned his neck to look at the timber, searching the upside-down terrain for his soldiers, but all he saw was the growling Akita with a muzzle crusted in frozen blood icicles.

Something hot slid into Fenix’s side, and his eyes widened as a sharp wave

of pain rushed through his body. He screeched in agony. His eyes flitted to his stomach where Raven had jabbed him with a knife.

"He's mine, Creek," Raven said to the dog snarling at Fenix. The Akita slowly backed away, and Raven bent back down so his lips were next to Fenix's left ear.

"Guess a *redskin* got you after all," Raven hissed.

Fenix blinked and tilted his head so he could look Raven in the eyes. "You're nothing but a mongrel son of a—"

Gunfire silenced Fenix, and Raven looked over his shoulder as three Brandenburger Commandos fired at Creek. Bullets punched into the dirt, and the dog scrambled away.

Fenix groaned in pain as Raven rolled off his body, leaving the knife in his gut. The Indian tackled his dog and dove into the underbrush off the side of the path. Bullets ripped into the bushes a moment later, but Fenix couldn't see if the commandos had hit anything. He focused on the knife sticking out of his side, reaching for it with shaky hands.

"Sir, are you okay?" one of his men asked.

Fenix managed to point to where Raven and his dog had escaped. "Go…go find them."

Two of the men took off with their rifles, sweeping for Raven and Creek, while the third soldier bent down to help Fenix up.

"Best to leave that in for now," the man said.

Fenix saw it was Brian Sanderson, a forty-year-old former corporal that had served under Fenix in Iraq. He was one of the best fighters left in the Sons of Liberty.

"Get me to the truck," Fenix said, his voice crackling.

Sanderson helped him down the path toward the vehicles. More gunshots rang out in the distance, but it was the sound of a helicopter that made Fenix freeze. His blood boiled as he looked up at the sky and saw the Black Hawk. This was the end of the road for the Sons of Liberty unless he got the hell out of here soon.

The bitch Secretary of Defense was coming for them.

***

Raven rested with his back against a ponderosa, panting. Creek was looking

up at him. He could tell his dog was scared. Raven was scared too. But they were alive, and neither of them had been shot.

Yet.

He peered around the tree to check for the two Nazis hunting them. This would never have happened if he hadn't taken his time trying to kill Fenix. Now the man was about to escape.

Raven's mind shifted from thoughts of Sandra and Allie back to his friends on the road. The message from Colton had crossed into his muddled mind when he heard the faint but unmistakable sound of a helicopter on the horizon. The clock was ticking.

Shit, we have to get out of here.

If the military was on the way—if they knew Fenix was here—they would likely carpet-bomb the entire mountain. Raven checked the magazine in his Glock. There was one round left, but two men stalking them. His crossbow and M4 were both empty, and he'd left them behind to travel lighter. Both hatchets were buried in SOL soldiers, and his knife was stuck in the gut of their general.

One bullet, his bare hands, and a very pissed-off Akita.

It would have to do.

Raven looked to Creek. The dog knew what to do. He took off into the woods, leaping over a fallen log and vanishing behind a cluster of snow-covered rocks.

Drawing in a breath, Raven snuck a glance at the closest of the SOL men. They were moving slowly, their rifles sweeping with calculated precision. These men were trained killers. Probably former soldiers.

But they weren't Marines.

Raven moved out from behind the tree and aimed at the closest of the men, pulling the trigger. As soon as the bullet left the barrel, he was running for cover.

Gunfire riddled the snow where he had been a second earlier, and he leapt through the air into a ravine, sliding down the side. His boots hit the bottom, and he quickly climbed up the steep embankment on the other side. At the top, the remaining soldier was striding toward the area Raven had just abandoned.

Taking off at a hunch, Raven flanked the man. The sound of the approaching helicopter disguised the crunch of his boots in the snow. The man looked toward the sky, and Raven slipped behind a tree. He waited, and

then moved back into the shadows. His advantage was the night vision goggles he still wore. The SOL soldier had nothing but moonlight.

Raven saw his opportunity a second later, the same moment Creek emerged from his hiding spot. Together, they slammed into the unsuspecting soldier. The dog tore into the man's leg while Raven climbed on top. He pulled a knife from the Nazi's belt, looked him in the eyes, and then traced the blade deeply across his neck.

"Let's go, Creek," Raven said. He traded the knife for the M4 on the ground and took off toward the trail where the vehicles were located. An engine growled nearby, and he ran faster, leaping over rocks and fallen logs until he got to the road.

The camouflage tarps had already been removed from the three Humvees, and Fenix and the man that had helped him were driving toward a curve in the road ahead.

Raven aimed the rifle and fired at the truck, bullets pinging off the back before it rounded the corner. He ran after them, his rifle clutched across his chest, sucking in cold air and doing his best to will his body forward. His muscles and mind were exhausted, and the pills were starting to wear off. Even worse, he kept thinking of Sandra and Allie. Not knowing their fate was eating him alive.

But this was his duty. He had stopped the mortar and M240 fire, and now he had to stop Fenix.

The sound of the helicopter grew louder, and he saw the big black bird to the west. It was a Black Hawk, and while he wasn't sure if it was the same one that had flown over Lily Lake, he was certain this was just a recon party. The real threat was coming from the south.

Raven froze at the low rumble of fighter jets. It had been ten minutes since he had talked to Colton, and it appeared the clock had finally run out.

Oh shit.

"On me, Creek!"

Raven looked to the path that curved off to his right, away from the other two Humvees. If Dale was still alive, he would be down there with Sarah. Fenix was already long gone. Raven would let the military deal with the bastard. He had to get off this mountain with Dale and the girl.

He made his way back to the smoking crater in the middle of the field. The scent of burned flesh and death filled his nostrils. Creek took off as Raven searched the gore-peppered area for Dale and Sarah.

A few minutes later, barking came from near a truck across the debris zone. Raven ran over to find Creek had located Dale and Sarah. The big man was on the ground behind the truck with the girl by his side.

Sarah said something to Raven, but he was too busy staring at the pickup. The explosion had speared the tires with shrapnel and peppered the hood. There was no way they were driving it out of here, and he didn't want to risk going back to the Humvees without having a key in hand.

"Raven, you have to help Dale," Sarah said.

Dale moaned. "Get her out of here, man."

"Not leaving you," Raven said. He pointed down the hill. "Sarah, go get the horses. They're tied up about a quarter mile down there. Creek, you go with her!"

She didn't hesitate, and took off with Creek while Raven bent down to help Dale up. The big retired soldier had taken at least three rounds, from what Raven could see, and couldn't stand on his own.

"Are those fighter jets?" he rasped.

Raven nodded. "We have to get off the mountain."

Dale leaned on him as a crutch, and they set off down the slope.

"You shouldn't have come back for me."

"Like you wouldn't have done the same for me," Raven said.

They navigated the rocky terrain like they had each been trained decades ago in boot camp, moving together as one. Brothers. Raven's head ached from a migraine, but adrenaline kept him going.

The roar of the fighter jets closed in. Raven had heard that sound many times, and knew what was coming. He moved faster, a mistake that cost him his footing. They went down together, rolling until they came to a stop against a fallen tree. Raven pushed himself up and reached back down to help Dale.

"No, man, I'm too far gone—" Dale protested.

Raven could barely hear past the raucous sound of the approaching jets. He bent down and yelled over the noise, "Get on!"

He picked Dale up and set off with the man over his shoulders. This wasn't the first time Raven had carried another man. Back in the Corps, he had carried his fair share, but that was years ago, and he was now hurt and out of shape. And Dale was heavy as a horse.

Raven focused on each step, trying to ignore the sound of incoming death. The jets were closing in. There were three of them, and they were heading

right for Prospect Mountain. Several missiles slammed into the aerial tramway far above them. The explosions rocked the mountain, and Raven lost his balance again.

“We have to get up. They will be back,” Raven said, crawling over to where Dale had fallen.

“Leave me,” Dale said.

“Get your butt up, Dale!” shouted another voice. “That’s an order!”

Dale and Raven both looked to their right to see Creek and then Sarah, who was standing with the reins of both horses clutched in her hands. The little firebrand had come through for them.

Creek barked at them as if to say, *move*!

Raven helped Dale over the back of Rhino, and then climbed on to Willow, with Sarah clinging to his back. Raven gave the horse a good nudge and then whistled at Rhino.

The horses took off down the steep path as the fighter jets were preparing to make their second pass. Raven looked up to see two of them were Chinese L-15/JL-10 and one was an American F-22 Raptor.

“Go, go, go!” he shouted.

Sarah wrapped her arms around his waist. The horses loped down the slope, hooves crunching over snow and fallen branches. The rumble of the jets was so loud Raven had to resist the urge to clamp his hands over his ears. Another salvo of missiles lanced away from the Chinese jets, and the F-22 Raptor dropped a bomb that tumbled away toward the top of the mountain.

“Hold on, Sarah!” Raven shouted.

The concussion seemed to shake the entire slope. Rocks and snow rained down, and shards of broken trees torpedoed through the air. A sharp piece of bark stuck into Raven’s arm, and Sarah screamed in pain as she was also hit.

A wave of heat followed, and Raven looked over his shoulder at a tsunami of fire racing down the mountain. Creek was right behind them, running between trees and jumping over rocks.

Raven turned and focused on a bluff just ahead. If they could jump over the edge, they might just have a chance of not being barbequed.

“Jump, boy!” Raven shouted at Creek.

Willow protested when he kicked her, but a second kick pushed her forward. Raven grabbed the reins on Rhino and pulled the beast after them. Creek didn’t need to be told twice. The dog darted past them and leapt over the edge. The horses both jumped a moment later.

Sarah screamed again, and Raven looked up just as an avalanche of snow, fire, and debris rushed overhead.

— 23 —

The top of Prospect Mountain had vanished in a blast like a volcanic eruption. To Charlize, it seemed like a fitting end to the Nazi bastard that had terrorized Colorado and killed her brother.

Normally she would have felt the messy adrenaline rush that came with flying into battle. But this time she wasn't in the cockpit; she was in the troop hold of a Black Hawk, and right now there was nothing but anger coursing through her veins. She had waited a long time for a chance to get Dan Fenix, and that moment had finally arrived.

The bulkheads vibrated from the rumble of the squadron of fighter jets. The F-22 Raptor led them this time, and the two Chinese L-15/JL-10 tailed close behind. A second bomb dropped from the F-22, and another torrent of missiles hit the peak of the mountain, sending rock and flame toward the heavens.

"I hope there aren't any civilians up there. You think Colton's people got out in time?" said a voice.

Charlize pulled her gaze away from the view to look at Sergeant Fugate. The ten Green Berets were all watching the fighter jets pounding the aerial tramway. They were armed with a variety of weapons from M4s to M249 SAWs. All of them wore ballistic gear and helmets topped with "four eyes" night vision goggles.

They weren't the only ones that had come prepared for a battle. Charlize also wore a ballistic vest and carried an M9. Flanking her were Colonel Raymond and Albert, both of them armed and ready for combat.

The Chinese jets veered away, screaming as they curved across the Estes Park valley. Charlize turned back to the windows with conflicted feelings. This was the first time she had authorized the Chinese pilots to use deadly

force, and by doing so, she had not only dealt with Fenix and the Sons of Liberty—she had allowed General Lin a win for his Chinese troops. Hearing it had been missiles from the Chinese fighters that had helped take the Sons of Liberty down would be a great morale boost to the Chinese soldiers that had been ambushed by domestic terrorists in multiple locations throughout the United States.

Hopefully there is enough left to identify Fenix's remains, she thought. They would need to prove he was dead. The last thing she wanted was to make him a martyr and a ghost.

"Secretary Montgomery, there's still gunfire on Highway 36," said Captain Howey. "Looks like quite the fight down there. Some of the vehicles retreated when the jets showed up, but a group has remained behind."

Charlize looked toward the cockpit, where new pilots Captain Mayberry and Captain Howey were manning the controls.

"Looked like a bloodbath to me, and it's not stopping," Mayberry said.

Albert stirred in his seat and grimaced, apparently thinking the same thing as her. They had all hoped the military presence would stop the violence.

"What do you think we should do, Big Al?" she asked.

The question took him off guard. But that was the point. She wanted his honest opinion.

"Those may not be Latin Kings down there, like in Charlotte, but anyone that kills civilians is evil in my books. If they aren't scattering from the threat of a bomb and missiles, then they don't respect the government."

The explosions continued in the distance, the floor vibrating beneath her boots. For the past twenty minutes, they had stayed out of sight for fear of being snagged by an RPG or gunfire, but they couldn't wait any longer while the citizens of Estes Park were slaughtered.

Raymond must have known the order was coming. "I highly recommend not getting involved in a situation like this, ma'am. Stopping Fenix is one thing, but Estes Park and Fort Collins have warred over resources and—"

"Your dissent is noted, Colonel, but this isn't 'warring over resources.' This is a bloodbath with innocent civilians dying. We need to stop it."

Raymond sighed, but the Green Berets were ready for action. There was an approving gleam in Fugate's eye that made her sit up a little straighter.

"Take us down at a safe distance," Charlize said.

The bird quickly changed course, curving in a long arc around Prospect Mountain and over the town. They passed over a park outside town hall, the

place where she had dropped off supplies after her brother's death.

Several buildings were burning around the town square. One of them collapsed as they passed over. Bodies littered the roads below, and even from this height she could tell they weren't all soldiers.

"My God," she said. Seeing the devastation and loss of life in the once-quaint tourist town nearly took her breath away. Houses burned in the residential areas. To the east, Estes Park Lake was nothing but a shallow puddle, the dam destroyed.

"Two o'clock," said one of the pilots.

She stood and made her way to the cockpit at a hunch to get a better view. The battle was still raging at the roadblock. A cluster of trucks had surrounded the Estes Park militia, and Sheriff Thompson's men were still firing.

"Sergeant Fugate, take out the hostiles at that barrier and save as many people as you can. This ends now," she ordered.

"Yes ma'am," Fugate said without hesitation.

"I really think you should reconsider, Secretary Montgomery," Raymond said. "It's not safe down there, as you can see."

"Colonel, I gave you an order."

Raymond pulled his M9 from his holster, and for a moment she thought he might be preparing to point it at her, but he checked the magazine and said, "I'm with you, ma'am."

The Black Hawk lowered to the street, and Fugate opened the door. The Green Berets piled out, fanning across the street toward the barrier. Charlize started to get out, but Albert put a hand on her sleeve.

"Stay behind me, ma'am," he said.

Before they could all exit, Captain Howey craned his helmet out of the cockpit. "Ma'am, I just got a report from our Raptor pilot that a Humvee escaped Prospect Mountain and is heading south on Highway 7. They are asking for permission to fire."

Albert looked back at Charlize. "You think it could be Fenix?" he asked.

"Shit," she said, her eyes flitting back to the road. The Green Berets were running toward the burning vehicles and gunfire. Raymond had paused on the street, his pistol still in his grip.

"Tell those fighters to hold their fire and stand by. We'll check it out," she said. "If it's Fenix, I want to be the one to end him."

Albert nodded, and Raymond jumped back inside the chopper, leaving the

Green Berets to fight with the Estes Park militia. The bird lifted back into the sky, and the pilots veered south.

Smoke choked the skyline, rising off the burning structures and the smoldering top of Prospect Mountain. She pulled the M9 out of her holster and palmed a magazine into the gun. She pulled the slide back on her pistol to chamber a round. Raymond straightened his flak jacket, and Albert checked the magazine in his M4. They both looked at her as the bird continued over the town toward Highway 7.

“I’ve got eyes,” said Captain Howey a moment later. “One o’clock.”

She looked through the cockpit windshield at a pair of headlights on the road. The beams flicked off when the driver realized they were being tailed, but it was already too late.

“Open the door,” she instructed Albert.

He moved over and pulled it open, letting in a rush of frigid air. She grabbed a handhold as the pilots moved into position over the highway.

“I’ll take out the tires,” Albert said. He shouldered his rifle and waited for Charlize to give him the okay. She waited a few more seconds until they were about a hundred feet behind the Humvee, then dipped her head.

Albert squeezed off an automatic burst, hitting the back of the vehicle and then painting the side with rounds. The driver swerved but leveled out and continued speeding down the highway.

“Get back!” Raymond yelled as the front passenger window rolled down. A rifle barrel stuck out of it, but the pilots were already moving. They banked hard to the left, out of the line of fire, giving Albert another angle. He fired at the driver’s side, taking out the window and hitting the door with several rounds.

This time the Humvee veered into the ditch, where it slammed into an embankment and came to a violent stop.

“Nice shot, Big Al,” she said. She motioned for the pilots to put them down on the road.

“Hold on,” Captain Howey said.

Charlize made sure she had a good grip on the overhead handle as the Black Hawk descended to the road. The bird set down gently, with only a slight jolt as the wheels hit the snow-covered highway.

“Stay here, and kill those rotors,” she instructed the pilots.

Albert jumped out first, his M4 trained on the smoking Humvee. Charlize and Raymond went next with their pistols up. The rotor drafts hit them in the

back as they moved low under the blades, which were already beginning to slow.

Albert moved in front of her to shield her just in case anyone had survived the crash. Smoke whipped away from the hood of the truck and into the night. When they got to the edge of the road, the passenger door suddenly burst open and a man slumped out into the ditch. Albert aimed his rifle at the potential hostile, and Raymond walked to the right for a better firing field on the left side of the truck.

“Don’t shoot!” the man yelled, one of his hands in the air. The other was clutched around something protruding from his side.

Raymond gave the all clear a moment later. “Driver’s dead,” he said.

The rotors waned behind them, the final blasts of cold air rustling her clothing as she stared at the man in the ditch. His face was covered in cuts, and his nose was bleeding. Long, dark hair hung over his face. He flicked it away, revealing two hate-filled eyes.

Was this him? Was this the man she had been hunting for so long?

“Stay here, ma’am,” Albert said.

“Like hell,” she replied, moving past him with her pistol up. They walked to the ditch where the man was lying on his back, a knife handle sticking out of his gut. He winced in pain and squinted up at Charlize.

“That you, bitch?” he asked.

Albert moved forward, but she put a hand on his back to stop him before he could do anything rash.

“I’ve got this,” she said.

The look Albert gave her was one of deep concern, but there was understanding too. He knew how important it was that she be the one to bring Fenix down.

“I’ve got your back, ma’am,” Albert said.

“I know, Big Al.”

She walked closer, with Albert by her side. The scent of diesel filled the night as it leaked from the tank of the Humvee. The injured man watched her like a bird studying its prey, dark eyes following her every move.

“Dan Fenix, I presume?” she asked.

The man grinned. “You finally got me, Charlize,” he said.

“Secretary Montgomery,” she corrected.

“Not to me you’re not. You’re just a traitor bitch that let the damned Chinamen overrun my country.”

Charlize wiped the smirk off his face with a pistol whip. He cried out in pain, and then spat two teeth into the snow. He glared up at her with stone-cold eyes. There was a hatred there that she had only seen in a few people before.

“You can take me in, but my cause will live on while I await trial,” Fenix said, spitting more blood. “I’ve created a movement that you can’t stop.”

“Wrong,” she said.

“You think you can stop it?” Fenix asked. He smiled again, a wide, shit-eating grin that exposed his broken front teeth.

Charlize looked over at Albert. He was a lawman and had always followed the rules, but she could tell by the look on his face that he condoned what she was about to do.

“Your movement will die with you,” she said. Bending down, she yanked the chain with his dog tags off his neck.

The grin on Fenix’s bloodied face vanished and his brows furrowed as she backed away. He held up a hand. “Now let’s not be hasty, Secretary Montgomery,” he said, the tone of his voice changing to something almost respectful. “I may be guilty of a few crimes, but I still have rights. I’m a citizen of this country.”

“No. You’re a domestic terrorist. Nobody will care if I burn you at the stake.”

Fenix seemed to relax at that statement, apparently not taking her literally. She jerked her chin at Albert, and they moved back up the ditch to the shoulder of the road, where Raymond watched with his pistol aimed at Fenix.

“What are you doing?” Fenix asked.

She grabbed a flare from Albert’s tactical vest. Fenix’s eyes widened when he saw what she was holding.

“No,” he said, raising both hands. “Please, you can’t…you can’t do this. I have rights.”

She pulled off the top and hit the flare’s tip against the striker surface. A flame burst out, and she held it there for a moment while Fenix pleaded for his life.

“You bitch!” Fenix screamed as she tossed the flare into the ditch. The gas instantly caught fire, raging around the Humvee. Albert led Charlize to a safe distance, where they stopped to watch with Raymond.

Fenix had made it to his stomach, and crawled several feet before the flames engulfed his legs and then his back and neck. He let out an agonized

scream as it consumed his body. He flopped and squirmed to try and put the flames out. She had wanted to leave behind an easily-identifiable body, but watching him burn was too satisfying. Besides, she had his dog tags to prove he was dead.

Charlize stood there for a good ten minutes, even after Fenix had stopped moving. Sometimes justice was a very violent thing, especially at the end of the world.

***

Sandra wiped the sweat and tears from her face with a sleeve, and focused on the doors of the emergency room, trying to see through her suddenly blurred vision. After Chief Colton had arrived with five bullet holes in him, she didn't know how much more she could take. He had died long before he made it to the hospital, but Lindsey had insisted on bringing his body here anyways.

More Green Berets were streaming into the room. They had pushed Thompson's men back, and were now bringing in more injured. Sergeant Fugate, the leader of the team, was helping Lindsey Plymouth. She had a shard of metal sticking through her forearm, but she looked just as fierce and determined as ever.

"It's over!" Lindsey yelled. "The battle for Estes Park is over."

For a moment, everyone stopped what they were doing to look at Lindsey. Sandra finished the bandage she was putting on a patient and took in the makeshift emergency room in a quick scan. Lanterns lit the open space, illuminating what looked more like a field hospital from the Civil War than a modern medical facility. Beds with severely wounded patients surrounded her in all directions. There were buckets collecting blood. Hacksaws and knives glistening red on metal tables. Over the cries and moans, Lindsey continued her announcement.

"We won," Lindsey said. There wasn't enthusiasm in her words, and Sandra had a feeling it had to do with the fact they had lost so many people in the attack. "Thompson's forces have retreated. What's left of them, that is." She continued talking, but Sandra ignored the words when she saw two new patients moving toward the open doors.

"Sam!" Sandra shouted.

Raven limped into the open space with Sarah by his side. Just behind them, two soldiers were helping carry Dale inside. Sandra let out a sigh when she saw her brother looked mostly okay. He raised a hand at her and forced a smile. Then he saw Colton's body and his hand fell limply to his side.

She hurried toward Raven and wrapped her arms around him when they met. Behind them, more people piled into the lobby outside the hospital. She didn't recognize three of them. Wait…hadn't she seen the woman with short-cropped hair walking through the lobby before? The doors to the operating room shut, blocking Sandra's view.

"You okay, sis?" Raven asked.

She managed a nod. "Is Allie okay?"

"The high school was untouched," Raven said. "Everyone is fine there."

"Where's Creek?"

"Sitting outside."

Sarah tried to dart away from them, but Sandra bent down to check her for injuries.

"I'm fine," the girl said. "I'm going to sit by Dale."

Sandra nodded and looked back to her brother.

"Is it really over?" she asked.

"I think so." He turned to look at Colton again, a tear flowing freely down his filthy cheek.

"He was hit seven times before he finally went down," Lindsey said, stepping over with her hand still gripping her wound.

"I should have been there," Raven said quietly.

"You saved lives, Sam. If it weren't for you, we would have all died on that road, and those mortars would have destroyed the high school. You and Dale are heroes."

"No," Raven said. "Chief Colton is the hero."

"Sandra, we need you!" Doctor Duffy yelled. He was standing next to a table where Dale was stretched out. Sarah held the big man's hand.

"Go help him," Raven said.

Sandra nodded and left Raven and Lindsey to speak privately. The macabre sounds of the battle's aftermath took over, but Sandra was able to drown out the screams and cries to focus on Dale.

"You're going to be okay," she said.

Dale looked at her, his face pale from the blood loss, but his eyes alert.

"Your brother saved us," he said. "He saved us all."

Sandra wanted to smile, but all she could do was nod. Chief Colton had died a hero's death in the battle for Estes Park, but apparently a new hero had also emerged—someone she'd never thought would be a leader. The fight was over for now, and for the first time since the North Korean attack, she trusted they would be okay. Her brother and Lindsey would watch out for Estes Park in Colton's stead.

— Epilogue —

Three months after the North Korean attack

Raven Spears fidgeted with his tie. He hated ties, and he hated wearing a suit, but today he was an honored guest at the unveiling of the new White House, along with his sister and niece. Creek trotted along next to them. The dog hated being on a leash about as much as Raven hated being in a suit.

“Don’t worry, boy. We’ll be free again in a few days,” Raven said with a grin.

Creek stopped to lift a leg on a fire hydrant. Allie gripped Raven’s other hand, gawking at the skyscrapers towering above them. It was fairly warm for December, but not warm enough to keep away the snow. Light flakes fluttered from the sky, and a snowplow idled at the next intersection. The driver smoked a cigarette while he waited to see if the snow would materialize into anything heavier.

It was a long time since Raven had last been in New York City, and the metropolis had changed dramatically. Lower Manhattan looked relatively normal, but although the lights were on, it wasn’t the bustling zone of fancy boutiques, high-end restaurants, and twenty-dollar girly drink bars that he remembered from his last visit. Most of the shops were still closed, and plywood covered windows and doors.

The sidewalks and intersections were no longer bustling. Instead, small knots of civilians rushed from one place to another. There weren’t people talking on cell phones or listening to music either. In their place Raven saw groups of Chinese and American soldiers patrolling, rifles cradled, but eyes flitting like hawks.

The streets weren’t filled with bumper-to-bumper traffic or cabs honking at daring bicyclists trying to squeeze between traffic. The few vehicles that were

running were stopped at roadblocks manned by NYPD officers.

Security was tight, but while the city appeared safe, Raven knew there was danger outside—and possibly inside—the island of Manhattan.

Smoke fingered away from fires on the horizon, and the military flight in had shown a city that looked like a war zone. Brooklyn had fallen into anarchy after the North Korean attack, and hundreds of buildings had been burned to the ground. He had heard rumors of mass graves.

“What are they doing here?” Allie asked.

Raven looked down to see her pointing at the Chinese soldiers. Sandra gave him a look that said *You explain this one, Uncle Raven.*

“Those men are here to help us get things back to normal, *Agaliga.* They are here to help.”

“Why don’t they have them in Estes Park then?” she asked.

“Because we’re not a big enough town,” Sandra replied.

The answers seemed to satisfy the girl’s curiosity, but she continued to examine the foreign soldiers in white uniforms walking along the sidewalk and in the streets. Raven did his best to ignore them. At first he hadn’t trusted the Chinese, but Lindsey had told him the word coming in over the airways was mostly positive. If they were here to finish what North Korea had started, they would have done so a long time ago.

“This way,” Raven said, shepherding his family down Church Street. At the next intersection, FEMA workers were handing out meals from the back of a semi-trailer to a crowd of civilians. Raven recalled the food vendors that used to have carts on the corners, and wondered if the smell of hotdogs, pretzels, and ethnic cuisine would ever return to these streets.

“I’m hungry,” Allie said.

“We’re going to eat in a bit,” Sandra replied. “We’re almost there, see?”

Allie followed her mother’s finger toward the One World Trade Center. The new location of the White House had seemed odd at first, but now Raven understood the significance. The tower represented the strength and resolve of the American people to rebuild and keep fighting.

Creek pulled on the leash to paint another hydrant, but this time Raven scolded him. The dog did as ordered and fell into line next to Raven. Security increased as they approached the One World Trade Center, and Raven didn’t want his best friend mistaken for a stray.

“Keep moving,” an NYPD officer said, gesturing toward Greenwich Street. Dozens of people in civilian clothing were streaming toward a gated

entrance with military sentries just outside the 9/11 Memorial.

It took them a while to get to the front of the line, where a stern-looking American soldier that reminded Raven of Jake Englewood asked for their badges. Raven handed over their credentials. The man looked at each one, checking Raven, Allie, and Sandra. Then he looked down at the dog and raised a brow.

“He’s the guest of honor today,” Raven said with a grin. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a slip that had been non-negotiable—the military approval for Raven to bring Creek to the event.

“He’s a service dog,” Sandra said.

The soldier looked back to Raven and smiled. “I heard about you guys. Welcome to New York City.”

“Thank you…” Raven looked at the man’s tag. “Sergeant Maddow.”

“Sorry, but I have to ask,” Maddow replied, “are you carrying any weapons?”

“Yes,” Raven said.

Maddow jerked his chin toward another soldier next to him. “Cunningham will have to take them for now, but you can pick them up on your way out.”

Raven hesitated. He didn’t like going anywhere unarmed, but he also didn’t have a choice. He reached into his suit and pulled the Glock out from the holster. Then he bent down and pulled a .45 revolver from his right boot. He handed the guns to Cunningham.

“That it?” the soldier asked.

Raven just looked at him.

“You got a knife or anything?” Maddow asked.

Raven shrugged and then bent down to pull out a knife from his left boot. He handed that over too.

“We good?” Raven asked.

Cunningham chuckled, and Maddow handed Raven a slip of paper with a number on it.

“Don’t lose this,” he said.

Raven took the slip and led his family through the open gates down Fulton Street toward the north memorial pools.

“You’re famous, Uncle Raven,” Allie said.

Raven shook his head. “No, I’m not. Creek is.”

She chuckled and Raven directed them toward a group of people gathering in the open space between the pools and the front of the One World Trade

Center building.

Hundreds of people.

From all walks of life.

Raven had always felt out of place in crowds, and the thought of being recognized in front of so many people, especially while dressed in this silly suit, really made him nervous. Sandra reached over and squeezed his wrist.

“You should be excited,” she said. “This is a huge honor, and we’re very proud of you.”

“Yeah,” Allie said with a smile. “You’re a hero!”

Raven took in a deep breath as they made their way through the crowd. No matter how hard he tried to sell it in his own mind, he couldn’t bring himself to believe he deserved any sort of recognition. He had stewed about even coming here after receiving the invite. But they were here now, and he needed to make the best of it.

“Sam Spears,” came a booming voice.

“That’s me,” Raven said, holding up a hand. A large African American man dressed in slacks, a navy pea coat covering a blue button-down shirt, and a black tie, walked toward Raven.

“I’m Officer Albert Randall, the head of Secretary Montgomery’s security detail. Welcome to New York City. Thank you for coming.” He nodded politely at the others. “You must be Sandra and Allie Spears.”

“I like your shoes, mister,” Allie said.

Raven looked at Albert’s new Air Jordans and grinned.

“Thank you,” Albert said.

They followed the officer through the growing crowd to two rows of white chairs facing a ribbon stretched across the entrance to the One World Trade Center. Several Marines stood stiffly on both sides of a podium set up behind the ribbon. Raven swelled with pride at the sight of his brothers.

“Please have a seat,” Albert said, gesturing toward the front row. The chairs were already filling with people dressed in fancy clothes. He hesitated for several seconds. Never in his life had he sat in a front row. He could tell by their expensive suits and fur coats that the other people sitting here were some of the most powerful people left in the country. Politicians, the one-percenters, and military officers with chests full of medals.

Some things don’t ever change.

Several faces turned in his direction as he finally moved down the row to find a seat. Scrutinizing eyes swept over his ponytail and dark skin, his sister

and niece in their simple dresses and coats, and finally on Creek.

“Is there a problem?” he said to a middle-aged woman wearing a fur coat.

“Not at all,” she said, focusing back on the podium.

Creek growled at her.

“Sorry, lady, my dog doesn’t like your coat,” Raven said.

Sandra smiled politely at the woman as she pulled her collar closer together.

“It’s okay, Sam,” Sandra whispered. She took a seat with Allie and patted for Raven to sit next to them. He did as ordered, and stroked Creek’s fur to calm himself. His heart was beating like an automatic rifle. It was worse than the pre-combat jitters. He was more nervous now than when he was squaring off with SOL soldiers.

A crowd gathered behind the white chairs. Albert made his way to the front of the building, where he pulled out his radio and spoke into it. The glass doors of the front entrance finally opened, disgorging two more security guards and Colonel Raymond. It was Raymond who had convinced Raven to come here.

Behind the colonel stood Secretary of Defense Charlize Montgomery. She looked stately in a white coat. Albert and another officer in plain clothes led her toward the podium, their eyes scanning the crowd.

Raven continued to pat Creek’s head. The dog looked back with his one eye and then licked Raven’s hand. His loyal friend always knew how to calm him down.

Secretary Montgomery stepped up to the podium. Ty wheeled his chair up next to her.

“Good afternoon, everyone. For those of you that don’t know me, I’m Secretary of Defense Charlize Montgomery, and this is my son Ty,” she said.

Ty raised a hand in a shy wave. The crowd quieted, and Creek’s ears perked to listen.

“I’d like to welcome you to the One World Trade Center, and new home of the White House. President Diego wished he could be here with us all today, but he is working on important matters in California.” She smiled. “It’s my great pleasure to be here in his absence and recognize a few of our honored guests in the audience. When I finish, I’ll talk a little bit about the future of our country. After that, we will head inside and begin tours of the new White House that is now located on floors five through ten.”

Raven looked up at the building towering above them. He had been a

young Marine the day the Twin Towers came crashing down. So much had happened since then, but he was proud of the man he had become through the chaos, and for the first time he was excited to stand up in front of these people, to represent all those that had died so this day could happen.

"Today, we're here for the ribbon-cutting of the White House, but we're also here for much more than that. We're here to remember everyone we've lost over the past three months, and we're here to celebrate our country." Her words reflected what Raven was thinking. "This, *this* is what America represents. Resilience. Strength. Freedom."

She paused and smiled sadly at her son. "Many of our heroes aren't here today. Today we bow our heads to remember them, and to thank them for their sacrifice."

Raven lowered his head with those around him, thinking of the heroes they'd lost: Captain Jake Englewood, Major Nathan Sardetti, and Chief Marcus Colton. But he wasn't thinking about how they had died—he was thinking about how they had lived: Honorable, brave, and selfless.

"Thank you," said Secretary Montgomery, looking up at the crowd. Her eyes scanned the crowd, and then the rows of seated people, stopping on Raven. His heart thumped.

"We're also here to recognize several people that are still with us. These men and women have shown extreme acts of bravery in the face of pure evil since the North Korean attacks. To start, I'd like to call Officer Libby Hawks up to the podium."

Raven twisted in his chair to see a young woman dressed in an NYPD uniform. Her red hair, freckled features, and confident gait reminded him of Captain Lindsey Plymouth. He held back a smile as he remembered Lindsey's final words before he got on the chopper. She'd not only agreed to that drink he had been hounding her about, but also a meal when he got back from his trip.

"Thank you again, Officer Hawks, for your service to the citizens of New York City," Secretary Montgomery said once she'd presented the woman with her medal. The crowd clapped while Hawks walked back to her a seat. Secretary Montgomery directed a smile at Raven and motioned for him to stand.

"I'm also honored to have Marine Staff Sergeant Sam Spears from Estes Park, Colorado and his Akita, Creek, here with us today," she said. "Come on up here, you two."

“That’s you, Uncle Raven,” Allie said with a huge grin.

“Come on, boy,” Raven said. The dog stood and followed Raven down the row. Several people moved their legs to let him and Creek through.

“Sorry…excuse us…sorry…thank you,” Raven said politely. He could feel the eyes on his back, but he ignored them. He wasn’t here to impress these people; he was here to remember his friends.

“I appreciate you making the long journey here, Staff Sergeant,” said Secretary Montgomery. She shook his hand. “Thank you for everything you have done for our country. And thank you, too, Creek.”

She bent down to pet Creek on his head. His tail whipped back and forth. Raven moved next to the podium as Secretary Montgomery stepped back up to the mic.

“Staff Sergeant Sam Spears, better known by his friends as Raven, helped bring down the leader of the Sons of Liberty.” She looked over at him. “Actually, Raven helped bring down the entire organization. He and his wonder dog put their lives in harm’s way more times than I can count.”

“Thank you for what you did at the Castle, sir,” Ty said. He held up a medal, and Raven bent down so the boy could put it around his neck.

“My pleasure, buddy,” Raven said.

Ty pulled a second medal off his lap and said, “Come here, boy.”

Creek looked up to Raven, who gave his dog permission with a nod. Trotting over, Creek sat on his hind legs and let Ty put the medal around his neck.

Colonel Raymond gave Raven a firm handshake. “Good job, Marine,” he said.

Secretary Montgomery nodded firmly. “Good job, indeed. Would you like to say a few words?” she asked.

Raven swallowed hard and looked toward the crowd. The woman wearing a fur coat was still glaring at him like he didn’t belong here.

“Yes, I think I would, Secretary Montgomery,” he finally said, moving over to the mic. He adjusted it and then grabbed the side of the podium, focusing on his sister and Allie in the front row.

“I am not a hero,” Raven said. “I have never been a hero. In fact, I have done some very bad things in my life. Some of them I did to protect my family, my town, and my country, and I would do it again. There are far better men that should be standing where I am today.”

Raven paused and carefully pulled the medal from his head, careful not to

get it snagged on his ponytail. He held it in his hand and said, “Today I’m dedicating this to those men, and to Ty Montgomery.”

He looked over at the boy, who had a surprised look dawning on his face. Raven stepped away from the podium. Charlize took his place there and said, “You are a hero whether you want to be or not.”

“Thank you, ma’am.” Raven grabbed Creek’s leash to lead him back to his seat. For the first two seconds, they walked in silence, everyone staring at the American Indian man and his dog. And then, to his surprise, the audience broke into applause and stood. Even the woman with the fur coat rose to her feet and clapped.

Raven returned to his seat, heart pounding with pride.

“Good job, brother,” Sandra said. She placed a hand on his thigh and he couldn’t help but smile. The grin lasted for the rest of the award ceremony. When Secretary Montgomery finished handing out medals, her words took on a more serious tone as she spoke about the state of the country.

“It will take a long time for our country to recover, but one thing is certain. People like the heroes we have recognized today will help us get there. We have already had great success in bringing the power back on in several states. Our supply lines and distribution efforts are running smoother than ever. Our Survival Centers are operating at full capacity, but with the help of our NATO allies and the Chinese, our citizens are staying alive in desperate times. However, there are still threats out there.” She paused to look again at Raven.

“Domestic terrorists, gangs, and outlaws have taken advantage of suffering Americans, and while we have brought down Dan Fenix, there are more like him out there. On top of that, the North Korean threat persists. We have already taken out two terrorist cells in Chicago and Los Angeles.”

The Secretary of Defense stopped again to let the words sink in. Raven appreciated her candor with the crowd. They needed to hear this.

“I’m dedicated to preventing evil from planting roots and growing in our country. I will eliminate every Dan Fenix out there, with the help of men and women like Staff Sergeant Spears and Officer Hawks.” Secretary Montgomery looked over her shoulder to Albert, who walked forward with a pair of scissors.

“What does she mean?” Sandra asked Raven.

“I think she has something planned for me and Creek.”

Secretary Montgomery gestured toward the crowd. “If our honored guests

would please join me."

Raven led Creek back up to the ribbon, where everyone crowded behind Ty's wheelchair. The boy held up the scissors and cut through the ribbon to the sound of applause.

"Today marks a new beginning for our country," Secretary Montgomery said. "Today, our government has a home again."

The clapping continued for several minutes. The glass doors to the One World Trade Center whisked open, and tour guides began instructing people to follow them into the building. While Sandra and Allie made their way toward Raven, the Secretary of Defense pulled him to the side.

"So, Staff Sergeant, how would you and Creek feel about hunting some Nazis and North Koreans?" she asked.

Creek looked up, his tail wagging.

Raven patted the dog's head. "We thought you'd never ask, ma'am."

—End of Book 4—

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