

Seeking Silence
E.A. Darl

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Also By E.A. Darl
Stealing Silence



Chapter 1

A Place To Start

Avalon sprawled on the floor of the bedroom she shared with Alexa, Achin wedged between her palms, staring at the items spread across the floor. Stretched out on her stomach and legs bent at the knee, she swung her feet back and forth, studying the objects. Two silver cuff links with a stylized golden bee on black sparkled in the ray of sunshine slanting through the open window. A curling photo of laughing friends, two of which were circled in black pen; five books of matches advertising “Frankie’s Finger Foods,” and a hand drawn pencil sketch of a green house and the words “Landfill #3” written at the bottom, with the number “9275”. She scowled at the items, then swung around to sit cross-legged and picked up the matchbook.

“I think this is our best bet. I am going to go check out Frankie’s Finger Foods,” said Avalon.

“Are you sure? It might not even exist anymore. There are hardly any restaurants in business. The cost of food is so much, no one can afford to eat out,” Alexa pointed out. “I think we should start with the landfills.”

“How are we going to search every landfill in the country? We can’t even drive.”

“We could search for them online. You know, see if any of the photos have green houses. Or use internet maps. They would have the latest satellite views of the dumps.”

Avalon frowned and fingered the matchbook. The last ray of the sun vanished as it sank below the horizon, plunging the room into twilight. “I have a feeling about this place. I am going to go to Frankie’s first.”

“Ok, then I am coming with you.”

“No you’re not. I am not dragging you out into danger. I swore to Mom and Dad to keep you safe. You are too young,” said Avalon as she pushed to her feet. She gathered the items and stuffed them back into a tin that she had found, placing all the objects inside except for one cuff link and a match box, which she stuffed into the inside pocket of her dad’s jacket. She rarely took it off.

“You can’t stop me following you, Avalon. I hate being stuck alone when you go out.” Alexa scowled at her older sister, angry tears sparkling in her hazel eyes. She jumped to her feet and ran over to the door, planting herself in front of it, all five feet two inches of stubborn sister..

“You are not alone. Peet is right downstairs. You will be safe here.”

“I am coming with you. You have to get by me to go out.” Alexa spread her arms wide, back against the door and gripped the door casing, anchoring herself against Avalon’s advance.

Avalon shrugged and walked over to the window, picking up her back pack and slinging it over her shoulder and onto her back as she passed it. Reaching the glass, she gripped the edge of the pane and pushed the sash higher. She swung one leg out over the lip of the window jamb then sat down straddling the opening.

“Tell Mitch where I have gone and if I am not back within two days, to start looking for me there. Love you, ‘sis.”

She ducked her head under the window and grasped the upper window casing, pulling herself to a standing position outside the window. A metal television antenna ran up the side of the house and she stepped over onto the structure and climbed quickly down, jumping the last three feet to land in a crouch at the base of tower.

“Avalon, get back here!” screamed Alexa in frustration. She stared at the offending tower in frustration and then backed away from the window. The height scared her and kept her confined to the house more than any lecture of Peet’s.

Avalon glanced back up at the window and waved, before vanishing into the bushes lining the driveway.

A curtain parted on the main floor and a pair of anxious eyes watched as Avalon disappeared down the drive.



AVALON RAN DOWN THE driveway, once she was clear of the house and any watching eyes. *I don't want to worry Mitch, he is way too protective of me. I work better alone. I can go places and do things that he cannot. He's a cop, for god's sake!*

Mitch had been her constant companion for the last several weeks. They met when he arrested her for breaking into a greenhouse. He later freed her from custody, under the condition that she agree to a dangerous mission. The mission involved stealing evidence of a government cover up, one that strangely linked back to her missing parents. Avalon and her sister Alexa had been on their own for five years, ever since the disappearance of their mother and father, two preeminent scientists with a flair for solving ecological issues in the natural environment. *But this goes way beyond invasive species management*, thought Avalon, as she ducked behind a wooden machine shed at the edge of the driveway.

She ran around to the back to the aging wooden door and yanked it open. It took a moment for her eyes to adjusted to the dimly lit interior, after the brightness of the outside. She pulled the door partly shut and looked around the barn. She had been in the machine shed last week, just poking around to see what Peet kept in the decrepit old building. It was then that she spied the old bicycle, leaning up against the rusting red fender of a long disused square hay baler. Lucky for her, the tires were still fully inflated. She pulled the bike out of the thick cobwebs and rolled it over to the doorway. The bike was baby blue with a purple banana seat, the plastic split in two places. Long curving handle bars put her in mind of a Harley Davidson motor bike. "This will do for transportation," she muttered aloud, scooping off the remaining spider webs and then rolling it outside. She kicked the door closed behind her and

with a running start, hopped onto the bike and began peddling. *Beats walking*, she thought, as she sped down the deserted gravel lane, a cloud of dust trailing in her wake.

The paved highway was empty when she reached it, for which she was grateful. Peet's driveway sloped toward the road and as she sped down the hill she gathered speed. Just as she reached the turn off, she braked, squeezing the pedals in reverse to slow her descent. Nothing happened. She shot out into the road at break neck speed and swung the handlebars to the left, dumping herself onto the hot pavement as the bike skidded out from under her. She slid along its surface for a few feet before coming to a bruised stop at the edge of the gravel.

"Oww!" she howled, the palms of her hands skinned and embedded with stones. The cuts welled up with blood and she wiped them on her jeans, wincing at the contact. "Damn, that hurts! Shit!" She puckered her lips and blew gently on the stinging cuts. Her knee throbbed, drawing her attention to a new ache and she bent over to examine the rip in her jeans. "Aww, man! Not my new jeans!"

They were not new jeans at all but the cast offs of Peet's eldest daughter, now well into her middle years. Twenty years out of date, they were still a wondrous find for Avalon, for they fit her thin torso perfectly. She even liked the bell bottoms.

Avalon limped back to the bike, scowling. She picked it up by the scuffed handles and did a visual inspection, carefully checking it over for damage. It looked to be no worse for the spill on the hard pavement. The chain had sprung off the sprocket and was dragging in the dirt. Avalon put down the kickstand and began repairing the bike. As she fiddled with the chain, an object dropped onto the road with a jingling sound. Surprised, she picked up the object. It was a leather change purse stuffed with coins. She bent her head sideways to look at the underside of the bike seat and that is when she saw it. The seat was hollow, and a little trap door had popped open with her fall. She snapped open the clasp of the change purse and emptied it in her hand. Out tumbled a large number

of assorted coins, and a small silver key, but more importantly, a fat roll of bills secured with a rubber band. A low whistle escaped her lips as she slipped the rubber band from the cache of cash. A quick count brought the total to over a thousand dollars. Shocked at her sudden windfall, she stretched the band around the bills and put them back into the bike seat, keeping the change in her pocket. As an afterthought, she put the cuff link in the bike seat too, for safekeeping.

Chain properly seated once again, Avalon straddled the bike and slowly pedaled away, testing that the chain was repaired and operating correctly. This time when she braked, it slowed with no effort at all. Grinning, Avalon sped up, heading toward the outskirts of Solace. Her aches were forgotten in the excitement of her windfall. *I can even buy myself lunch when I get to Frankie's*, she thought. Her stomach rumbled in pleased agreement at the thought.



Chapter 2

Plans Within Plans

The door opened and closed. The floorboards creaked as Peet walked down the hallway to his living room where Mitch sat, a glass of neat whiskey in his hand. He frowned down at the book open on his lap. The page was in some way offensive, for his frown deepened as he turned the page.

“She found it,” Peet said, sitting down in the horse hair chair across from Mitch.

“That didn’t take her long,” said Mitch, engrossed in his reading.

“She is a smart one, that girl,” said Peet with a grin. “I like her.”

“Did you really have to slip the chain like that? You could have just told her.”

“Yeah? And have her run like last time? Nope, she is a stubborn one. Best to let her discover things herself.” Pleased with himself, Peet helped himself to a measure of whiskey from the decanter sitting on the table between the two chairs. He took a sip and as he lowered his glass, he spied Alexa standing in the doorway. “Hello Alexa.”

Mitch’s head came up and he smiled at the younger sister, features smoothing. “Come in, Alexa.”

She walked into the room and sat down on a foot stool by the fireplace hearth. The fireplace was empty and cold. Alexa twisted her fingers together and said, “You put her up to this, didn’t you?” The accusation tumbled from her lips in a rush and she felt her cheeks heat. “Why did you have to use her again?”

Mitch stuck a coaster in between the pages of his book and closed it, settling his full attention on Alexa. “I am not using her, Alexa. Avalon came to this decision all on her own.”

“No she didn’t! You are responsible. You said that the restaurant might be where the gangs hang out. You had to say it, didn’t you?”

“Alexa, I only said they might be there. I also said that trying to locate the stronghold of the Firebrand gang is like trying to find a nest of rats in a sewer system. So many dead ends.”

“We need to find our parents!” Alexa trembled, her anxiety spiking with the conversation. “They are the important key, not the Firebrand gang. Who cares about a gang of teenage street rats? They robbed our house after our parents were taken! They are thugs and scum!”

“Alexa,” said Peet, “We are going after your parents, but first we need to figure out where they are. We will find them but it will take time. The S.O.S. might have some information. I am going to start with them. If anyone knows where they might be, it will be the S.O.S.”

“Who are the S.O.S? I know what they are, you already explained that. What I want to know is *who are they?* If they are so important and smart and all of that, how come the government doesn’t have them under lock and key, helping to solve the problems rather than sneaking around in the dark?”

The S.O.S. were a group of scientists, working in secret right under the government’s nose, to discover the “Seeds Of Survival” in a world where the land was dying. No longer trusting the government to provide answers in time to save the populace, the environmental scientists formed an underground, non-profit scientific brain trust, to explore solutions to the advancing ecological disaster that was unfolding before it was too late.

“They are in hiding, Alexa, because they refused to help the government. The government doesn’t take these things lightly. Its aims are not always aligned with the scientific community.”

“You want to go to scientists who are on the most wanted list and ask for their help against the government? Why would they do that? They are in hiding!”

“They are in hiding as their way of fighting back. I know what they want, Alexa, I am one of them.”

“So if they are so smart, if you are so smart,” she glared at Peet, “why did you have to send Avalon into danger again?” Alexa’s voice rose in anger and she choked on the next words. “She’s the only family I have!”

“Hey, hey... Alexa, we are here. I know you hate seeing her leave, but do you really think we could corral Avalon?” Mitch gathered Alexa into a fatherly hug, pressing her face against his shoulder. “She would have gone anyway, Alexa. She is headstrong and way too used to doing her own thing. We wanted to make sure that if that was the choice she made, that she was set up in an unobtrusive way. We also wanted to make sure she had resources and options. She has cash and transportation and most importantly, she is street smart. She will be fine.”

Alexa pulled away, scrubbing an escaped tear from her cheek. “Why can’t I help? Why does everyone treat me like a child? I hate being left behind. I can help!”

Mitch ran a hand over the stubble of his beard, taking in the stubborn set of her jaw and the narrowed, stormy eyes. His gaze rose to meet Peet’s. He nodded agreement to his unasked question. Mitch sighed.

“You can help.”

“I can?” said Alexa, surprised.

“Yes, you can. Peet would like you to be his spy. Would you like to be a spy?”

Alexa’s eyes widened as her lips wobbled into a half grin.

“A spy? Like in the movies? I can run around and eavesdrop on conversations, and discover secrets?”

Mitch nodded. “Exactly. Adults overlook children, and often speak things in front of them they would never share with an adult nearby.”

“Ok.” Alexa sat up straight and twisted around to look at Peet. “Who are we spying on? When do we leave?”

“Not until the morning,” he said.

“But Avalon got to leave early. She is biking to town in the dark!”

“Well the people we will be infiltrating do not hang around after dark. Most scientists work during the day. We leave in the morning.”

“Alright.” She jumped to her feet and ran out of the room. “I am going to go pack. Do I need a dress?” Her voice floated back to them as she climbed the stairs to her room.

“Yes!” called Peet after her retreating form.

Mitch eyed him for a moment then picked up his glass of whiskey again. “Are you sure this is a good idea?”

“I guarantee they will not even notice her after a while. She will be safe with me. And as you are leaving, it’s best she is in my line of sight.”

“Alright, we go with your plan. Now, I just have to figure out how to get back into my old job without being thrown into jail. We need access to those police records.”

He watched the amber liquid swirl in his glass for a moment, before downing it in one gulp. Placing the glass on the table, he stood, picking up his baseball cap and tugging it onto his head.

“I think it’s time to pay a visit to another old friend. Take care of Alexa.”

“Will do. Watch your back, Mitch. You cannot know who is involved in this or how far the governments’ reach is. Be careful who you talk to and who you trust when you do.”

Mitch nodded, and left the room. The front door slammed and his steps faded away. A moment later the engine of his ‘69 Mustang roared to life and he swung out of the driveway, leaving the old house in a cloud of dust.

Peet watched for a moment as the car disappeared down the lane, then shut the door and bolted it. He picked up the shot gun behind the door and checked the magazine, then placed it back behind the door. He hoped he would not need it. But one could never be too careful.



Chapter 3

Press Ganged

Dawn was still a few hours away when Avalon came to the sign announcing the outskirts of Solace. She stopped pedaling and coasted to its base, to rest for a moment. She leaned the bike against the signpost then dug into her back pack to retrieve her flash light. The beam of light washed over the sign. It read “Solace - Gateway To The Stars - Population: “The number was erased and spray-painted over with a skull and crossbones. The sign was covered in graffiti and gang slogans, the most prominent of which was the Firebrand gang, with its signature flames making the sign look as though it was on fire. Avalon smiled. Where the Firebrand gang could be found, she would also find clues to her parents’ fate.

She sat down under the sign then dug into her back pack and pulled out an apple, devouring it in three bites. Apples were her favourite. She could never eat enough apples. She reached in for a second apple, eating this one more slowly, pondering her next move. *I could head to the ghetto, and check out every place where the brand was spray painted. Someone would know where the gang’s headquarters were in Solace. But making inquiries in that fashion is a good way to be ambushed and beat up pretty badly, especially if it is the Firebrand gang. They like their privacy. They would not appreciate someone asking questions. No, if the Firebrand gang wanted to speak to you, they initiated the conversation. What I need to find is the place where they exchange information, among other things. Their secure meeting place.* It dawned on her that they could have more than one, but in Solace, there would be a primary location. She was hoping that Frankie’s Finger Foods would be that place. Avalon plucked the matchbook out of the side pocket of her backpack and flipped up the cover.

Inside was small map, and a pointer in the shape of a hamburger pin-pointed the location of the diner. It was located on the east side of town, not far from the road she was currently travelling. The hours listed were 11:00 a.m. to 9:00 p.m., seven days a week. She planned to be there at 6:00 a.m., to scout around and spy out the lay of the land, see who came and went from the place.

Avalon slid the matchbook into a pocket of her jeans, slipped her arms through the straps of the backpack, and headed off down the road.

Dawn found her in the city proper. The drought was no less severe here, than it was in the country or at home at Gainsborough Manor, for that matter. The difference here was that the pavement increased the temperatures by reflecting it back into the air. By noon great waves of heat would shimmer across the surfaces. The increased heat fed the drought and any patch of grass was a crispy carpet of dried vegetation.

The first buildings she came to were all abandoned, their windows broken out, and by the look of it from the roadway, the doors were missing too. She poked her head in the first couple to confirm her theory and noted that anything of value had been stripped out of the buildings. Soulless plaster shells were all that remained as every ounce of copper or metal or plastic had been scavenged from the bones of the building. The cracked stucco exteriors were tagged with graffiti announcing which gangs controlled the various neighbourhoods. Where the territories of the various factions intersected, the tags changed on a regular basis.

There were no vehicles on the street. Parking one in the area was as good as giving it away. Avalon kept a wary eye as the single family homes became duplexes and then row housing, and the density of the number of structures increased. The units in this area of town were occupied, the windows shuttered and curtains drawn to maintain the privacy of those inside. She began to see people on the street, lounging in doorways or sitting on the steps of the brownstone units. Most were boys, her age or a little older, with tattooed arms and chests, hair shaved or left long as they desired. They watched her cycle past them, following her passage with

suspicious stares. Avalon kept her head straight, ignoring them, but secretly watched from the corner of her eye to see if they followed. One group got into a heated discussion over her passing. Hands pointed at her but their leader shook his head, and the group of four boys sat back down. With a sigh of relief, she spotted the street she was looking for and turned the corner. A van parked on the side of the road, forced her bike to move away from the curbside. As she swung out around it, five people stepped out into the road in front of her. Avalon braked hard, and as she did, three more stepped off the curb behind her, blocking her in. Avalon skidded her bike to a halt, apprehensively eyeing the approaching teens. They were a mix of boys and girls, in the vicinity of her age. Her eyes darted around the circle, looking for an escape.

“Why are you here?”

The question came from a tall, sandy haired teen, his face hard and unsmiling. A scar from a knife wound puckered his eyebrow, and slid down his cheek. He wore an eye patch, over the eye.

Avalon stared at him, surprised at the wave of pity that washed over her. Despite the wild thumping of her heart as the gang members closed the noose, something about their leader made her pause.

“Is there a reason why I shouldn’t be?” she said, with a false bravado, glancing around at the shuffling bodies closing rank. She let a knife, tucked up inside the sleeve of her jacket slide into her palm, all without taking her eyes from the advancing teens.

“This is Firebrand territory. Only the foolish would enter.”

“Or the really stupid,” said a girl to the leader’s right. She was also tall, with dirty blonde hair braided into one thick rope and slung over her right shoulder. Her lips were pressed together into a thick flat line that transformed her face from acceptable to ugly. Or maybe it was the possessive stance she took in relation to their leader that made her ugly to Avalon.

“She looks stupid, so that must be it.”

The other gang members laughed.

“Where’d you get the bike? Steal it from your little sister? Or just swipe it off of the street? It’s super ugly.”

Avalon ignored her, eyes fastened on the leader, who let the girl ramble on. She had the impression that this was how they did things, the girl provoking the victim until they began the fight, even though outnumbered. He was the only one that mattered. The rest would do nothing without his approval. She focused on the male with the eye patch and pretended the others did not exist. A muscle twitched in his cheek, a hint of a smile. Avalon decided that she had nothing to lose or to hide.

“My name is Avalon. I am not from here. I didn’t know this was Firebrand territory. If you wish, I will leave.”

“Avalon. A stupid name to go with a stupid girl. You are named after a tree? I bet it’s nuts!” The girl snorted at her own joke and the others guffawed along with her.

“Avalon is a mythical world of hope and peace. The name means ‘island’. It is the home of Merlin, and the legendary burial place of King Arthur,” said the boy, his eyes never leaving Avalon. “Don’t you read, Cris?”

Cris’ laugh cut off, her mouth hanging open at the rebuke. She snapped it shut. The gang surrounding Avalon laughed, this time at Cris. An ugly scowl echoed the murderous glare she directed at Avalon, hatred in her eyes.

“Did you not see the markings?” he asked.

“Yes, I saw them. But I needed to travel this way.”

“Why?”

Avalon hesitated. *Can I trust this guy?* She stared into his lone eye, noticing flecks of green and gold. It stared back into hers. Suddenly he winked and she realized she had been *staring at him like a love sick teenager*. Avalon mentally winced at her own description. She secured her knife then reached into her pocket and slowly pulled out the matchbook, holding it up for everyone to see. A variety of knives instantly flashed into gang member’s hands at her movements. They held them up to the

light, steady and menacing, a visible threat. Avalon's eyes swept around the group and leaving one open hand in the air, she tossed the matchbook cover to their ringleader. He caught it and opened his palm to gaze at the matchbook. Surprise flicked across his face.

"Where did you get this?" he whispered.

Avalon hesitated again. "I can't tell you that, but I need to go there. It's important. I need information."

He stared at the matchbook, and then stuck it in his own pocket. He sauntered over to where she stood, walking around her and her bike, taking in her appearance. Pausing at her side, he reached out and touched the bee symbol stitched into the sleeve of her father's jacket.

"Where did you get this jacket?"

Avalon pulled her arm out of his grasp, backing away.

"I didn't steal it. It's mine, and I won't give it up either," she said with growl, eyes fierce. "I will never give it up."

He straightened, puzzled by her reaction. Suddenly he spun around and walked away.

"Bring her," he snapped over his shoulder.

The gang closed in around Avalon and she had no choice. Pushing her bike and ignoring the gang members at her side, she followed the gang leader. The blonde girl fell into step beside him, slipping her hand into his. He did not seem to notice. She turned her head, throwing Avalon a dirty look, full of triumph. The warning could not be clearer. Her murderous gaze screamed *stay away, he's mine!*

Avalon didn't care. She was already plotting how to get away from this annoying gang. She had to get to Frankie's, and find the Firebrand's hideout



Chapter 4

Mitch's Secret

Mitch fiddled with the broken air conditioning switch for the fifth time and for the fifth time since he left Peet's place, it didn't work. As the sun broke the horizon he finally gave in and rolled down the windows. Dust filled air blasted through the open window cooling the sweat on his brow and making him feel marginally better despite the grit now coating his skin.

The winding gravel road broke over the ridge of what was once a seabed tilted crazily on its side. Fossil Ridge was a well-known landmark and the destination of many a school field trip during his youth. There were shallow caves and crevices all along its expanse. The local lore said that gold was buried in the hills, the ill-gotten contraband of a time when the art of robbing a train was at its height, over two hundred years ago. The legend said that Crazy Annie was the brains behind the Sampson heists. Family members all, the three person team were credited with a dozen successful train robberies over twenty years. In year twenty-one, they all died when the team of horses they were using for a getaway flipped during a river crossing, trapping them all in the water beneath the wagon.

Somewhere in Fossil Ridge the gold of their heists was stashed, or so the rumours went, and prospectors turned treasure hunters searched the hills for the missing gold to this day. What no one knew was that Mitch was a descendant of the Sampson gang. No one except his sister knew, that is.

Mitch turned off onto a dusty track that switched back and forth between large outcroppings of rock, following a path that was little more than a goat trail. The old Mustang groaned at the steepness of the inclines

but soldiered on, inching its way over the rugged terrain. It crested a hill and skidded down the far side to the base, kicking up a cloud of dust. A camp was set up in a copse of fragrant juniper bushes. Canvas stretched between the bushes providing a low shaded area. Under the makeshift shelter was a tightly rolled sleeping bag, a metal chest with the lid flung open and a woman, bent over a small campfire. The smell of coffee drifted back to Mitch as he shut off the engine, along with the delicious smell of eggs and bacon.

“Pam! Do you have enough there for two? I’m starving!”

Pam stirred the contents of the fry pan then lifted her head, squinting at the newcomer. Her grey hair was waist length and tied back into a pony tail.

“Is that my mangy cop-for-a-brother? Figures you would show up when there is food cooking.”

“It’s good to see you, too.” Mitch bent over and entered the shaded pavilion, squatting by the meager fire.

“Ummm,” he murmured, inhaling deeply of the smell of food “that smells amazing. How is the prospecting going?” He kissed her lightly on the cheek.

Pam pulled two tin plates from the chest and split the eggs and bacon between the pair and handed Mitch a fork along with his meal.

“Promising. I think I have figured out another clue. Here, look.”

She pulled out a tattered old ledger. The leather cover cracked and faded, and opened it to page defined by a ribbon.

“Annie said to ‘...travel the shadow of the twin mounds to find your dearest treasure...’ I think she means those two hills right over there.” Pam pointed with her fork to a series of rounded hills just visible on the horizon.

“She was writing poetry, Pam. You know what a raunchy gal she was. She was probably practicing her pick-up lines for the local saloon.”

Pam stubbornly shook her head. “I don’t believe that, and neither do you.”

“How long are you going to keep prospecting, Pam?” Mitch shoved the last of his eggs into his mouth.

“Until I find the treasure, you dolt. Why would I give up when I am so close to finding it?”

Mitch shook his head, bemused.

Pam put her plate down then sat back, arms folded across her chest. Her eyes narrowed.

“You want something. What is it, Mitch? This isn’t just a family visit, is it?”

“No, it is not. I need your help.”

“With what?” She narrowed her eyes in suspicion. “You don’t want me to sponsor your baseball team again, do you? You need some real sponsors.”

“No it’s not about baseball sponsors. This is something else, much worse.”

He picked up the pot of coffee and Pam held out the two mugs for filling. Over sips of coffee, Mitch filled her in on the events of the past few weeks, and what they had discovered. He mentioned the problem with the killer bees, if that was in fact what they were.

“You see, we need a place to house these bees, someplace that they cannot escape from but still some place that they can do what they normally would do, gather nectar and produce honey. Something about these bees is key to the drought, to the ecological disaster that surrounds us right now.” Mitch gestured with his coffee mug and liquid sloshed over the side. “The government is keeping very quiet about it all. Peet and I have hashed out a plan to locate the missing scientists and those who are possibly in hiding. The government is willing to kill to keep this information secret, Pam. I feel bad even asking you to get involved. But something must be done. The land is dying and the people will begin dying right behind it, when the food runs out. Society is disintegrating all around us. People are desperate. If you know of a possible place to hide

these bees, I need to know and I need to know it, right now. I have the bees in the car.”

“You brought them here? Are you nuts?” Pam shot to her feet, her head bowing the makeshift tent. “What if they get loose?”

“They are in a secure pod. They won’t get loose until someone releases them. Do you know of a place?”

Pam slowly sank down to the ground.

“Well, there may be one place. It’s a two day hike from here. Are you willing to back pack them all that way? If they are killer bees, as you suspect, one false move or one fall that cracks that canister, we are both dead.” She glared at him in accusation. “And worse yet, you will have released a horror to the world that may kill us faster than the drought.”

“If we don’t find a place for them soon, they will die in that container and the chance to study them and find the antidote to the sickness attacking the land will be lost. Do you want to lose that opportunity? We have no choice, Pam.”

Silence descended for a moment and then she nodded.

“Ok, but we need to leave right now. I know of a secure place. It so happens to be in the direction of those two mounds you scoffed at, earlier. This is as good of an excuse to explore that set of hills as any. Personally, I’d be just as happy if they all died under my boot heel.”

She scowled at Mitch’s car containing the bees, then peered up, pinning the location of the sun in the early morning sky.

“We could get in about five hours of walking this morning before our brains fry, but I have a better idea.” She exited the tent and walked over to a thicket covered in tumbleweeds. “Come here.”

Mitch got up walked over, joining her in pulling the tumbleweeds away from the thicket. A glint of metal caught Mitch’s attention. Once they had cleared the brush a motorcycle was revealed, but not just any motorcycle. An aqua blue 1949 Harley Hydra-Glide was hidden in the brush. Mitch let out a low whistle, grabbing the handlebars and rolling it out into the sunshine.

“Where the hell did you get this?”

Pam grinned. “Not all treasure to be found out here is gold. I found this baby in a cave near where we are headed. It had been there since 1949. It was still in its original shipping crate. Inside, wrapped around a handle grip was a note that said ‘The spoils of war go to the victor. Perseverance pays off.’ The keys were in the ignition. The cave had not been disturbed since the bike was delivered. That is the place I want to take you to.”

“Wow, alright! Let’s go! I’m keen to see this place now.”

Mitch ran back to his car, grabbed his backpack containing the bees then locked and pocketed the keys for the Mustang, before running back over to Pam. An angry buzzing accompanied him.

Pam ducked back under the awning, gathered some essentials, and then joined him.

“It will be a tight fit on the seat, riding double. I’m driving.” She stuffed her bag under the straps behind the seat and climbed on.

Mitch sat down behind her, backpack on his back. She kicked the start and the bike roared to life.

“There is more gasoline in the cave,” she yelled over her shoulder then gave the bike some throttle and sped off across the dusty yard.

Mitch tightened his grip around her waist, yelling and hooting with glee as they vanished over the first set of hills.



Chapter 5

The Hospital Visit

Peet led Alexa down the hallway of the dimly lit hospital, keeping a tight grip on her hand as they weaved in and out of the stretchers and bodies littering the hallway. Alexa's eyes were wide with fear, and her lower lip trembled as she fought the urge to cry. Women, children, grown men. It made no difference. All of them were sick.

The emaciated bodies revealed distended bellies, every ounce of fat long gone, consumed in the struggle to stay alive. Open sores ran on the arms and legs of the people huddled against the wall. One man, on the only stretcher in sight, lay with a heart monitor beeping sporadically, ashen-faced and struggling to breathe.

Hands clutched at Alexa's skirt as she walked by, begging for food and water. A wave of helplessness overwhelmed Alexa. A sense of shame dimmed her earlier joy of her pretty party dress. Sunny yellow with tiny blue flowers stitched around the hem, she had thought it would cheer the sick people in the hospital, but she no longer cared to attract attention.

It was just a dress but to the sick hoard in the hallway, she appeared rich, healthy and most importantly, like she had eaten recently. To them, she was wealthy beyond measure.

"Do not look at them, Alexa." Peet murmured in her ear as he tugged her along, weaving in and out of the people.

The odor of sickness and unwashed bodies was overwhelming. Alexa wrinkled her nose and tried to breathe through her mouth but then she imagined she could taste the air and she clapped a hand over both to try to block the smell.

A woman lurched to her feet, screamed a name and then ran at her, eyes wild and crazed.

“Mandy! Mandy it’s you. You’re safe! Oh my darling, I found you at last!” She staggered toward Alexa, hands outstretched.

Alexa screamed. The woman’s hands were covered in blood. As her hair swung away from her face, deep red gouges were revealed, her skin clawed by her own fingers.

Peet stepped between the woman and Alexa, pushing her behind his body. The woman was oblivious to his presence, trying to slide around his bulk to reach Alexa’s trembling form.

“Now see here, woman. That is not your Mandy. Stop right here.” He gripped the woman’s arm, pulling her to a halt.

She blinked at the hand on her arm and then met his eyes.

“Not my Mandy? But where is she? I can’t find her anywhere.”

“I don’t know. I’m sorry. You need to see a doctor for those cuts. Here, come sit down.” He led her over to an empty chair and pushed her down into it. “Stay here. If I find Mandy, I will send her over, but you must stay here or she won’t find you.”

The woman nodded, mumbling under her breath. Her words trailed away and then she lapsed into silence. Alexa slid her hand into Peet’s as he hurried her away. She glanced back just before they turned the corner into another hall, to see the woman arguing with another woman that the child she held in her arms was Mandy.

“What is wrong with her, Peet?”

“A great shock, I suspect. She has lost someone dear to her, probably a daughter or granddaughter.”

“Oh. That’s sad. She really should be stronger though. What if Mandy is found?”

“Not everyone is strong, Alexa. Some people are weak. Those will be the first to suffer in trying times. I suspect all of these people are homeless. Hospitals always have food so they come here, looking for help and a handout. They are usually sick too.”

He veered down a corridor and pushed through a set of swinging doors. The howling din from the corridors cut off abruptly. The silence was profound and welcome. It left a slight ringing in Alexa's ears.

"Where are we going Peet? Are we allowed to go back here?"

They passed a door with a glass window in it and a sign that read "Radiology: Admittance Restricted To Grade 3". So far they had not encountered any hospital staff. Hospital security had its hands full with the corridor, but they did not bother Peet in his doctor scrubs and fake photo ID badge that announced him as Dr. Peet Anders. Alexa looked up at him as they strode down the hallway unchallenged.

"Are you really a doctor, Peet?"

He chuckled. "Yes, I am. But my education is in literary history. My doctorate is in archeology. This way."

He came to a plain green door with no window. The bronzed plate beside it read "Records". He pushed open the door and a light turned on. The room was filled with dozen of rows of metal shelving containing binders and books, stacked floor to ceiling. At the end of each row an alphabetical directory indicated what was to be found in that row. Cubicles lined the windowed wall on the far side of the room, each with a computer terminal blinking sleepily.

Alexa grinned at Peet then ran over to the computer terminals.

"I love libraries!" she said, and plopped herself down into one of the chairs in front of the screen and jiggled the mouse.

The screen awoke and she typed in a password. The screen saver of bouncing stethoscopes disappeared and a menu appeared, asking for her search terms.

"How did you do that?" Peet asked, amazed.

"The password is taped in the corner of the keyboard" she said, pointing at the curling paper. "So what are looking for?"

Peet stared at the piece of paper and laughed. "I thought you might like to search your parents, see if there are any records of their research in the data base. All the computers in the country are interconnected."

“Ok.” Alexa typed in her father’s name and hit enter.

Peet sat down at the terminal beside Alexa and after entering the password, typed in ‘search by stats’ then ‘search by cases between:’ and selected ‘one month prior’. The screen flashed then cases scrolled by on the screen, before coming to a stop. Ten thousand patients were treated in the last month. Peet raised an eyebrow at the number. He typed in ‘narrow by diagnoses’ and ‘sort alphabetically’ and scanned the listing. The vast majority of cases were listed as “Unknown Disease Element” or “Cause Unknown”. Frowning at the unhelpful screen, he broadened the search. The cases of unsolved or unclassified illness remained steady, reaching back over ten years of data. Peet raised a hand and scratched at his encroaching daily growth of beard, puzzled.

“That is really odd,” he muttered, sitting back and staring at the screen, willing it give up its secrets.

Several moments ticked by, then he leaned forward and resorted the information. He typed “Search by assigned physician” and hit enter.

The correlation slapped him in the face. He ran his finger down the list of physicians on the right side versus the diagnosis on the left. The pattern lined up perfectly. All the undiagnosed cases involving skin lesions, seizures and early onset dementia were assigned to the same two doctors. ‘Research Doctor 1’ and ‘Research Doctor 2’ were the only two doctors listed handling their cases. He plugged in a thumb drive and saved the search information and their case files to the drive, then did a search for the employee profiles for the two Research Doctors. There was no record of them in the hospital system. Frowning, he repeated the search and once again it came back “file not found.”

At that moment, the door opened and a security guard entered, hand over his baton.

“Identify yourself, Doctor,” the balding man said, his eyes flitting from Peet to Alexa.

Peet rose slowly to his feet, hitting the clear key and palming the thumb drive up his sleeve. Alexa did the same, and slipped her hand into his.

“I am Dr. Peet Anders, on loan from Solace University. Is there a problem?”

The guard looked at Alexa.

“Ah, this is my niece, Alexa. Her parents had to work late, so I brought her along for the evening. I could hardly leave her at home alone with the current state of things.

The guard frowned. “There was a report of an unauthorized entry in this area of the hospital. This records room is off limits to civilians.”

“Of course it is, but I am hardly a civilian, am I?” Peet walked toward the guard, Alexa’s clutching his hand tightly. “Well my shift is nearly over. Please enjoy the rest of your evening.”

Peet made to walk past the guard but he pulled his baton and placed it across his chest.

“I must search you first. Your entrance was the only one to register in this room in the last hour.”

Peet nodded and dropped Alexa’s hand then grabbed the lapels of his lab coat as though to open it to inspection. Quicker than a flash, his left elbow rose and smashed into the guard’s nose.

“Owwww!” howled the guard, grabbing his nose, bending over with the pain.

Peet’s knee was rising at that exact minute and smashed into his face, sending him sprawling, blood spurting everywhere. He crashed into a metal cart stacked high with x-ray plates and sent both the cart and the plates clattering to the floor.

Peet grabbed Alexa’s hand and ran out the door, racing down the corridor deeper into the hospital. He took a series of turns and had just slowed to a walk when alarm bells went off. He walked casually along the hall, nonchalantly strolling toward the side entrance that led to the employee parking. Guards ran past him, heading to the source of the alarm.

Once they were safely past, Peet opened an emergency exit and let them out into the side alley between wings of the hospital. Once clear of the building, they ran for the safety of obscurity in the greater world beyond the hospital grounds.



Chapter 6

Frankie's Finger Foods

Avalon let her body go limp, sagging in the arms of the two husky teens who had clamped their beefy hands on her upper arms. At first they'd tried to grab the bike away from her but she'd see a passive resistance video once when she was younger. Make your weight impossible to bear and they would drop you, giving you a chance to escape. They did indeed drop her, but as she hit the ground a sharp boot kicked her in the ribs. Avalon cried out, hands clutching her side against the sharp, stinging pain.

"Get up, bitch!"

A hand leaned down and tangled in her hair, dragging her to her feet by its roots.

"Stop!" she yelled. "I tripped, ok?"

"Let her go," said their brooding leader, frowning at her.

The husky lad shoved her away from him, watching as she stumbled, breaking her fall on the handle bars of her bike. They yanked the temporary support out from under her and she tumbled to the pavement.

"Give it back to me!" she yelled, hand clutching her aching ribs as she staggered back to her feet, reaching for her bike for support. "It's mine."

Green and gold eye stared at her then he held up a hand.

"Let her be. Her bike is hers."

Avalon's head came up, making contact with that beautiful eye. He appeared to be three or four years older than her. Tall and lean, he was well muscled. She found she could not stop staring. She gripped the handle bars tight, knuckles whitening. Her eye contact was broken when a pimply scar-faced girl forced her way into the circle. She had shaved the sides of her head, above her ears, leaving a Mohawk of spiky hair, dyed

bright orange. She glared at Avalon, drawing a short switchblade and testing the edge of her knife against her tongue, drawing blood.

“Ok, princess, bring your bike in. Don’t worry, I don’t bite,” she said at Avalon’s look of surprise. She bared sharpened teeth at the assembled gang members and as they backed off, she took Avalon by the arm. “This way, princess.”

Avalon gasped as her fingers dug painfully into her flesh. With a stubborn set to her lips, Avalon dragged her bike behind the toothy troll as she now thought of her. The street ended at an alley way that fed between tall brick buildings, blackened with age. Her companions were forced to narrow into three rows, the central position taken up by her bike, which she now hugged close to her. Avalon faced forward, staring at the blond head and refusing to look at the rest of the gang.

When the group squeezed in tight to get around a dumpster, Avalon tripped over her bike pedal, scraping her ankle against the metal. Swearing under her breath, she licked her dry lips. She was thirsty and hungry. Her stomach growled and someone behind her laughed.

As they reached the end of the alley, it opened onto a square. There was no exit; rather, it was by framed by the remains of a partially collapsed building, the shell of which was four stories high. Avalon stared in awe at the towering structure. All the upper floors had long ago been harvested for firewood during the winter, cleared away leaving concrete ribs in blocks that rose through the floors and defined the balance of the interior space. The crazy patchwork walls were fascinating to Avalon. She could see aged wallpaper and faded paint, snippets of lives frozen in time. A nursery with cartoon animals sat beside a dark painted wall with a sailboat wallpaper border. The wainscoting had long ago been stripped from the room. Beside it was a kitchen with a stenciled saying on one wall. “Live for the moment. Hope. Pray.”

She was jerked to the side by the troll, bringing her back to her immediate surroundings. Troll hauled her towards a staircase located at the base of the wall. It disappeared into ground. She realized suddenly

that it was the basement of the ground floor unit. An old wooden floor board had been carved to look like a hand with a painted finger. On the sign was painted the words “Frankie’s Finger Foods” in bright red paint. Indeed, the finger was cut off and dripping blood. Avalon stared at it, shocked. *I’ve found it!* she thought, but that sign was not what she had thought of when she had seen the matchbook cover. Swallowing past an exceptionally dry mouth, she followed the tall form of their leader down the stairs, her bike jumping as it rolled down the concrete steps.

As she crossed the threshold at the bottom, a dimly lit restaurant was revealed, complete with tacky green booths and prints of actors whose popularity had faded several decades ago. Heavy navy blue velvet curtains hung on a rod above each booth. A quick glance showed that all the booths were empty except for three located at the very back. The privacy curtain was drawn tight across the end of the tables, hiding the occupants from view.

Halfway down the aisle, Avalon was shoved into a booth, followed by the toothy troll. Her bike was taken out of her resisting hands and wheeled over to lean against the table of the booth across from them. Green-gold eye slid in across from Avalon followed by Cris. The table was scarred with carved hearts and initials. A grimy green pendant light fixture with a single bulb was suspended above the table.

Green-gold eye stared at her.

“Name. What is your name?”

Avalon’s eyes flitted around the circle, weighing the unfriendly gazes. She knew that none of them used their real names, but she could not see any reason to withhold her own. She was not from here. They would not know her name if she spoke it.

“My name is Avalon.”

They waited. The silence stretched.

“Last name!” snapped the troll, knife flipping into her hand.

Gold-green eye grabbed her wrist, not breaking eye contact with Avalon.

Suddenly, Avalon was afraid. They wanted something from her. Badly. But still, it was just a name, wasn't it?

"Gainsborough," she whispered, watching the reactions.

Eyes widened and silent messages flashed around the table.

"I thought so," said the gang leader.

This time Avalon's eyes widened.

"You know... you know my name? My parents? You know where they are! Where are they?" Avalon made to rise and the troll grabbed her arm and made her sit. Avalon ignored her. "Who are you?"

He frowned, clearly struggling with how much he should tell her.

"Trevor Trench. But my friends call me 'Trench.'"

Trench. Avalon mentally tested the name on her tongue. She liked Trevor better.

"This is Megan, we call her Magnum," gesturing to the trollish woman whose fingers still dug painfully into her arm. "And this is Francis. She goes by Cris."

The blonde-haired girl by his side glared at Avalon, in challenge, winding her arm possessively through Trench's.

Definitely not friendly, Avalon thought.

Avalon nodded to each in turn, nervous suddenly. She had not expected them to know her name.

"How do you know my name?"

They exchanged glances.

"We know your parents. They came here once," said Trench.

"They did?" Avalon leaned forward, excitement shining in her eyes. "When? Where did they go? Where are they now?"

He hesitated. "Magnum, get us some drinks," he said. "Root beer will do."

Magnum looked pissed at the request, but she rose nonetheless and left to gather the drinks.

Once she was gone, Trench pulled the privacy curtain closed then leaned across the table.

“It was three or four years ago. They came through here, looking for someone that could help them gain safe passage away from Solace for four passengers. I assume it was for them and you... and a brother? Sister?”

“Sister,” whispered Avalon. “My sister Alexa.”

Avalon shot a quick glance around the dilapidated restaurant.

“What is this place? How did you know who I was, back on the streets?”

“Frankie’s is our headquarters, the headquarters for the Firebrand gang. We operate from here. We stop everyone that comes into our territory, but never has one come *bearing that symbol*.” He pointed to the sleeve of Avalon’s jacket where a stylized bee was stitched on to her right sleeve.

“I got this jacket from my father. Why, what does it mean?”

“It is a symbol of the revolution. Of the revolt.” At her puzzled frown, he continued “You know the rebellion against the government? They have been suppressing information about the blight. It’s like the environment is cursed. We use this sign to identify those that can be trusted. It is very, very secret. We did not know who you were, yet you wear it openly.”

Avalon frowned. “My father said that I should always wear the jacket. He said it could save my life.”

Trench grunted. “We are also a refugee way stop. By refugee we mean political refugees. There is good money to be had in selling falsified passports and passage out of the country. Your parents came to us to make a deposit, passage for four out of the country. We saw them that day but we never saw them again.”

Avalon’s face fell.

“Avalon. I’m afraid they are dead.”

Avalon studied the scratches on the tabletop, tracing the patterns, letting her mind drift. Sadness welled within her, tightening her throat.

She swallowed past the painful lump. Then her head came up. Her eyes blazed with determination.

“I do not believe they are dead. They were too clever for that. I intend to find them, and I will not stop until I do. So you can either help me, or get out of my way,” she said, a fierce light in her eyes.

At that moment the curtain was ripped back and Magnum stood with her fingers curled round the neck of four root beer bottles. She dropped them on the table and slid onto the bench beside Avalon, crowding her back into the corner.

“Oh look, the princess has claws,” Magnum smirked. She shared a quick glance with Trench, and then she flipped an envelope onto the table. “Here, these were supposed to go to your parents. Maybe you can make some sense of it all. It means nothing to us.”

She pushed it towards Avalon, who picked it up with trembling fingers. *Finally some clues to work from!* she thought. Avalon gave her a grateful smile then slipped her thumb under the flap and slid open the yellowing parchment.



Chapter 7

Tribal Trespass

The five hour walk still took the better part of an hour on the bike, as they were forced to slow down over the rugged and rapidly changing terrain. At first it was a hot, sandy ride across the level land, the breeze created by the speeding bike compensating for the intense heat of the sun as it climbed towards its zenith. Thirty minutes into the ride they reached the base of the first set of hills and began to climb, entering a stand of trees that brought blessed relief from the unrelenting rays. The trees were scattered and sparsely leafed, their hollowed trunks standing silent sentinel in a forest of dying green. Those few trees that lived on shivered with the passing of the bike, tossing curled yellow leaves its wake. Mitch could not determine the path that Pam sought. The forest looked the same to him.

“The biggest danger in these forests nowadays, is the threat of wild fire. Even the heat of the exhaust of this bike can spark a blaze. The wild fire risk is extreme, and this is one of the main reasons I walk everywhere. If the need wasn’t so urgent, I would have made us both walk.”

She winced as the bike backfired, craning her neck for a quick glance behind.

“Keep an eye on our back trail. Let me know if you spot any smoke,” she yelled, speeding up.

The invisible path crisscrossed the hillside, a snaking trail of rocks and fallen trees. Pam found a way around the barriers.

“You have been here before,” he yelled as she lurched to one side, to avoid a thick branch.

“How can you tell?” she yelled back, over her shoulder.

“You know where all the obstacles are. How did you memorize it so well?”

“I haven’t! These are all new!”

“What?” yelled Mitch, his grip tightening around her waist.

“The native residents who own this land have laid these traps. I am not worried about the ones I can see. It’s the ones I might miss!”

Pam steered the bike around a curve and suddenly there was no more trail.

“Shit!” she screamed as the bike spun out into empty space.

The chasm was not deep but it was steep and just wide enough. Mitch swore but his words were whipped away as bike and dual riders fell.

“Jump right!” Mitch yelled at the last second, and tossed himself off the back of the bike to the left as Pam rolled to the right.

They landed on the steep slope to a shower of rocks, quickly forming the center of the slide as the bike slid and flipped its way to the bottom of the incline. Somehow Mitch managed to keep his pack from being crushed but the angry humming increased in tempo with the jostling. He settled at the base of the ravine, half buried in scree, with Pam face down ten feet away.

“Pam! Are you ok?”

Pam pushed up out of the rocks. Her face was covered in grey dust and a trickle of blood ran from a long scratch down the side of her face. Her cheeks puffed out and with a groan, she pushed the rest of the way to a sitting position, testing her limbs.

“Yeah, nothing is broken. Just bruising. These old bones don’t bounce like they used to.”

Mitch groaned in sympathy as he pulled off a boot, emptying it of pebbles.

“I thought you knew these hills? How did you not know about the ravine?”

Pam glared at him and limped over to the bike, righting it.

“The ravine wasn’t here before, you dough head of a cop. Look up.”

Mitch followed her pointing arm and saw that the upper edge was freshly formed. Tree roots spilled out of the side, thin vegetative tentacles searching the air for sustenance. The ravine was not long. It ran for the length of a football field in the rough shape of the game ball.

“What could have caused this ravine? Better yet how are we going to get out?”

He tugged his boots back on and pushed to his feet, stamping them to settle them in place. He picked up the buzzing backpack and walked over to Pam, where she bent over the motorcycle, checking over the mechanics.

“How’s the bike?”

“Scratched,” she huffed, “but it will live. It’s operational. As to your first question, this is a dry sink hole. They have been popping up all over the region as the water table drops. First one I have driven into, though. As for your second question, look.”

She pointed to the rim of the crater on the opposite side from where they had fallen. There, crowding the bank, faces painted in fierce colours stared down at them. None of them looked friendly. Mitch groaned. “Those are warriors of the Seiko tribe” Pam said, as the twenty guardians glared at the intruders on their land. “They are mainly nomadic, roaming the abandoned hills of their ancestral lands and disregarding all government edicts. They are self-governing and proud. They alone know how to exist on the land, even while it dies around them. None of their people suffer. It is why outsiders have been searching for the tribes. Rumors have reached the cities that the tribes are not starving.”

Pam straightened and waved at the warriors and then spoke to them in their native tongue. Mitch didn’t understand a word of it. After an exchange that lasted a couple of minutes the faces disappeared. When they reappeared, ropes were tossed down into the pit. Pam rolled the bike over, chattering away as she tied ropes around the bike, securing it to be hauled up the slope. Once it was secure, the ropes tightened and the

heavy bike began to move, inching its way up the steep incline. It disappeared over the edge and silence descended. Mitch shifted his feet, sweating under the sun that now beat down mercilessly, perfectly aligned to roast them alive.

Pam chattered again at the ridge, and was greeted with silence. Her voice sharpened and a face appeared over the edge, speaking just as sharply. Two ropes were tossed over the edge and Mitch caught his, grateful for the escape. He gripped the thick twine in his hands and began to climb the slope, relying more on his strength of arms than his legs as the sides crumbled away at the touch of his feet. Pam climbed beside him, and as they reached the edge, arms reached over and hauled them the rest of the way and onto firm ground. With a sigh of relief Mitch tried to push to his feet but was met with a spear at his throat. Swallowing carefully, he froze as a blade, sharp as any knife he had face in the alleys, pressed against his jugular.

Pam snapped a few words and the blade lifted from Mitch's throat.

"Thanks," he croaked.

Pam laughed. "For what? I told him that slaying a cop was bad karma, and he didn't want to befoul the sacred soil beneath his feet. I think he is more worried about offending the land, than spilling your heathen blood."

Mitch glared at his sister but held his tongue.

He was hauled to his feet by two burly youths that easily topped his height by a foot. He didn't need any urging to follow the direction of the warriors away from the cliff face, limping slightly with the new rocks that had settled into the heel of his boot.

They trudged along a well-worn path for about an hour, the sun setting at their backs. Just as the sun hit the horizon in the west, a village came into view. Tan tents embroidered with wildlife met his gaze. The figures were so life-like he had to look twice to realize they were stitched. An eagle in flight soared over wolves couching in tall grasses. Bison grazed nearby while an inquisitive prairie dog stood sentinel. Amazing

scenes that had disappeared from the landscape. “Mitch looked around, bewildered. ‘How long have these people lived here? Why are they living like this?’

Pam glanced sideways at him. ‘The Seiko Tribe have lived here for generations. They’re nomadic and fiercely independent. They have roamed these abandoned hills of their ancestral lands for years, disregarding the government’s edicts. Because of their indigenous heritage, they are self-governing and proud. They know how to exist on the land, even while it died around them, and so none of their people suffered. That was a problem reserved for the cities.’ Mitch looked closely at the people as they watched them walk past. ‘Some of these people aren’t indigenous. I see lighter skin, and some much darker.’ Pam shrugged. ‘As people left the cities, some found their way here, and the Seiko welcomed them. They wanted a simpler lifestyle, free of government control, and the Seiko offered that. Not everyone can live like this, but those who can, become part of the tribe.’”

Mitch felt a pang for what was already lost, for what they still had to lose. When he looked away from the artwork, he did not find a defeated people, however, but one that stood proud. A bustling community greeted the returning warriors, children running to meet their fathers, and young women running to hug lovers. Mitch was astonished that such a large community existed so far from civilization. It was obvious that this was a large, extended family that had worked hard to create such a feeling of solidarity and cooperative effort. Mitch couldn’t remember the last time he was part of an extended family, working towards a common goal.

Pam clucked and whooped and two children ran out from a nearby tent to greet her, glad cries filling the air. Twins, a boy and girl crowded into her arms as she crouched down to greet them, then she fell onto her back, bowled over by the force of their charge. Pam laughed and the years fell away from her face. She hugged and kissed them, then tickled

their ribs while the warriors laughed and dispersed into the village, leaving them there with the motorbike, propped on its kickstand.

“What is this, Pam?”

“Welcome to Wapatipae. Welcome to the Village of Love. These are my adopted children. Come meet your niece and nephew.”

Nonplussed, Mitch crouched down by his sister, as giggles rent the air. They frolicked on the ground, shouting and pulling faces. The people passing by smiled at the trio. A bemused grin crept across his face as he observed their obvious affection for each other.



Chapter 8

Flight Of The Hunted

Peet and Alexa dashed down the alley that ran between the hospital and the multi-story parking garage. Peet stripped off his hospital scrubs and tossed them into a dumpster after pocketing his doctor's badge in his pocket. The far end of the alley opened onto the main thoroughfare and the sound of sirens echoed down the narrow passage. Red lights flashed, reflected in the puddles that had formed in the drizzling rain.

Surprised at the unexpected shower, Alexa pulled up the hood of her sweater. Her body cooled as they hurried along the alley, the rain a welcome relief. Even as they ran, she could see the clouds parting and knew the rain would not be enough to end the gnawing drought that gripped the land. Peet lifted his face to the rain and let it flow over his face, soaking into his beard.

"Glorious," he said, but suddenly pulled her behind a dumpster.

Alexa peeked around the edge of the metal wall. A squad car had turned into the alley, the engine a soft purr as it slowly inched along its length. At first, she thought it was the local police, but the colour of the car was all wrong. On the doors of the slick black doors was an insignia of the security wing of the government.

"Feds," hissed Peet, pulling her deeper into the shadows cast by the container. "Nasty business. Come on, it's time to go."

He grabbed her hand and pulled her along behind him as the squad car pulled to a stop beside the container. Alexa looked forward and back. It was the only hiding place and a natural conclusion that someone or ones might be hiding behind it.

"Alexa."

She looked up, tensed to run.

“Do you see that crack in the alley brickwork, just beyond the end of the car park? I want you to run to it and squeeze into the opening. On the count of three.” Peet shifted his weight, to shield her flight as the door of the squad car slammed and gravel crunched under a heavy foot. “One, two...THREE!”

Alexa shot out from behind the dumpster and ran like the hounds of hell snapped at her heels.

Peet watched her slide into the narrow door opening and then bolted out from behind the dumpster to the shouts of “Halt! Stop now or we will shoot!” Gun shots rang out and chunks of pavement burst into the air as the bullets sought contact with his fleeing frame. He zigzagged, randomizing his gait to throw off the chasing bullets, but it was a gambit with no promise of success. Just shy of safety Peet stumbled, as a bullet pierced his calf. He changed his fall into a dive, to take the weight off his burning leg. Airborne, he tumbled into the opening, coming up hard against the bricks, tumbling into the waiting Alexa and knocking her to the ground. He grabbed her arm before crawling out of range.

“Peet! You are bleeding!” Alexa gasped, as she placed a hand on his leg. A dark stain soaked the fabric and her fingers came away sticky with blood.

“Can you walk? Oh my god, Peet, you have been shot!”

Peet pushed himself to stand, and leaned back against the wall. The break was a narrow gap covered over with tin, bridging the two buildings and lined with garbage containers. He pulled Alexa along, limping to a window covered in metal grillwork. He pulled on the grating and it fell away under his touch. The block was rotten and crumbling. Another shove and the window swung in.

“Inside, now!” Peet picked up Alexa and feet first shoved her through the window.

She squealed as she fell through, landing on a filthy couch and tumbling off its back. Peet followed Alexa through the opening. His descent

through the window was much less graceful, rolling to a painful stop on the floor. Alexa scrambled up and slammed the window shut, locking it. She wedged a broom handle under the lock, before helping Peet to his feet to limp off through a doorway to the right. They disappeared around the corner just as flashlights shone down into the room.

“Where are we? Did we just break into a house?”

“Shhh!”

Peet fished in his pocket for his keys. Dangling from the ring was a tiny pen light. He switched it on then limped over to a door on the opposite side of the kitchen where they found themselves. He placed his ear against the heavy door, listening hard. After a few seconds, he pulled open the door and motioned for Alexa to follow. A hallway, decorated with peeling flowered wallpaper, stretched away in both directions, with numbered doors. They were in the central hallway of an apartment building. Peet closed the door and hurried down the hallway. An exit sign flickered over a metal door with a panic bar at the end of the dimly lit hallway. Peet limped to the door and pushed it open, revealing a staircase climbing up to the front doors of the building. A squad car was parked out front, red and blue lights flashing. The car was empty.

“This way.” Peet grabbed her hand and pulled her through into the landing.

Ignoring the squad car, he took her down two flights of stairs. At the bottom was a brown painted door and a sign that announced the parking garage could be found on the other side of the building.

He pulled open the door and led Alexa over to their parked car, unlocking it with the key fob. Easing his way into the driver’s seat behind the wheel, he lifted his left leg into the car with a groan. In the dim light of an overhead fluorescent bulb, Alexa got a clear look at Peet. His ashen face was beaded in sweat.

“We need to get you to a hospital, Peet!”

“No hospitals,” he said harshly. His voice softened and he squeezed her hand. “I will go see a doctor but it will be someone I trust. Pass me that towel.”

Alexa twisted around and grabbed a towel lying on the back seat, then handed it to Peet. He took it and mopped his face, then wrapped the towel around his leg, tying it into a knot over the gunshot wound.

“Ok, we are going to drive out of here. If we get stopped, I want you to pretend to be getting sick, ok? Just a father and his daughter heading out for the day. I want you to be a total brat, ok?”

Alexa smiled. “I am good at that.”

Peet’s mouth twitched. “I bet you are. Show me how good you are.”

He turned the key and the car roared to life. He started out at a leisurely pace, driving slowly around the bends as they climbed out of the car park. On the final turn, the underground parking door rolled up and brilliant sunshine greeted their eyes. Squinting past the glare, their eyes fell on two black cars parked at the street exit. Peet drove up and as the car leveled off and reached the government cars, a man in a dark suit stepped off the curb in front of Peet’s car and motioned for him to stop. He carried a hand gun in his right hand. His companion closed in on Alexa’s window.

“Begin whining now,” whispered Peet. He rolled down their windows. “Can I help you?”

Alexa put her hand over her mouth and moaned. As the second federal officer stepped up beside the car, she yelled, “Dad, I’m going to be sick!” She rolled down her window and leaned out, gasping.

The agent on Alexa’s side paused and stepped back.

“Get out of the car, both of you,” said the one at Peet’s window.

Alexa moaned and hung over the side of the car.

“I am not getting out the car. I am trying to get my daughter to her kidney dialysis appointment. Who the hell are you to tell me to get out of my car?” Peet hit the button to roll up the window but the agent grabbed the glass.

“Let go of the window, or lose your fingers,” he said quietly, stopping the window.

Alexa groaned again and began to cry. She dry-heaved, her pale hair a curtain around her face.

“Maybe we should let them go.” The second officer stepped closer to the car, to try to peer inside of it but still stay out of range of anything that might spill from the little girl.

“Nah, he’s hiding something.” The first agent sneered at Peet. “Where have you been today?”

“None of your business. Why should I answer you? Are you some kind of cop?” Peet scratched his beard as the federal officer flashed his badge. “You looking for terrorists or something? You might find a few drug dealers in this building, but that is about it.”

“We are looking for a man who stole some private records from the hospital.”

“Since when are the feds interested in hospital records? I don’t think you are cops at all. Now get out of my way.”

“Dad!” gasped Alexa as the second fed put his hand on the door handle. Alexa’s head came up and she projectile vomited down the front of the dark suit. The force of her sick was so strong that it wedged in behind his collar and dropped with a sickening splash onto his shiny patent leather shoes.

“Eww!” He jumped back from the car, shaking off his jacket. The vomit soaked into his shirt, and the sour odour of sick filled the air. “Let them go, dammit!”

The first officer dropped his hands from the window. “Get out of here,” he growled.

Peet rolled up his window and drove out of the parking garage. Two sets of furious eyes followed them as Peet rounded the corner. Once the officers were out of sight, Alexa pulled her head back into the car, grinning. Peet grinned back.

“That was masterful, Alexa. Nice timing.”

Alexa grinned, but then her smile faded. “We need to get you to your friend.”

“Yes, and fast.” Now that the adrenaline was fading, pain slammed into his leg. Peet felt woozy from blood loss. “Keep me awake Alexa, I am losing a lot of blood.”

She reached over and squeezed his arm. “I will keep you awake.”

Peet took the ramp to the highway and sped off to find the only doctor he could trust. He prayed he would not pass out before getting there. But five miles down the road, he pulled over to the side of the road. Sweat covered his face once again. Putting the car in park, he sized up Alexa.

“I cannot drive any further. I am afraid I am going to pass out behind the wheel. You must drive.”

“Me?” she gasped

“Yes. You can do it. You are tall enough. I am going to crawl into the back seat. Take the next exit and turn right off of the ramp. Drive to Timbers Gas and pull in behind the mechanical garage at the back of the property. The man you are looking for is named Steve.”

Eyes wide, Alexa got out of the car then helped Peet into the back seat. He passed out as soon as his head hit the seat.



Chapter 9

The Envelope

Avalon's fingers shook slightly as she pulled open the business envelope and tipped it, spilling the contents onto the scratched tabletop. She spread the items out, and examined them with a quizzical eye. The passports were self-explanatory. She picked one up at random and opened it to the photo page. Her mother stared back at her. Her hair was cut short around the ears but left long at the sides and spilled over her shoulder. It had been dyed a brassy blonde. She had made up her eyes so that they gave the impression of being larger than they normally were. A bright red lipstick traced her full lips. She wore a V-necked tight pink t-shirt.

Avalon started at the picture, shocked. Her mother looked twenty years younger, as she had in her college days. She checked the date of birth as shown on the passport and it agreed with her assessment of the photo. Her mother had changed the date of her birth to eighteen years later than her actual date of birth. The name listed was 'Mary Fullerton'.

Avalon flipped through the rest of the passport but it was blank. She put the passport down and picked up the next one, flipping them open one by one. She saw a picture of her father, Alexa and herself, all with names changed. She recognized the photographs of herself and Alexa. Her mom had snapped them on Alexa's birthday. Alexa had wanted a cops and robbers themed party, and in the makeshift cardboard jail house, her mother had set up a photo booth to take pictures of the criminals as they were arrested. Her mother, dressed as a police officer, had made them sit straight faced. Prisoners were not supposed to giggle, she'd said. She had made stay in jail there until they could stare straight into the camera and not laugh. Those were the pictures that she saw now, the straight-faced photos.

She placed them back in the envelope then picked up a piece of paper. It was a print of a train schedule, showing the departure times for the Solace train station. It was the Monday schedule. She placed it back into the envelope with the passports. The third paper showed a series of three numbers: 22 17 38, and then the number 1008 circled in red ink.

“It must be the combination to a locker,” she said aloud, to no one in particular.

Trench took the paper from her hands and studied the writing. “Or, it could be the buzz code to an apartment.”

“Or maybe a departure or arrival schedule?” she said, thinking about the train leaflet.

Avalon tucked it back inside the envelope and picked up the last item. It was a page torn from a magazine. On one side was an advertisement for Betty Bees Honey Trees. A smiling woman in a bee keeper’s suit held up a large honey comb swarming with bees. Avalon flipped the page over but the reverse side did not seem relevant, as it was the final page an article about women’s rights. She returned to examining the advertisement of the bee trees, puzzling over its significance.

“Bee Trees? Why would my parents be interested enough to put this in the envelope? It makes no sense.”

“It must have made sense to them.” Trench took a swig of his root beer. “What are you going to do with this?” He gestured toward the envelope with his bottle.

“I am going to chase down the leads, the same as I did today by coming here.”

“How did you find us?” Cris’ eyes narrowed.

“With the matchbook cover.” She glanced at Trench, who hauled out the confiscated matchbox cover out of his pocket and tossed it onto the table.

“Where did you get that?” growled Magnum, pointing at the matchbook cover that Trench was turning over and over in his hands.

“In the high security facility on the edge of town,” said Avalon.

“I knew it! You’re a government spy!” Magnum’s hand shot forward and grabbed Avalon around the throat. “You lying bitch! I will —”

Trench cut her off when he reached over to haul her hand away from the choking Avalon.

“Stop it, Magnum. Let her go!”

Trench wrenched her hand away and pulled her off of Avalon, who collapsed onto the bench gasping for air and massaging her neck.

“You heard her, Trench! *She was inside the government facility,*” she shouted. “No one goes inside the gates, unless they have been cleared by security. She is a spy, and she is going to rat on us all.”

A cluster of other gang members gathered at the table, pulling knives as they approached, drawn by the conflict. Trench stood up and blocked the others from approaching the table. He grabbed Magnum’s arm, hauling her to her feet, and gave her a hard shake.

“Get a grip, Magnum. She is not a spy.”

“How can you be sure? And what was that,” she pointed at the matchbook cover “doing inside of the warehouse?”

All eyes swung in Avalon’s direction, as she slid back into the corner.

“I found it in a scientist’s desk and I took it, thinking it might help me find my parents. I do not know why it was there. It was in a drawer with a picture of my parents with friends from their college days.”

“Prove it. Show us this picture,” Magnum growled, as she placed both fists on the table and leaned toward Avalon.

Avalon’s eyes flashed with anger. “I don’t have it with me! Do you really think I am stupid enough to carry around with me anything I have stolen? I barely got out of there without being caught!”

“Oh great,” said Cris, “she is a fugitive too! She is going to bring the entire government down on us, Trench. I say we do away with her. She is a liability.”

“Shut up, both of you.” Trench stared at Avalon, sizing her up. Cris and Magnum glared at Trench. He took no notice.

“Everything all right here, boss?” asked a tall, dark haired young man covered in tattoos. A silver ring pierced one nostril. On his right hand a set of brass knuckles flashed.

“Yeah. Take Magnum and Cris and check our back trail. I want to know if anything so much as twitches, back to where we picked her up.”

With a huff, Magnum pushed away from the table.

“She will bring disaster, Trench. Mark my words.” Cris’ face darkened at her dismissal. “You betray us, bitch, and I will slay you first.”

She kissed Trench on the cheek and got up to follow Magnum, who stomped away from the table, taking the toughs with her. The door at the base of the staircase slammed behind them.

Silence descended. Only Trench and Avalon remained. He relaxed back onto his bench as Avalon straightened.

“Thanks,” she muttered, as her eyes darted around the room, searching for more trouble.

“Magnum is super protective of me. She is also a hot head who leaps first and thinks later. That is why I am the leader, I think things through. Without me, they would all have been dead long ago, most likely by each other’s hand.”

“And Cris?”

Trench smiled. “She is protective...for other reasons.” His attractive mouth twitched into a smile.

Avalon wrenched her eyes away from his mouth. “She hates me.”

“She is jealous of you.”

“What is there to be jealous of? I live on the street the same as you do.”

The lie fell from her lips and she crushed the swelling guilt. She did not technically live on the street, but it came to the same thing. Until Mitch and Peet had entered her life, she had lived as they did, stealing to survive.

“You know who you are. You know the faces of your parents, even though they are gone. Cris has no idea. She was found in a dumpster after

she was born. She was found by a garbage picker, who sold her to a pimp. She worked the streets for him from the age of seven, until she killed him at age eleven and fled. That was three years ago. Not a night goes by that she doesn't wake up screaming, thinking he has found her." Trench stated Cris' history in a flat, matter-of-fact voice, devoid of emotion.

Avalon's eyes widened in horror at the retelling. "She has nothing to fear from me."

"I am convinced that you believe that, Avalon," he fingered the envelope, "but she is right about one thing. You do bring trouble on your shoulders. It was not a coincidence that brought you here today, but a planned event. You need to tell me everything you are up to. We need to know the facts so that we can prepare for what may come. I need the truth and all of it. If you don't tell me, I will have to kill you."

"What?" Avalon shot to her feet. "You wouldn't do that."

Trench's face hardened.

"I will not let this gang fail because you bring the feds down on us. This is the only home we have. We will defend it with our lives. But perhaps there is something we can do to help you find your parents. If it wasn't for them, you would be dead already. We do not allow trespassers on our turf."

Avalon stared at him for a minute, and then sat down with a sigh.

"Ok, I will tell you, but only you. This must be kept between us. If this knowledge were to get out on the street, there would be rioting. I do not want to be the cause of a civil war, nor get caught in the middle of one. First, let me first tell you about my family..."

Trench reached outside the booth and pulled the sound proofing curtain closed, sealing its sides.



Chapter 10

The Bunker

Mitch followed Pam through the welcoming crowd and to the most highly decorated tent of the village. The patched leather hide was tanned to a chocolate brown and stitched with thick bindings of cream leather. It was long and rectangular, anchored to the ground by pegs driven deep into the soil. At the entrance, two warriors stood guard, faces painted with multiple eyes and images of lightning bolts. Mitch could not help staring at their fierce makeup. Pam paused at the door and bowed, then straightened. Mitch mimicked her posture.

“We seek the counsel of the Chief Elder. Could you request an audience for us?”

The warrior on the right nodded and ducked inside the tent. He returned a short time later, and held back the tent flap, gesturing to them to enter. They passed through into the interior. The longhouse was set with benches of carved wood, set in a semi-circle around a tall chair set on a small platform. The pale chair was carved from bleached wood, and glowed in the natural light that filtered through several openings in the roof. In the chair sat a man with long red hair, braided into two plaits that ran down the front of his chest. On his chest he wore a vest of hollow bird bones, interspersed with beads and shells. Leather leggings and boots clad the lower half of his body. In his right hand he held a long scepter crowned with a petrified egg. The shell was pale blue and luminescent. Pam crossed over in front of the chief and bowed low once again.

“Elder, I would like you to meet my brother, Mitch. He is an officer in the Melina police department.”

Mitch elbowed her.

“Excuse me,” she amended, “he is currently on leave from the Melina police department.”

Mitch grinned at the description, and Pam scowled at him.

“He carries an object of utter secrecy,” she continued, “one that has now made him into a fugitive from his own co-workers, and from the government itself.”

Pam reached out to take the backpack from Mitch. He slid it off his shoulders and placed it gently at her feet. Pam unzipped the pack and withdrew the blinking cylinder full of the hive colony. As soon as it was brought out of the back pack and into the light, the chamber began an angry buzzing.

“What is this thing?” the chief asked, his eyes on the container.

“Possibly the answer to the plague that is causing the land to die. It was stolen from the government research facility.”

The chief sat straighter. Stark realization flickered in his unusual, green-eyed gaze. “You have bees.”

“Yes,” said Mitch. “Genetically altered bees, we believe.”

The chief stared at the container. “We do not know what was done to them, do we?”

Mitch shook his head. “No, we do not. We need to study them. By ‘we,’ I mean a team of scientists. Pam thought you might know of a place where we could do so without the government detecting us.”

The chief’s gaze roved between Pam and Mitch. “We know of such a place. But the danger to my people is very great. The government does not bother us while they think we don’t have access to any technology. But if they were to learn certain ‘truths’ they may not leave us alone any longer. I repeat; the risk is very great, not just because of what you carry but who is interested in it.”

Mitch met the chief’s eyes with his own and held them.

“I swear that the government will not learn your ‘truths’. I will destroy all evidence of the bees before I would let that happen. We will keep your secrets as our own.”

The chief studied Mitch, and then he addressed Pam.

“Daughter, you are a part of our people, one of our tribe, sworn to our protection and secrecy. Do you trust this man, as a Seiko tribeswoman?”

Pam picked up the chief’s hand and pressed her lips to the back of his wrinkled hand.

“I swear on my familial oath, that my brother is honest and worthy of your trust. He will not betray the Seiko tribe. I swear that if this is not true, I will slay him by my own hand after cutting out his deceitful tongue and feeding it to my dogs.”

The chief nodded, satisfied.

“Then you have my permission to travel to the sacred caves. Take however many warriors you need for security. Remember your oath.”

Mitch and Pam bowed low, twice, then returned the container of buzzing insects to the backpack and left the lodge. They passed out through the tent flaps and between the two sentinels. As they walked away, one of the young warriors ran off in a different direction, into the village.

Mitch leaned over and whispered in Pam’s ear, “You would cut out my tongue and feed it to your dogs, would you?”

Pam’s head turned and her eyes twinkled.

“It was the least painful of oaths. The other favoured way that the Seiko deal with the deceitful is to pull your intestines out through your belly button and wrap them around your lying throat, then hang you from the highest pole in the village square. You choke twice then, you see? Strangled by your own twisted gut and hung for good measure. My choice of death for you is much more merciful.”

“Gee, I feel so much better now,” muttered Mitch as Pam laughed.

“Come on, if we hurry we can be at the caves by nightfall. I want to show you them while it’s still light.”

Pam quickened her step and soon had Mitch jogging behind her as she hurried through the village, returning the greetings of the women

they passed. By the time they had returned to the motorbike a group of six warriors were waiting for them, three women and three men.

Pam climbed on the bike and kicked it to life, Mitch once again taking his precarious seat on the back of the bike. Pam eased off the brake on the handle, and sped off toward the hills in the distance. The warriors ran. Fleet of foot, they had no trouble keeping up with the motorbike. Mitch was amazed at their speed but as he soon found out, riding the bike was not an advantage. The terrain became ever rockier and the climb steepened until the bike moved slower than the human feet. They inched their way along the rough terrain and forty painful minutes later, just as the sun flattened and the colour of the sky morphed to reds and oranges, the caves came into view.

The face of the cliff was sprinkled with holes, but the largest of them gave the cliff the appearance of a grinning skull. Bats flew in and out of the eyes of the face, blinking away into the dusky light, in search of their breakfast. The heated winds of day died away, as they parked the bike and began the last part of the climb to the largest cave. It was the nose of the rocky face, a flattened outcropping with two lopsided bores for the nostrils. Mitch pulled a crank-style flashlight from his pack. He spun the handle as he climbed behind Pam, building the charge in the battery. The sun plunged below the horizon just as they reached the lip of the cave. Mitch snapped on the flashlight and shone it into the dark hole in the face of the cliff, and nearly dropped it in shock as the beam revealed a shiny metal door. A weathered sign hung over the entrance and announced in barely legible paint “Integrated Blast Facility” and then in smaller letters below “Danger! Keep Out.” Over the sign an aged bell lantern hung, rusted and pitted with age.

“You found a bunker?” Mitch said, pleased. “This is fantastic! There is nothing more secure than this. Is it abandoned?”

“Yes, the government never comes here. It is deep within the Seiko tribes’ sacred lands. They wouldn’t dare enter, since the signing of the treaties of The Silenced Lands, seventy five years ago. They returned the

traditional burial grounds and all structures on or below the surface to the Seiko at that time.”

“Brilliant. This is perfect.” Mitch walked up to the silvery barrier. “There is nothing more secure than a bunker. How do we get in?”

Pam tugged on his arm and he followed her to the right side where another door stood hidden in shadow.

“We use this entrance.”

She knocked on the door, the taps coded into a pattern. A series of knocks were returned and Pam tapped again a shorter message. After a moment of silence, the door swung open and they stepped into the dim interior. A narrow hallway ran a few feet and then broadened onto a catwalk suspended from the curved metal ceiling and fenced over like a chicken coop to keep one from dropping several stories to the stone floor below. The fenced walkways crisscrossed the vast room, descending to the floor at either end. From above, Mitch could clearly see the silos built into the floor, like empty eye sockets. Instead of missiles, however, the silos were filled to the brim with water. Precious, life preserving water.

Mitch whistled. “Talk about striking gold. You have found true treasure, Pam.”

Pam nodded. “I have, indeed. It was under our feet all along.”



Chapter 11

To Save A Life

Alexa wobbled down the highway, taking up both lanes trying to keep the car on the road. Her hands shook on the steering wheel, the wet slick from her sweating palms making her grip slide on the leather. She was too scared to let go of the Mustang's wheel long enough to wipe each hand on her dress, in case she lost control of the car. She gripped it tighter, her fingers white against the black grip. She could barely see over the dash and had to sit close to the wheel to be able to see the road at all.

Her first attempt to make the car go forward was greeted with spinning tires that scared her so badly, she'd started crying. She sat, frozen with fear for several minutes before gathering her courage and gently depressed the gas pedal with a trembling foot. The car eased forward without the spinning tires, and she drove it off the gravel and onto the pavement, her foot quivering so badly she wondered why the car didn't hop down the road like a rabbit. The green road sign announced that the exit she needed was two miles further.

She had no idea what the dials meant, except for the one that told her the speed. The red hand in the middle left circle of the woodgrain dashboard was pointing at the number thirty, so she thought she must be driving thirty miles an hour. She had no idea what the speed limit was, but at that speed, she didn't wobble so much on the road.

"Peet?" she called, not wanting to be alone.

There was no answer. She bit her lip, to stop the tears that wanted to spill from her eyes. *Stop it, Alexa. Peet needs you*, she scolded herself, and concentrated on the road. The car hit a pot hole and lurched. Peet moaned from the back seat.

The exit veered off on the right side and she followed the exit down an incline. A stop sign was at the end of the ramp and she braked, but it was a bit too late. She shot out into the intersection and was across it and onto the gravel on the far side before she could get the car turned. Panicked, she yanked the wheel to the right and the car swerved out onto the pavement again, but on the wrong side of the road. Alexa screamed as the grill of a truck bore down on her. A horn blared, scaring her so badly she floored the gas pedal. The Mustang leapt forward, onto the proper side of the road as the truck whizzed past, horn still blaring. Shuddering, Alexa took her foot off the gas and let the car coast down the road. Her legs were out of control, shaking in a cold adrenaline rush so severe they refused to do anything that her brain commanded. Alexa concentrated on steering the car, her brain numbed with terror over the near miss. The Mustang slowed as the needle dropped and as she coasted, she calmed.

The gas station! There it is! Alexa squinted at the tall orange sign. A circle like the setting sun, with green triangles representing trees announced Timber's Gas was closed. The last price posted was missing two numbers and a board announcing "Last Gas for Fifty Miles" swung in the breeze, flapping from one unbroken hinge. Alexa turned the wheel, still too scared to touch the gas pedal. The Mustang limped past the rusting gas pumps and the whitewashed gas station, obscured by six foot tall weeds and thistles. At the back, a narrow lane could be seen, but no building in sight. The Mustang rolled to a stop. Peet groaned once again.

Alexa let go of the steering wheel and rubbed her hands on her legs, fingers aching with stiffness. She shook her hands and then took several deep breaths, gathering her courage. She placed her hands on the wheel then gently pressed the gas pedal. This time she had more control over the pedal and the car eased forward, bouncing down the rutted lane. Gritting her teeth, she fought the bumps, steering as best she could. She was so focused on the driving part that she didn't see the cottage until she was almost driving in the front door. She crested the slight hill and there it was.

Alexa braked and put the Mustang in park, relieved that her ordeal was over. She opened the car door and stumbled out on legs that felt like jelly, stumbling to the front door. She pounded on the door with her fists.

"Hello," she called. "Is the doctor in?"

Spying a brass knocker, she lifted it and pounded on the striker, still calling, "Doctor? Hello, Doctor, are you home?"

The door opened abruptly under her pounding. A frail man stood in the doorway, white hair sticking up in all directions. A bathrobe was tied closed around his waist.

"I am Dr. Song. Who are you, girl?"

"I am Alexa, I am a friend of Peet's. He is in the car, he has been shot. Please, can you help me?"

"Peet? I don't know any Peet." The door started to close.

Panic rose once again in Alexa once again. She stuck her foot in the door.

"Please, you need to help me. He is bleeding and unconscious. Please! Help me!"

The man paused, eyes searching her dirty, tear stained face.

"Alright, child, I will help you. Show me your friend."

Alexa took his hand and dragged him back to the car, opening the passenger side door and pulling the seat forward.

Peet was sprawled across the back seat, but his legs had dumped onto the floor sometime during Alexa's inexpert maneuvers. Blood had soaked through the towel wrapped around his leg.

The doctor leaned into the car, placing two fingers against the side of Peet's throat.

"He is alive. We must move him inside, but it will take both of us to get him there. Wait a minute. I have a small wagon."

The doctor walked around the back of the cottage and returned a short time later with a gardening wagon. He rolled it up under the open door.

“Now, we need to grab him under his arms and pull him out onto the wagon. I will pull him out, if you can keep the wagon steady. Ready?”

At Alexa’s nod, he bent inside the car, slid his arms under Peet’s and began to pull him out. Peet groaned as his injured leg shifted, but with a few more pulls and heaves, they had him out of the car and onto the cart. Together they pulled the injured Peet into the house and into a library where a squashy, well-used couch sat under the window.

“Take his feet, I will get this end,” said the doctor, and on the count of three, they lifted Peet’s limp form off the wagon. “There.”

He straightened, running a practiced eye over the prone man. “I will need to examine him. Come with me —” He paused, turning to peer at her, and raised an eyebrow in inquiry.

“Alexa,” she supplied.

“Come with me, Alexa. You can run some water for me.”

He led her back into his tiny galley kitchen, pulling a metal basin from a cupboard and placing it in the sink.

“Fill this with lukewarm water while I fetch my supplies.”

He shuffled out of the room, leaving Alexa to her task. When she returned to the library, he was already there, towels spread under the injured leg.

A pair of sharp scissors made quick work of the blood soaked pant leg. He peeled back the stiffening cloth to reveal the damaged leg. Dr. Song gestured for her to put the water on the table beside him then dipped a clean cotton cloth into the warm water and washed away the dried blood. Fresh blood flowed as he washed away the thin crust and he poked at the wound, feeling his way.

“The good news is that the bullet passed right through. We do not need to probe further. The bad news is that he has lost a lot of blood. I need to clean the wound then we will need to stitch it closed.”

“Is he going to live?”

Now that the raw emergency was over, Alexa felt weak, and sick for real. Her stomach churned watching the injured Peet.

Picking up on her tone, the doctor assessed Alexa's pale face.

"Go get some food in the kitchen. There is some roast chicken salad in the fridge. Make yourself a sandwich and have a glass of mint tea. There might be a bit of goat milk left, check in the freezer. I freeze it in ice cube trays and only thaw what I need. The goat has been going dry." I will be fine for now. I will call you if I need your help. Do not come back until you have finished eating."

Grateful for the excuse to leave, Alexa got up and left the room to do as the doctor asked. She poked around the kitchen and found all the fixings for sandwiches. She carried everything over to the table and decided to make three sandwiches, one for each of them, rather than just the one. Peet would be hungry when he woke up, she was sure of it. The cheery thought lightened her mood and she made sure to pile Peet's sandwich twice as high as hers, as he would need the extra energy to heal. She sat and ate her sandwich and drank her milk. Bravery returning, she walked back into the library.

The doctor was wrapping Peet's leg as she entered.

"Feel better?"

"Yes. I made you and Peet a sandwich, too."

"Thank you." He smiled at her. "The leg is all stitched, and now just wrapping him up. I need to give him a shot for pain and one to help stave off infection. Are you scared of needles?"

Alexa shook her head, no.

"Good, because you hardly feel them at all."

He reached into the box at his side and pulled out a couple of small, labeled vials and a thin needle, pushing the needle through the rubber top. He pulled out the needed quantity and then plunged the needle into Peet's arm. He repeated the process with another vial. He winced at the need to double up on the needle but they were hard to come by now. He ejected the spent needle into a secure container then stood up. He would re-sterilize it later. He pulled a blanket up over Peet.

"He needs to rest. Come show me this sandwich you made for me."

He followed Alexa back to the kitchen table, pausing to wash his hands at the kitchen sink before joining Alex at the table. He lowered himself down into his favourite chair with a weary sigh.

“Thank you for the sandwich, Alexa.”

“Will Peet be ok?”

“Yes, his vitals are strong. He needs to rest and recover though, so you will be staying with me for a few days. I have a spare bedroom. How about you tell me what is going on here, and how Peet was shot? By the way, Peet is his middle name. That is why I didn’t recognize his name. I guess he doesn’t go by his first name.”

“What is his first name?” asked Alexa

“Gustave.”

Alexa giggled. “Sounds like something out of a kid’s movie.”

“It sure does.” The elderly doctor’s eyes twinkled, as he took a bite of his sandwich. He chewed and swallowed, then said gently, “What happened, Alexa?”

The smile slid from Alexa’s face, as she recounted their narrow escape from the hospital. The old doctor frowned, listening in silence. He did not interrupt, leaning in to catch her every word.



Chapter 12

Firebrand

“So, you are saying that your parents are likely the leaders of the SOS or very close to the top of the underground movement? They are public enemy #1 according to the government?” asked Trench.

“Yeah. That is my take on it. They knew something, something dangerous, something that the government didn’t want the general populous to know. It was damming enough to hunt them down and silence them,” said Avalon.

“So you think they are dead?”

Avalon pondered the question for a moment, searching her feelings.

“No. I don’t believe they are dead. However dangerous their knowledge is on the outside, *it is even more dangerous to those on the inside*. But it is also something they need. I think what my parents discovered was the antidote to the government’s failed experiment, the genie they let out of the bottle. I think they know how to stop all of this.” Avalon waved her hand at the greater world beyond the walls of Frankie’s Finger Foods.

“Why imprison them for it? Why not thank them and implement the cure?” Trench scowled at the realization that the world he knew writhed in the throes of death beyond the brownstone walls of their hideaway.

Avalon stared at him sadly. “Money. It’s the only theory that makes any sense. Someone is making a fortune to keep the truth silent, that there is a cure for all of this. And we do not need to look very far to guess who that is.”

“Senator Penn,” growled Trench.

“Senator Penn,” agreed Avalon. “Do you remember the scandal of a few years ago, with the off-world shipments?”

“Wasn’t he investigated for privateering? It was all hushed up by the House of Lords.”

“Exactly. Do you remember who brought the accusations?”

“No,” said Trench.

“It was the student body at Solace U. They planned that big rally and marched from campus right to the gates of Parliament Hill. Don’t you remember? The government swarmed the crowd and opened fire, killing the leaders of the march.”

Trench nodded, as memory of the event returned. “That’s right. The government later put it about that the Parliament security had acted against orders and issued a formal apology, but that didn’t bring back the dead students who were leading the charge. The movement died with them. No one wanted to be the next ones targeted.”

“Exactly. The movement went underground at that point. I wasn’t old enough to know any of this, but I remember my parents talking about the rally. I didn’t understand any of the conversation then, but I understand it now. They never tried to hide the issues from us. They spoke openly of their school days and the rally. In their study, they kept a scrapbook with news articles from the event, noting everyone they could identify on both sides of the conflict.”

“Do you still have it?” said Trench.

“Yes, it is in our hidey-hole in the barn,” said Avalon.

“We need that scrapbook,” muttered Trench. “It will help us so much!”

“How so?”

Exasperated, Trench leaned across the table, glaring at her.

“How so? *How so? Your parents were eye witnesses to the revolution! They know everyone who is involved. That might be the reason they were targeted.*”

Avalon’s mouth dropped open with an audible click.

“Oh my god, you are right.” Her eyes glazed over as memories flooded over her. “How could I be so stupid? They were trying to teach us

without us even realizing it. They left the scrapbook as a road map, a guide. The government agents. That is what they were looking for. That is what they wanted. THE SCRAPBOOK!" Avalon shot to her feet. "I have to go," she gasped and turned away but her flight was halted by a strong hand that clamped onto the bruises forming under the skin, from Magnum's manhandling.

"Ouch!" she cried, pushing at Trench's hand.

"Sit," he commanded, pushing her back down and releasing her. "You are not going anywhere until you are one of us."

"One of you?" she rubbed her upper arm. "What do you mean?"

"No one can come and go in Firebrand territory without being branded. What do you think it meant?"

Trench shoved up his sleeve, and there, burnt into his skin was the Firebrand's signature image, tattooed into his skin. Only this tattoo was burnt in, not inked.

Avalon licked her lips. "You mean I have to join you, in the flesh, in order to leave here alive?"

"Yes."

Her eyes rose to meet his. They were blue steel on ice. Immovable. Avalon's eyes dropped to her bruised arm. With a sigh, she shoved the sleeve of her jacket up her arm, revealing the heaving bruising that had made her wince.

"Ok, but make it quick. I need to get back so I can be sure the album is safe." Anxiety over their hidey-hole in the hayloft where she and her sister Alexa had been living for the last five years set her heart to hammering in her chest. "I can handle your initiation."

"Can you?" Trench raised an eyebrow. "We will see. I hear the others returning. You agree to become one of us? The decision cannot be reversed. Once branded, you are always branded. That is why we do not do ink."

Avalon swallowed past the chunk of stone that lodged in her throat.

“I can handle whatever you dish out. I do not fear you.” Avalon’s chin lifted in defiance and her eyes locked on Trench’s. “Bring your best and your worst. Either way, I am out of here in half an hour.”

Trench grinned in appreciation of her bravado. He ripped aside the privacy curtain, and pushed himself to his feet, to greet the returning gang members. Avalon scrambled to her feet also, anxious to not appear as a supplicant any longer. Her chin lifted in defiance, and her fists clenched. She spied her bike, still leaning against the booth across from her and sighed with relief.

Magnum lurched to a halt in front of them, the permanent glare fixed on her square face. A trickle of blood ran from her split lower lip.

“The coast is clear. Nothing but the usual scum on the street.” She swiped the back of her hand across her lip and grinned. “Nothing like a good fight to start the morning off right.”

The other gang members chuckled and cracked knuckles. Cris sidled up to Trench and ran her arm through his.

Trench grabbed Avalon’s arm, lower this time to avoid the bruised area.

“Avalon is going to be inducted into the Firebrand gang.”

Silence fell while all eyes fell on her. Some were curious, some almost friendly. Magnum’s grin fell, but it was Cris who raised the first objection.

“Why would you let her into the gang? What is she to us?” said Cris.

Trench untangled himself from her grip.

“She is needed, and the decision to induct or not induct is mine alone, as our leader. Do you wish to dispute this, in front of the gang?” His eyes were flat grey green steel.

Cris blushed with anger, eyes flashing.

“No, I will not argue with you. But I do not have to like it.”

“That’s correct. You don’t. Your personal feelings have nothing to do with who is invited into the gang and who is not, but once inducted, you

will protect her as you would any other gang member. Do you have a problem with this?"

Cris shook her head.

"Alright," he continued. "Let's get this done. We have work to do. Avalon, follow me."

Trench headed toward the back of the restaurant and Avalon fell in behind him, keeping her distance from Cris. Magnum fell in beside her and the rest of the gang closed the box.

Magnum leaned over and whispered "I'd watch your back if I were you. Cris doesn't like you."

Avalon turned to meet her eyes. Magnum grinned at the look of feigned surprise on Avalon's face.

"No kidding. I don't intend to be here long enough for it to matter. The only thing I am interested in, is finding my parents. Nothing else matters to me. This was Trench's idea, not mine."

Trench's broad back shouldered through a pair of swinging doors that opened to reveal the kitchen of Frankie's Finger Food. The kitchen was currently quiet, with no food prep underway. Trench marched back to the fryers lining the back wall and paused in front of one that had oil bubbling on a low simmer. Beside the fryer was a charcoal grill. He stirred the coals and added a couple more bricks to the grill, then a small splash of oil. The charcoal caught and burned merrily. Trench crouched down and sorted through a cupboard then pulled out what looked like a branding iron. On its tip was a symbol that Avalon knew all too well. It was the Firebrand symbol. Her eyes widened as Trench stood back up, facing her. He shoved the brand into the coals without dropping eye contact.

"Take off your coat and give it to Magnum."

Avalon hesitated, but shrugged out of the precious jacket, handing it to Magnum.

"Now, give me your left hand," he said softly.

Avalon's throat constricted with fear. Silently, she held it out fighting the telltale quiver of fear that ran down her arm. Trench shoved her

sleeve up, just as a pair of hands gripped her shoulders and pushed her down, so that her arm rested on the wooden prep board in front of the grill. Panting, she looked away as Trench reached in for the glowing fire-brand.

“This is going to hurt, Avalon.”

Before she could say a word, he plunged the burning poker onto her arm. The smell of burning flesh and hair filled the air and Avalon shrieked, her scream echoing off the tiled walls. The excruciating pain overwhelmed her, merging with her exhaustion. The world spun then tunneled smaller and smaller until it faded to black.



Chapter 13

An Unpleasant Truth

Mitch followed Pam down a series of walkways. Their boots clicked on the metal grating, echoing in the vast chamber. The entire facility was empty. Not a person moved in the dimly lit interior. Mitch shivered. The temperature within the bunker was at least twenty degrees cooler than outside, and the contrast was shocking on the skin.

They crossed over to a metal door, set with a security code. Pam punched in a series of numbers and wrenched open the door.

“The pass codes are set to each person’s individual birthday plus one random number of their choosing. I will get you set up in the system in a second.”

The hallway they entered ended in an elevator. They stepped into the box and Pam punched level 2. The doors closed and they descended, the cage rattling and squealing over the rusting pulleys. Mitch grimaced over one especially loud screech.

“We haven’t had time to service the elevators yet. No one who is familiar with this facility has any experience with the elevators, and we can’t pull in someone from the outside. They work, that is what is important.”

“As long as they continue to work,” said Mitch. “Where do you propose we keep the bees?”

“That is where I am taking you.”

The lift doors opened and they stepped out into a room with curved glass windows that overlooked the nuclear station. Old blue grey steel monitoring equipment was set in tidy rows, their displays dark. A thick coat of dust covered every surface.

“This is the original control room for the facility.” Pam led him through the room.

“This is like stepping through a portal into one of the creature feature movies of our youth. I expect to find monsters on the other side of the wall,” said Mitch, with a grin.

“I think you have brought the monsters with you,” said Pam, eyeing his backpack.

“True enough,” said Mitch. The backpacked buzzed angrily in agreement. He could feel the vibrations on his back.

“Here, this is the place.”

Pam paused in front of a door with reinforced glass, with a heavy seal. She opened the door, passing into a narrow hallway that stopped at a secondary door. This door said *Emergency Containment. Timed Entry Only*, in bold red letters.

“This is the safest place. Come on, let’s release your pets in here. We will set up a feeding station for them. We have been growing hydroponically within the facility. The plants could use some natural pollination. In time we can build a fly tube to the greenhouse. But for now we will bring plants into them. Put the back pack down and let’s get the supplies the bees will need.”

Grateful to be free of the buzzing pack, Mitch set it down on a table where it would not be disturbed, then followed Pam back out into the facility.

Along the way, she found a couple of people stationed in the facility, and commandeered their help in carting plants and water, as well as rigging a temporary bee hive out of screens in wooden frames where the bees could begin building a home for the colony.

Once everything was in place in the containment room, complete with a drip water system and a variety of pots containing flowering plants, Mitch tied a string to the loosened lid of the bee container and unwound it back to the door. With a tug, he pulled the lid off, just before he slammed the door, which cycled into locked mode. The lid fell to

the floor in a silent crash and the bees flew out of the container, racing directly at the door, behind which their captors hid. They slammed up against the glass, swarming its surface. When they couldn't reach Pam and Mitch, they lost interest and headed over to the flowers, settling in to feed off the nectar and familiarizing themselves with their new home.

Mitch turned around to ask Pam when the door would be unlocked again, and paused at Pam's ashen face.

"You weren't joking when you said the bees were killers. They knew exactly where we were. If we had been inside with them loose, we would be dead right now."

"Yes, the bees are very dangerous. We think they have been altered somehow. We don't know how or even why, but they are evidence of the government's crimes. We just need time to be able to study them, and discover the truth. Avalon went to great personal risk to steal them."

Slowly the colour returned to Pam's face.

"We need those dammed scientists," she muttered.

"Peet is in contact with them."

He settled in beside Pam, matching his stride to hers, working their way back through the control room.

"Do you think we would be allowed to bring them here? I mean, who do we ask for permission? It would go better if we knew that we could invite them to the facility, before we made direct contact."

"I am the person in charge, and seeing as this may soon be one of the last hospitable places left on this planet, it only makes sense to bring the best and brightest here, to aid in our survival. If they can unlock the secret, they may be able to reverse the damage that is being done, before it's too late. But I doubt anyone will believe that every crisis on the planet right now is a result of a handful of bees. It is difficult for me to believe, and I am only one person that needs convincing."

"I know, Pam, but the bees are a place to start. Maybe it's not the only cause, but it is a major one. I am sure of it."

“Then bring your scientists, if you can find them. We will keep your pets safe for now. You don’t need to worry about anyone disturbing them. No one will want to get too close to them.”

“Great.” Mitch yawned, his jaw cracking. He raised a hand to the thick stubble on his beard.

“You could use some food and a rest. Whatever else you have planned can wait a day or two. Come on, let’s find the cafeteria and see if there are any leftovers in the fridges there.”

As she lead him through the facility, she described the areas they passed.

“Men’s showers are on the left, Women’s on the right. The left side doors are all sleeping chambers for men, the same on the right for the women. Family quarters are one level below. Laundry facilities are located at the front of the shower facilities. All the water here is recycled. Soaps are made here, from what we grow. The organic compounds are separated during the water reclamation and used as fertilizer for the greenhouses. Nothing goes to waste.”

They entered the cafeteria, which was set with about fifty square tables and metal folding chairs with cracked red vinyl seats. The walls displayed old posters urging the purchase of war bonds, and one showed a list of rubber drive depots, where old tires could be donated.

Behind the serving counter, a fridge hummed. It was white enamel with a rounded top and a large silver handle that pulled down to open it.

“Ok, let’s see what we have in here,” said Pam, pulling on the handle.

Blocks of hard goat cheese, wrapped in brown paper sat on the top shelf beside a pitcher of watered down goat’s milk. Boiled eggs sat in a green plastic bowl and raisins soaked in a second glass bowl, rehydrated to a plump and juicy state.

“Great, let’s eat!” She pulled the items from the fridge and put them on the counter.

Mitch pulled a knife and began slicing cheese and bread. “How did they come by all of this?” he asked as he divided the food between two

plates. A couple of eggs and some sweet raisins followed and a cold glass of skinny milk, each.

“They keep goats and chickens in small pens by the tents, and they keep a separate stock here, in case of raids, or deaths due to the drought on the outside. Animals are worth their weight in gold now. Theft is a real problem, even out here in the wilderness. But the goats and the chickens are great scavengers, and nothing goes to waste.” Famished, Pam pulled her plate in front of her, signalling an end to the conversation. They fell to eating and when the plates were cleared and their stomachs content, they both yawned.

“I am going to find an empty room and crash for a few hours,” said Mitch. “I will be leaving when I wake up. I set out to find a place for the bees and I have accomplished that, with your help.” He put his arm around his sister and squeezed. “But now, I need to get back to my police station. We need information and I need to get access to it. Hopefully there isn’t a warrant out for my arrest.”

Pam nodded. “I will have a warrior take you back to the Mustang. He can retrieve my gear too. I need to prepare for the scientist’s arrival, provided they consent to come.”

Mitch pushed to his feet and pulled Pam up beside him. “Thank you for your help. I don’t know what I’d do without you.”

Pam hugged him and then pushed him away. “Enough of the mushy stuff. I wanna sleep. Come on.”

They placed their dishes in the sink then headed out of the cafeteria. At the door to the sleeping chambers, Pam paused, frowning.

“One last thing, Mitch. Be careful who you bring back to this facility. You must clear them all. One stray word about what we have here, and the government will be on us like flies on stink. This is still a top secret facility. It must remain so.”

“I will screen them all personally. That is another reason why I need to get back into the good graces of the police department. Each and every person I send here will be as shiny as a bright new penny.”

Pam nodded, and then entered her room.

As the door closed behind her, Mitch couldn't help but wonder what his reception would be at the police station. *I need access to the records there, but first I'd better find out if I am a wanted man, or I might end up in the same cell that held Avalon, not so long ago.*



Chapter 14

Undercover Scientist

Dr. Song shuffled back into the living room, carrying two mugs of hot chocolate. Alexa eyed the treat with excitement. Two fat marshmallows bobbed on the top, slowly spreading their creamy gooey goodness across the surface. He placed one on the TV dinner tray he had set up for Alexa, before easing himself into his armchair.

“Now, be careful with that. It’s very hot and I don’t need any other casualties under this roof.”

Alexa nodded and then bent over and stuck her finger on the marshmallow, dunking it under the surface. It bobbed right back up but now it was covered in a slick milk chocolate coloured cream. She stuck her finger in her mouth and licking off the sticky sugar confection.

“Oh! This is *so good!* I haven’t had a marshmallow since Mama made us...” Her voice trailed away as a bittersweet memory came to mind. Her head dipped down and her hair fell forward, shielding her face.

“Hey now, no crying now. Whatever you are thinking about is in the past. It has no power to hurt you any longer. You are safe, and your hot chocolate is yummy and you have a place to sleep tonight. Now drink up and let’s get you settled for the night.”

Alexa took a sip of her hot chocolate, then put it down and looked over at the still mound of blankets that was Peet. The sun had set and outside the window and all was dark. The light of the lamp by Dr. Song’s chair was the only illumination in the room. Alexa yawned, her eyes drooping.

Dr. Song picked up a note book and pen from the table side and flipped it open to where he had left off. He scribbled down a few sentences, scratched them out, and then tried again. He wrote, absorbed in

his creation, sipping his hot chocolate while the cuckoo clocks' pendulum ticked off the seconds and minutes. When he looked up an hour later to check on Alexa, he found her slumped sideways in the chair, fast asleep. Grabbing a spare blanket, he draped it over the sleeping child then shuffled out of the room and down the hallway to a spare room. He opened the door and entered what looked like a small radio studio, complete with a vintage microphone on a stand and a pair of bulky headphones. He sat down in the office chair, rolling it toward the desk where a stack of old CD's sat on top of a CD player, plugged into a mixer. He flipped the switch on the wall to light the room then turned on the short wave transmitter/receiver, stacked in the corner of the desk up against the wall. He had created the numbers station as a way to send coded messages to his listeners, in case the government was listening in." Only those who knew how and when to listen in would be able to hear and decode the messages sent in plain sight. Sometimes he used altered voices, sometimes a series of sounds, mixed with Morse code. His favorite ones were the nursery rhymes he created. Poetry was a passion of his and the message was locked deep within the verse. It eased an itch for both secrecy and art.

A quick glance at the bird clock on the wall confirmed that it was 9:15 p.m. and time to begin his broadcast. He turned on the mixer, queued the CD player, pulled several pages of poetry from his pocket and laid them flat on the desk. Dr. Song donned the headphones and pressed the black button on the base of the microphone, then fed the words to the night sky. He read aloud for fifteen minutes, flinging his message to a specific audience that only he knew about. He repeated the message three more times, and then shut the mic off just before 10:00 p.m. He pulled the headphones off and swiveled around in his chair and jumped at the sight of Alexa standing in the open doorway.

"My child, come in. You startled me."

Alexa came into the room, rubbing her eyes.

“That was a strange nursery rhyme. What did it mean? Was it a secret message?”

“Yes, I was sending news to my friends in a way that only they would understand.”

“A secret code!” Alexa’s eyes lit with excitement. “That is so cool! Will you teach it to me? I want to be a spy when I grow up!”

Dr. Song chuckled. “I might teach it to you. Let me consider the request while you sleep. Secrets can be dangerous and I don’t know if it is wise to teach you this.”

As she opened her mouth to object, he held up his hand to stop her words.

“I will consider it, but for now it’s time for rest.”

He pushed himself up from the chair, straightening slowly.

“Come, this is where you will sleep.”

He motioned her further into the room. Behind the door, pushed up against the opposite wall from the radio equipment, was a day bed. Alexa followed him over to the bed while he pulled back the covers.

“Now, the recording equipment may turn on in the middle of the night, if it hears a signal, but don’t be worried, it is just doing its job.”

Alexa crawled under the covers and he pulled them up tight under her chin.

“Sleep well, Alexa.”

“Good night Dr. Song.”

He closed the door behind him as he left the room then checked on his patient one last time. Peet was hot. He checked his temperature and pulse, then gave him another shot of antibiotic. He checked the dressing and seeing that it was weeping, he unwrapped the leg and changed the absorbent pad out for a new one then wrapped the leg once again. Angry red lines ran from the lip of the wound, and the exit hole was red and swollen. Peet had infection setting in, and that, combined with his loss of blood meant that his patient was not going anywhere soon. With

a heavy sigh, he pushed back to his feet then grabbed his cane as he felt bone weary. He was retired and not used to all this excitement.

He locked up the doors and headed to bed, grateful for the chance to rest. In the morning he could worry about his two guests and what to do with them. The message he had sent to the SOS had advised the scientists that Peet had arrived and that an emergency meeting was in order. Now, he would wait for a reply and further instructions. It could be a week before they messaged back, and in the meantime he would try to nurse Peet back to health. He was running low on medical supplies. They were not easy to obtain and when one was dealing with a gunshot patient, even harder to hide the need. He ran through a mental check list of the items he would need to trade for, or source from the black market. His eyes drooped and he fell asleep, to his most frequently recurring dream where government agents swarmed his house, searching for the SOS.

From the living room, similar sounds issued from the throat of Peet, as he wrestled with the blankets tucked around his body. Flinging out his arm in panic, he rolled from the couch attempted to stand. His leg collapsed under him. He struck his head on the side of the end table as he tumbled to the floor, unconscious once again.



Chapter 15

A Change In Plans

The door of the facility clicked closed with the finality of a prison cell, the locks snapping shut with a snick. Mitch adjusted the near empty pack on his back. It felt immeasurably lighter now that the container was missing. The incessant hum of the buzzing bees was also absent. The sun was still an hour away, the formations around him ghostly shadows. He searched the darkness for the Seiko warrior who was to be his guide back to the Mustang. Crickets chirped, the only sound in the predawn gloom.

“Hello?” he called to the dark.

There was no answer. He fumbled around in his pocket and withdrew his flash light. A watery beam lit the immediate area, barely lessening the darkness. “Damn, the batteries need charging,” he muttered. He flipped the crank out of the side and with quick movements, spun the handle to create the charge to be stored in the batter, while he waited for the Seiko warrior to appear.

Suddenly a figure glided out of the gloom into the path of the weak spill of light from his flashlight. Mitch jumped, startled, his automatically dropping to where he would normally carry his service revolver. It was not there, of course, but the warrior’s eyes did not miss the movement. Mitch saw his hand flash and the glint of steel told him that a switch blade lay between the clenched fingers. Mitch held his hands above his head, palms out, one hand still clutching the flashlight.

“Whoa there, son. You startled me, that’s all. I meant no aggression. Put the knife away.”

The warrior hesitated, then folded the knife and tucked it back up his sleeve.

“Good thing you apologized, old man. My brothers would have run you through before you could twitch.”

He gestured around him and six heavily painted warriors stepped into the dim pool of light cast by the flashlight held aloft by his rigid hands. Mitch swallowed.

“I am lowering my hands now,” he said in a firm voice. “We are on the same side, you know.” Slowly, he lowered his hands.

The faces around him did not soften. A young warrior with a plethora of skinny braids grabbed him by the arm and jerked him into movement. Silently, Mitch followed the young warrior out into the badlands, shadowed by his muscular companions.

Not a word was spoken during the first half hour of walking. He followed in silence, assuming that Pam had given instructions to the warriors as to how to find the Mustang and her old camp, but forty five minutes into the walk, he noticed that their general direction of travel was away from the Mustang, not toward it. He reached out and tapped the leader on the shoulder to gain his attention.

“You do know that you are to be taking me back to my car, right? Pam gave you the location of it?”

The warrior turned his head, smirked, and continued on, picking up his pace to a quick, effortless trot.

Mitch was forced to increase his speed to keep up and said, in a breathy voice, “Hey, answer the question. Where are you going? I need to get back to my car.”

The warrior behind him, red hair bouncing as he ran, said, “Shut up and keep moving.”

Distrust swelled and his mulish, stubborn side kicked in. He stopped dead in the path and his sudden arrested movement startled the warriors. As one they pulled knives and leveled bows at his torso.

Mitch ignored the show of weaponry and addressed the leader, who had turned back, anger drawing his brows into a straight, furious line. Mitch crossed his arms, facing the youth. “Well?”

“Who said we were your escort back to your car? You are really stupid, for a cop.”

A frisson of alarm skittered across Mitch’s nerves.

“If you are not my escort, then what are we doing here?”

“That,” said the youth with a flick of his hand, “is none of your business.”

That moment a burlap sack dropped over Mitch’s head and was pulled tight against his throat. Mitch swore, grabbing the edge of the cloth with both hands as he kicked out at his attackers, but he missed. Off balance, he was tripped, falling heavily to the ground, barely breaking his fall. The pressure on his neck did not ease and he gasped for air. A knee shoved in his back immobilized him. Mitch’s arms were pulled back and a plastic tie snaked around his wrists tightening painfully, cutting into his flesh. He was yanked back to his feet, and the pressure around his neck eased as the sack was tied tight. A rope dropped over his head, tightening painfully against his Adam’s apple, and then the warriors began to run again, in complete silence.

The pace and the inability to see the ground under his feet had Mitch stumbling and falling on a continuous basis, and each time the rope around his neck tightened painfully like a hangman’s noose. More often than not, the warriors pulled him back to his feet by the rope, choking him until his sight tunneled towards unconsciousness. After the third fall, they cut the plastic tie and moved his hands round to the front and rebound them. With his hands now in front, he wrapped his hands around the rope by his neck to maintain the slack he needed to breathe.

The ground leveled out and his falls became less about the ground underfoot and more about his exhaustion. The heat of the sun beat down on him and the rough woven strands of burlap scratched despite the film of sweat that ran down his face. The coarse fibers dug into his skin, a thousand tiny pricks of annoyance.

Around midday, the pace slowed then the party came to a halt, with Mitch in their midst. He stumbled, wavering on legs that quivered with

exhaustion. Into the still, heavy air, the drone of a plane split the silence, growing louder as it approached. The drone of the engine identified it as a twin propeller prop plane. A welcomed breeze gusted past them and Mitch realized that the plane had landed nearby. The engine cut, and the crunch of boots grew louder as the pilot approached where he stood, coming to a halt a few feet away.

Not a word was spoken. Mitch sensed that something changed hands between the pair and the murmur of quiet speech reached his ears. He leaned forward to try and catch the gist of the softly spoken words exchanged between the pilot and the braided warrior. Without warning he was struck on the head from behind. The blow made Mitch's world spin and he crumpled to the ground, unconscious.

The warriors picked him up and carried him to the plane, loading him into the back seat. The tall man in the dark suit spoke for a few moments longer, then shook hands with the warrior and climbed into the pilot's seat.

The engine turned over and caught with a powerful roar, then taxied down the desert floor, stirring clouds of dust as it sped down the flat, boulder free stretch. Lifting off, the plane made a slow circle as it climbed into the sky, before straightening out, and vanishing from sight.

THE END



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About The Author:

E.A. Darl is a pen name, developed a group of authors who are excited to write in this world. This particular book was written by Susan Faw, edited by Judith Docken.

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