

A man and a woman are shown from the chest up, embracing each other. The man is on the left, shirtless, with his arms around the woman. The woman is on the right, also shirtless, with long reddish-brown hair. They are set against a dark, textured blue background. The title 'A DIFFERENT YESTERDAY' is overlaid in red, distressed, block letters across the middle of the image.

A DIFFERENT YESTERDAY

LINDA MOONEY

A DIFFERENT YESTERDAY

by

Linda Mooney

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WHAT THEY ARE SAYING ABOUT *FROM OUT OF THE SHADOWS*

“This was a very well written novel and it had me on the edge of my seat the entire time I was reading it. The love scenes were sensual, erotic and just graphic enough for me to be able to imagine what it would be like to have Croat make love to me. I really enjoyed *From Out of the Shadows* and would not hesitate to read another story by the author of such an enchanting story.”

Happily Ever After Reviews

WHAT THEY ARE SAYING ABOUT *RUNNER’S MOON BOOK 4: CHALLA*

“Wow! *Runner’s Moon: Challa Book 4* has to be one of the best science fiction romances I’ve had the pleasure of reading this year!”
Coffee Time Romance

“*Challa* is one of those books you just can’t put down, but of course it is; it’s a Linda Mooney book! Like everything she writes, this story is captivating from beginning to end, but then, frankly I think Ms. Mooney could draw you into a scene about taking out the garbage. She’s just that kind of writer. Her plots are riveting, and she makes you feel her characters, right down to their toenails.”

Two Lips Reviews

WHAT THEY ARE SAYING ABOUT *THUNDER SERIES*

“In this reviewer’s humble opinion, no one writes more touching, heartfelt romances (like *Wings of Thunder*) than Linda Mooney. She can haul you right into the story and make you feel

her characters' desires, happiness, passion and sadness better than any author I've ever read."

Two Lips Reviews

Fallen Angel Reviews Recommended Read

"The powerful and sensual sex scenes between Annie and Rion (in *Passion of Thunder*) add a deep, abounding passion to their devoted relationship. Rion's commitment to Annie drew me to him more than any fictional hero ever has."

Fallen Angel Reviews

"I will never look at a thunderstorm quite the same again. *Lord of Thunder* isn't just a play on words; it describes the main character of this fascinating new novel by Linda Mooney. A story of strength, determination, and love told with characters as rich as the Montana setting. Raw, intense and satisfying, are words that both describe the story and the romance. Reading Linda's work is an escape like no other. Reading romance, always a guilty pleasure has now become a real joy!"

Renee's Book Talk, Blog Talk Radio

Two Lips Reviews Recommended Read

"I devoured this book, alternately smiling and shedding tears along the way. I guarantee that readers will want to read this book over and over again."

Two Lips Reviews

WHAT THEY ARE SAYING ABOUT *MY STRENGTH, MY POWER, MY LOVE*

"The premise of this Science Fiction / Romance novel caught me off guard. I was blown away and completely enamored with the idea. Linda Mooney takes you on a beautiful journey to the stars and beyond. She has a wonderful ability for writing stunningly beautiful scenes and the expertise for making an emotional connection through her characters. She is a talented and powerful

writer and I highly recommend *My Strength, My Power, My Love*. It is a necessary read for all lovers of science fiction or romance.”

Renee’s Book Talk, Blog Talk Radio

WHAT THEY ARE SAYING ABOUT *HEARTCRYSTAL*

“Linda Mooney has done a top notch job of world building. You get a story that will make you laugh a little but mostly it will twist your heartstrings to pieces. You may want to keep a box of Kleenex nearby while reading (*HeartCrystal*).”

The Romance Studio

WHAT THEY ARE SAYING ABOUT *HEARTFAST*

PNR Reviewer Top Pick

“(HeartFast is) Well worth the time to read - which won’t be too long, as you won’t be able to put it down!”

ParaNormalRomance Reviews

WHAT THEY ARE SAYING ABOUT *SANDEFLAY*

Outstanding Read

“(Sandeflay is a) Great book, a definite keeper.”

Simply Romance Reviews

“Sandeflay is an absolutely stunning read by Ms. Mooney.”

Romance Junkies

WHAT THEY ARE SAYING ABOUT *RUNNER’S MOON SERIES*

Joyfully Recommended

“Fantastic Sci-Fi story is the first thing that comes to mind when I tell people about (*Runner’s Moon book 3*) *Simolif*.”

Joyfully Reviewed

“Go, Ms. Mooney, Go. I am thoroughly intrigued by the species she has invented and am hooked on reading how they adapt to the human race and lifestyles (in *Runner’s Moon: Tiron book 2*).”

Joyfully Reviewed

“Be warned, though. If you have not read the first book yet, odds are you will want to after reading (*Runner’s Moon: Tiron book 2*).”

Coffee Time Romance

Top Pick Recommended Read

“*Runner’s Moon: Jebaral* (book 1)...is an exciting and passionate romance that leaves you anxiously waiting for the next book in the series.”

Romance Reader at Heart

Dedication

Thank you, Anne Lynne and Mrs. Jones

Chapter 1

There were six of them getting ready to attack.

Tollson lowered his field glasses as he ducked behind the empty water tank. He had been following this gang of outcasts for the past two days. Ever since he had picked up their ill-disguised trail, he had watched them do the usual vandalism and odd pilfering. Nothing serious or far-reaching. Not until now. Sooner or later Tollson knew the group would set their sights on bigger prey. It was only a matter of waiting them out to find out when. And when they did, they would have to answer to him first.

The small caravan had been trundling along the ruined highway, moving slowly through the accumulated snow sludge. The entourage consisted of two open wagons loaded with an odd assortment of what Tollson guessed would be provisions and warm clothing. The usual. The wagons were guarded by at least four armed figures on horseback, not counting the two drivers.

A gust of freezing wind came from around the tank and tried to lift him off his feet. A glance upward proved the clouds were tumbling in from the northwest in thick gray piles. Tollson grimaced. The weather was proving to be a nuisance in tracking this gang, and it looked like things were quickly going to hell in a handbasket. Unless he was wrong, and he normally wasn't when it came to the weather, it would start snowing again around nightfall, and not let up until dawn. On the good side, however, if this bunch of miscreants was going to do anything, they'd have to do it

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soon. Tonight, more than likely, if they were smart, before the worst of the storm hit.

Quickly, Tollson slid off the top of the water tower. Years ago one of the tower's legs had buckled, sending the huge tank to the ground where it burst open upon impact. Of course, by the time that had occurred, most of the population of this town had either died out or dispersed to the larger cities where there were greater chances of survival.

Coming around the side of the tank, Tollson glanced at the faded red lettering on its outer walls. Capertown, Home of the Trouncing Tigers. The name brought a smirk to his lips. If there were any tigers left in the world, it would be a miracle.

Another quick glance through his binoculars finally confirmed what he had been suspecting would happen. The gang of outcasts had spotted the caravan and were making a beeline straight for it. They weren't going to wait for nightfall.

Tollson mouthed a curse word as he shucked his backpack. Carrying an extra forty-odd pounds when he was walking was one thing. Trying to stop six armed, half-starved renegades while wearing it was another. He glanced down at the pack, as if promising it he would be returning, then started off at a fast jog down the slope toward the caravan.

The small group of travelers had already spotted the outcasts. It wasn't difficult, since they were on pretty level ground, and there wasn't much in the way to help cover their advance. The caravan had two mules pulling their loads—two valuable animals in this day and age. The mules were tightly bound and wrapped for warmth, to help protect them against the ice and cold.

Like wagon trains of old, the two vehicles pulled next to each other, and the four guards took a stance around them. They were so intent on watching the advancing party, they were unaware of the one lone figure approaching from the opposite direction. But even if they did throw a look in Tollson's direction, chances were

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they would never spot him. Tollson was better than good. Better than the best. After all, he hadn't earned the moniker The Silent Wraith without a valid reason.

Pausing behind an abandoned car, Tollson sized up the weaponry. Each guard had a rifle. The drivers both had guns of questionable parentage. His eyebrows lowered. Having that many guns usually meant the small caravan had the ammo for them, and that could only mean one thing. The caravan was from a nearby city, and possibly had their own munitions factory. Tollson nodded, impressed.

The outcasts, from what he could tell, had one gun among them, but an assortment of blades, and at least one axe. If the group somehow managed to overtake the caravan, their haul would be better than they had originally anticipated.

It was six against six. Tollson rubbed his stubble through the ski mask. The caravan had the odds in its favor, but one never knew, especially when it came to outcasts. He'd once heard the story of how less than a dozen outcasts had managed to overtake a small town of nearly a hundred armed inhabitants. It wasn't a happy story, with an even unhappier ending. Despite the fact that it looked like things shouldn't be a problem for the caravan to ward off the oncoming attack, Tollson decided to remain close by, just in case.

A shot rang out. Tollson jerked in response. It had come from the caravan, yet all six outcasts continued to advance. Now that they had been fired upon, the lowlives sent up a cacophony of hoots and howls as they drew closer. The sound ran an icy finger down Tollson's spine. He hated what most people called the "hunting cry". It reminded him of the time he'd gone to the zoo when he was a boy, and the monkeys had gone berserk around feeding time. Their screams and bellows had bothered him then, and the noise he heard coming from the advancing bunch bothered him now.

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There was another shot, and this time he saw the man who fired it. One of the outcasts shrieked and clutched his shoulder. Winged him. With ammo being scarce, few people were able to afford taking target practice. Most hoped to be able to aim and hit something, anything, and hope for the best.

A third shot came from the caravan, this time from a different guard. There was no reaction from the approaching outcasts, and Tollson's evaluation of the caravan's ammunition went into the cellar. The group had ammo, but it was carefully hoarded. There was no munitions factory. Otherwise the caravan would have some crack shots traveling with them.

He stretched his fingers inside the rawhide gloves. When the time came, he would take the gloves off before doing what he did best. Otherwise the gloves would stay on, keeping his hands warm. Crossing through a deserted parking lot, he ducked behind another stalled vehicle to watch the confrontation.

Realizing their prey was armed and not above shooting at them, the outcasts split to begin circling the tightly packed caravan. As one tall, thin renegade passed in front of him, Tollson hissed to get the man's attention. A bearded, scraggly looking face turned to stare at him in surprise. A neat right hook to the man's temple put him down temporarily. The blade of the man's Bowie knife made it permanent. *One down, five to go.*

The next nearest man was advancing low to the ground, using the scattered remnants of old cars and trucks to help provide some cover. Since two could easily play the same game, Tollson followed behind, always keeping one eye open for the rest of the outcasts.

The next shot Tollson heard ricocheted off the trunk of the car not three feet from his face. A soft, low growl rumbled in his chest. The caravan had spotted him, and mistakenly assumed he was one of the outcasts. Well, there was no way he could let them know otherwise. At least, not yet. He hoped their aim would

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continue to be poor enough to keep the renegades at bay long enough to let him do his job.

Poor soul number two was the one with the axe. Tollson hefted a fist-sized rock and clocked the guy squarely in the back. The man huffed loud enough to draw the caravan's attention to him, and when the outcast turned and raised the axe to accost whoever had come up his rear, a guard's bullet managed to find his upper torso. Number two went down without a sound.

Four to go.

The mules were beginning to get skittish, and the wagons parted for a moment. While the drivers tried to get the animals back together, two of the guards were forced into grabbing the animals' halters to help control them. That left just two guards to watch all four ends of the compass. Tollson shook his head and mentally chastised them. *Stupid, stupid.* Dropping the watch would provide the perfect opportunity to rush them, if the outcasts were smart enough to see the opening.

A sudden movement from the corner of his eye confirmed Tollson's worst fears. The renegades were smart enough; they'd spotted the lowered defenses, and now they were going for broke.

A shrill whistle was their signal for an all-out attack. As the four men broke from cover, Tollson joined them. It would take them precious seconds to realize they were two men short, and that a new figure had joined them. But it would be enough time for Tollson to cause a bit more damage.

Four raggedly dressed men began running directly for the four on horseback. It was a tactic Tollson had hoped they would choose. The men were hoping to pull the guards out of their saddles and disarm them. If they managed to accomplish that, then taking the wagons would be child's play.

Tollson aimed for the nearest man pounding the turf toward one of the guards trying to control a mule. The outcast was unaware that he had gone from hunter to hunted. Neither was he

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aware of the knife that seemed to come from nowhere before it lodged itself up to its hilt in the back of his neck. He went down face-first in muddy slush, sliding at least another yard before his body ground to a halt. Reaching the man, Tollson pulled his knife from the body and wiped the blade clean on the rags as he gauged the location of his next victim.

Outcast number four had almost reached the other guard occupied with a shying mule, when a free guard put him down with a bullet in the chest at nearly point-blank range.

Two to go, but not for long. Seeing that their company had shrunk drastically in the past few minutes, the other outcasts suddenly dropped their plan to overtake the caravan, and began running for the nearest deserted buildings a little more than a hundred yards away.

Tollson started to watch them go without any urge to follow after them when one of the remaining outcasts paused momentarily and glanced back to see if they were being pursued. Tollson blinked. The man looked... No, it couldn't be him.

Memories flooded back like poison. Bad memories. Painful memories. Memories washed in blood and death that had never faded or lessened in intensity over the years. Memories that often wore the face of one particular man.

Tollson cursed himself for not having his knapsack where he could get to his binoculars. If the man was who he believed...

Fuck. He should have gone after them and killed the other two, but his whole intent had never been to see how many of those poor souls he could kill. As long as the outcasts kept to themselves and didn't resort to murdering innocent people who, like them, only wanted a chance to survive in this post-apocalyptic world, Tollson saw no reason for wholesale slaughter. To him, the outcasts had just as much right to life as everyone else, regardless of why they had been cast out of their communities and townships. It was only when the renegades set their sights on killing innocents

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in order to confiscate their food and whatever else they saw fit to own that Tollson put his foot down.

It was why he had been trained to do what he could do. And it was why he now went from township to village, to offer his help and protection to those who might need it at that time.

Turning to leave, one of the guards raised his rifle just as another guard cried out. The bullet sliced through Tollson's jacket and two additional layers of clothing right at the upper bicep before taking a nice chunk of skin along with it as it exited out the other side. A lucky shot, but unfortunately one he hadn't seen coming, or else he would have made sure to seek cover. He knew a couple of the guards had seen his assistance with the outcasts, but hadn't taken the others into account.

His own damn fault.

The shot stung like a son of a bitch. Worse, it was bleeding heavily. Tollson scrambled for cover, with his hand pressed over the wound to try and staunch the flow. Behind him he could hear more shouting, but his concentration was focused on the bitter taste filling his mouth and the hot pain in his good throwing arm.

Damn them and their refitted carbines. Damn them.

There were bandages and painkillers in his backpack, if he could make it back to the old Ford where he'd stashed it. If he could find a semi-safe place to camp for the night, Tollson knew he could manage until the morning. Right now his primary concern was stopping the blood loss, and getting the hole in him cleaned and packed.

He managed to scramble away from the caravan, out of the line of fire, in case another guard tried to take another potshot at him. He could feel the blood running down his arm, cooling as it reached his wrist and dripped to the ground. With a little luck he would soon get it under control. It didn't feel like a major artery had been hit.

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He reached the water tank and found his backpack without any difficulty. Shrugging out of his heavy jacket, Tollson winced at the fire slicing up into his shoulder and down to his fingers. His sleeves were soaked in blood. Sighing loudly, he dropped to his knees and pulled out the wad of rolled bandages from the side pocket. The entire operation took longer than he liked, since he had to use his nonpreferred hand to pack and wrap the wound.

A gust of freezing wind sought him out, making Tollson shiver. Slowly he managed to get his jacket back on. Already his damaged arm was stiffening up, and he gritted his teeth against the pain. His biggest mistake, though, came when he tried to get to his feet. Apparently he'd misjudged the amount of blood he'd lost. The ground tilted at a crazy angle, making steady footing near impossible. Tollson grabbed for the doorframe, missed, and stumbled. He fell heavily to his knees before listing sideways.

Rest. Just a minute or two of rest, and he'd be able to stay on his feet. A minute or two, but no more. There was no telling if the last two renegades had seen him get injured, and at this moment might be circling back around to seek revenge.

Tollson sank to the ground, unaware that he'd passed out.

Chapter 2

He could smell the wood smoke and the aroma of something cooking. His body lay stretched out on the ground, on top of a blanket, then covered with another one. That was a good sign. It meant that whoever had assumed taking care of him was treating him well.

There was shuffling and the sound of several bodies moving about. What conversation he could catch was too low for him to make out.

He tried to wiggle the fingers on his right hand, but the arm felt like a lump of worthless flesh attached to his shoulder. Carefully Tollson lifted his eyelids just enough to glance around.

“We know you’re awake,” a female voice remarked sarcastically. “You were groaning not five minutes ago.”

Slowly, Tollson opened his eyes to see one of the guards standing almost directly over him.

“That was pretty impressive what you did back there,” another voice, one closer to his head, remarked. “Pretty gutsy of you, too. Sorry about clipping your wing, but this is Faith’s first time out, and she got spooked.”

The man talking to him appeared to be the leader of the caravan. Tollson tilted his head back a bit, and the man obliged by walking around to his side. “My name’s Polinski. What’s yours?”

Shaking his head slightly, Tollson managed to lift his left hand and sign. Polinski looked confused. “Come again?”

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Tollson tried spelling it out, without result, but Polinski must have gotten drift of the situation. Or so Tollson thought.

“You didn’t get kicked in the throat, did you?”

A shake of the head. Tollson made a talking motion with his hand, then nixed it.

“You lost your voice?”

“I think he’s trying to tell us he can’t talk, isn’t that right, fella?” A third guard spoke up as he joined them.

Tollson recognized the man who had shot the outcast with the axe. Nodding, Tollson tried to sit up, but the shards of glass biting into his wound made him hiss loudly through his teeth.

“Hey, hey! Careful there.” Faith reached down to help steady him. “You’ve lost some muscle and quite a bit of blood. I’m sorry, but I thought you were one of our attackers.”

Pointing to the wrapping on his upper arm, Tollson signed a question. As he expected, all he got were quizzical looks. Patting his back, he looked around to see what they might have done with his backpack. It was the third guard who caught on and brought it out of the shadows. Tollson nodded his thanks as he reached inside the front flap for the small notepad and pencil.

Drew Tollson, he wrote.

It was awkward and ungainly, trying to write with his arm bandaged as it was, but at least he could use his hand without too much trouble or pain.

Guard number three read it aloud, and grinned. “Good to meet you, Tollson. I’m Vaughan Duluth, but everyone calls me Chip.”

the other 2 outcasts?

Chip moved his lips as he read silently. “Outcasts? Oh, you mean the scavengers? Gone. We last saw them heading east, trying to outrun the storm, I’d guess.”

At the mention of the word storm, Tollson glanced about to get a better look at his surroundings. The caravan had taken shelter

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in an abandoned building, most likely a car repair shop back in the pre-apocalypse days. Two of the large bay doors remained closed. The third one was partially opened, but facing away from the brunt of the weather. It was also pitch dark outside.

“Where you from, Tollson?” Faith inquired, raising her voice.

Tollson winced. It was a common mistake, thinking he was deaf. But why people tended to shout at him to make themselves heard was a fallacy he never understood.

from ME but born and almost raised in TX

no need to shout I can hear you

I’m mute, not deaf

Faith was instantly contrite. “Oh, sorry. But you’re originally from Texas? What part?”

hill country north of Austin

“Pretty neat! I’m from Louisiana, myself. Natchitoches. If you’re from the hill country, how’d you end up in Maine?”

“Faith, give the man a chance to eat before you give him the third degree.” It was Polinski with a plate of food.

Tollson had already surmised someone had been cooking at one of the other fires. Giving the man a slight nod of thanks, he tried the stew. Not bad. He’d scarfed down half of it before he gestured to the man sitting across from him, also having his supper.

how close are we to Austin?

“Another four days’ ride, at least, with the wagons loaded. Why?”

mind if I tag along?

Polinski snorted. “We could always use another pair of eyes and an able body to help guard. Are you any good with a gun?”

don’t use a gun, Tollson wrote.

Polinski read the words aloud. “Well, it was pretty obvious you’re damn good with just your hands and a knife. Didn’t hurt to ask, though. And since we’re responsible for putting that hole in

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your arm, it's only right we take you with us. Is Austin your final destination? Or were you planning on making it a stopover?"

just wanted to see if any family members survived, Tollson answered without naming any specifics. Polinski seemed to understand.

"Yeah, I know what you mean. I take it you were in Maine when it happened."

The last was a statement, as well as a question. Tollson nodded.

"Been on the road a long while?"

Again, another nod. Tollson also held up five fingers. "Five years or five months?"

Polinski tried to decipher. Tollson went back to the notepad.
months

"Ah. Well, damn, the apocalypse was seventeen years ago. What made you all-of-a-sudden decide you needed to check up on your kinfolk?"

Tollson hesitated. What indeed? He could try to explain, but it was a bit much to swallow all at once. Giving a half-hearted shrug of his good shoulder, Tollson wrote,

damned if I know

guess the suspense was killing me

It got a chuckle out of the caravan's leader. Getting to his feet, he reached out a hand in a mute request for Tollson's empty plate. "Mind if I ask you one last question before turning in?" A shake of the head. "Were you born mute? Or did you get that way after the apocalypse?"

This time Tollson gave him a truthful answer.

traumatic experience after the apoc

lost ability to speak

Polinski gave him a sympathetic eye. "Sorry about that. I know we all have our stories to tell, and some are worse than

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others. But you seemed to have found a way to survive despite your handicap. You were lucky.”

Lucky? Hell, it was a miracle, but Tollson gave no further comment, either in gesture or in writing. Some secrets were best kept to oneself. And, like Polinski had said, everyone had their own story to tell. Tales of survival seventeen years ago, and stories leading up to today.

Before he settled himself back down for the night, Tollson unzipped the small compartment inside the larger one, and reached inside. Physically he could withstand losing his backpack, if worse came to worse and he was forced to leave it behind. Emotionally, though, there was one bit of the past he would never come to terms with if he lost it.

Slowly he pulled out the short strip of photos. Two photos, in fact. The bottom half of the strip of four taken that day long, long ago in the photo booth at the mall. A mall that no longer existed as such. The booth was probably a pile of rusted dust, too.

He gazed at the two pictures, at the chunky, tow-headed boy named Drew with the almost pure white hair, and the girl named JoBeth with her hair twisted up in one of those French braids. They were goofing off in front of the kiosk’s camera. Here, they’d stuck their thumbs in their ears as the flash went off. The lower photo showed them forehead to forehead, staring at each other as the bulb caught their profiles.

Jo’s hair was a deep, russet red. Not quite orange enough to be a redhead, but not brown enough to be called brunette. She had a mass of freckles all over her body, her face and arms especially. And bright blue eyes. She’d told him her parents called them cornflower blue, then they had gone online to look up what a cornflower was.

Jo had been nine when the picture had been taken. He had been eleven. Despite their age difference, they had become instant friends when Jo’s family had moved into town—right next door,

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in fact. Back then, four years earlier, when Drew had been in second grade, and Jo was beginning kindergarten.

Two years and two grade levels separated them, but that was all. In the years that followed they played together every day after school, on weekends, and during the holidays. Unless their parents decided to go somewhere on vacation. It didn't take the two families long to realize the couple was almost inseparable. After that, it wasn't uncommon for the Wythes to take the boy along whenever they went out of town. Likewise, the Tollsons had no problem accepting the tomboyish JoBeth in their family plans.

Tollson distinctly remembered hearing his mother remark one evening, when she didn't know he was eavesdropping, that Drew and Jo shared a very rare and unique friendship.

"You know those stories you hear about? The ones about the eighty-year-old couple who'd been married for over sixty years, and who'd been childhood sweethearts? I'll bet you Drew and Jo will be like that," Teena Tollson had predicted as she dumped dinner's leftover chicken and dumplings into a plastic container.

Cort Tollson had scoffed at the idea. "They're kids, Teena. They're just friends."

"Friends now, but what about later? What about when they become teenagers and start thinking of each other as boyfriend and girlfriend? Are you going to stand there and pooh-pooh the whole idea when Drew takes her to the prom? Or when they decide to go to the same university? Or when they come into the kitchen some afternoon to let us know they plan to get married?"

Of course, Cort Tollson had no answer for his wife's comment. It proved a moot point anyway when the company Drew's father worked for decided to transfer them to Maine.

Tollson remembered that evening as if it had been yesterday. He remembered the darkness that had seeped into his soul when his father had let him know they would be moving in June, not long after school let out for the summer. Drew had cried and

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screamed, and threatened to run away so they couldn't find him when it was time to leave. Likewise, Jo had pleaded with her parents to find a way to keep Drew in Texas.

It had been for naught.

In the weeks that had followed, both their grades had gone downhill, but not enough to hold them back. The two children had tried to forget about the coming move, but there was no way to avoid it, especially when Drew's mother kept boxing up stuff and piling it in David's room.

A familiar sting of tears made Tollson pause for a moment. Seventeen years. He had been separated from Jo for seventeen years. And now, finally, he was venturing back to Texas to find out what had happened to her. To find out whether she had survived the apocalypse, and if she had, what had happened to her since that day.

If she was alive, was she married? Did she have a family? Would she even remember the overweight kid who had followed her about like a little puppy, even though he was the older of the two?

Would she remember the soft little kisses they had shared in secret, and the promise they had made to each other that, despite the distance, they would come back to each other?

On the day they had made that pledge to each other, the apocalypse had been less than three months away. Since then, the world changed. Life changed. The future had been changed. But Andrew "Drew" Tollson prided himself on always being a man of his word.

Seventeen years had gone by, but he had never forgotten, could and would never forget, the gangly little girl he had shared four years of his life with. Now that he was able, he was coming back to find her. And if she was still alive, to let her know he had never stopped thinking about her. Or stopped wondering about her.

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Placing the photos back safely inside his backpack, Tollson rested his head on the worn fabric and was asleep almost instantly.

He was nearly home.

Chapter 3

Yesterday, August 8

The night was humid enough to melt the fireflies.

They had snuck downstairs to see if they could pilfer a couple of Cokes from the ice chest where Jo's dad had iced down a six-pack of beer and some sodas. Both sets of parents were outside on the patio where Jo's father was barbequing hamburgers. After overhearing what the grownups were discussing, both Jo and Drew had found themselves too intrigued to go back upstairs to watch the new video Jo's mom had bought that day. Instead, they had gone outside via the front door and circled around to the side gate where they could listen in.

For some reason, these past few weeks the grownups had made sure they hadn't been around when they wanted to discuss "adult things". Normally that was okay by Jo and Drew. There was always a lot more interesting things to see and do than to hear their parents rant and rave about such things as the price of gasoline or the politics going on up in Washington.

"Look, I'm just telling you this as a friend," Jo's father Mitchell commented, waving the long-handled spatula about like one of the pointers he used as a science teacher at the university. "The weather's been crazy these past couple of years, and I've been doing some research on it. I've got a couple of college buddies up

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at A&M who are also doing some investigating for me. And so far what we've come up with doesn't look too promising."

"Aren't you being a little melodramatic, Mitch?" Teena asked. "I mean, we've been hearing about global warming and all that crap for years now."

"Yeah, not to mention all those disaster movies about it," Nancy Wythe spoke up. "How can you be sure something like this hasn't happened before in the past? Or maybe it's something that's been gradually going on for eons, and we've just now noticed it."

Mitch Wythe gave his wife a condescending look. "This isn't global warming I'm talking about. What we're discovering are discernible erratic patterns in the sun, especially around the corona and in its solar flares. We've traced back sunspots and disruptions as far back as the late 1800s, and nothing like this has ever been recorded before."

"So what do you want us to do about it?" Cort Tollson spoke up. "Buy sunscreen with a higher SPF?" He grinned, as if making a joke, and hoped his neighbor would lighten up a little. All this talk about an impending disaster was beginning to make him skittish, not to mention what the womenfolk must be feeling.

Mitch winced. "Ha ha. Go ahead and make fun, but I'm telling you, something's going to happen one of these days. Maybe not in our lifetime, but, hell, fifty or so years isn't even a blink in cosmic terms. But just in case something comes about, we gotta be ready for it."

"What do you suggest we do, then?" Cort asked.

"I don't know," Mitch shrugged. "When I get more information I'll have some kind of idea what to expect. Then I'll be able to tell you more. In the meantime, keep your eye on the temperature. We're going to be getting hotter and hotter summers every year, and warmer and warmer winters. I mean, just look at this past winter. We never even hit freezing!"

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“Yes, we did, honey,” Nancy quickly corrected him. “Just that one night, though, it got around thirty-two, but it didn’t last long. Maybe a couple of hours.”

“Just my point. We should’ve had at least a dozen or so days below freezing. Days, mind you, not nights.”

“Speaking of nights, are we going to be eating tonight? Or are you making these hamburgers for breakfast?” Nancy smiled sweetly and rubbed her growing belly. She was five months pregnant and hopefully expecting a boy. Mitch was her second husband, but JoBeth was her daughter by her first husband, whom she’d married when she was eighteen and just out of high school. JoBeth’s real father had been in the Air Force and stationed overseas where he had died in a helicopter crash. When Nancy had gone on to college to try and get a teaching degree, she had met Mitchell, who was also getting his master’s degree in science. After they had gotten married, Mitch had legally adopted JoBeth as his own, and given her his last name. Jo adored her stepfather, and had always thought of him as her dad, since she had been just three when her real father had died.

Once they saw the grownups getting things ready to eat, Drew and Jo had snuck back into the house before they were discovered missing. Later that night, after the grownups had gone inside for after-dinner conversation in the living room, they had left Drew’s older brother David upstairs playing a video game and gone out into the backyard to be alone.

“You really think something’s gonna happen to the weather?” Jo had asked. Despite being two years younger, she was the same height as Drew. So that when they sat down or stood, they were nearly eye-to-eye.

Drew shrugged. “Who knows?”

“My dad knows a lot of stuff when it comes to science,” she reminded him.

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Drew couldn't argue with her there. "It may not happen ever."

"But what if it does?"

"Don't matter."

They sat side by side and watched the moon in the sky. Crickets peeped. Something barked in the distance; something that didn't sound like a dog.

"If it does, will you hold my hand?" Jo asked, almost tentatively.

"Sure. Why? Scared?"

"Yeah."

"Okay."

Another long moment passed between them. Then Jo leaned over and nudged his shoulder with her own. "Mikey?"

A snort answered her. She knew he didn't like to be called that, but she loved to tease him with it regardless.

"Yeah, Bethy?"

Give a point to the towheaded kid. She hated that version of her name just as much.

"I was gonna ask if you wanted some ice cream."

"Whatcha got? Drumsticks? Or fudgesicles?"

"I dunno, but I heard Mom say she got some at the store today. Wanna go see?"

"Sure," Drew replied, getting to his feet and waiting for her to do the same. Together they went back into the house to check out the freezer compartment of the fridge. And all thought about the warming weather was forgotten for the next few weeks.

Chapter 4

Tollson always believed he had been born with some sort of sixth sense that told him when danger was near. In the beginning he hadn't been fully aware of this gift, until Uncle Carter brought it to his attention.

"Ya know, kid, you just have a knack for staying out of harm's way. You know that?"

Sixteen-year-old Drew Tollson gazed up at the grizzled old man who had taken the place of his real mother and father. In answer, he shrugged. After all, what did the guy expect him to say?

"That's not something you learn, like throwin' a knife or camouflaging your footprints," the old man continued, knowing the youngster would be paying attention, even though the kid had his back turned to him. "Barrettson told me about how you were aware of that pack of wild dogs before they was even spotted. I thought at first you might've smelled 'em. But that wasn't it, was it?"

Drew shook his head.

"Didn't think so. You just kinda felt them out there, didn't cha?"

A nod answered him.

It had definitely been a feeling, like a queasiness in his gut. Or like the first few twinges of a major migraine. Most people, if they possessed a similar ability, probably would throw off the warning

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signs as the beginning stages of an illness. Pop a couple of pills and hope to feel better.

Tollson had never been like that. Not since the murder of his family. Not since that night when those prickly feelings had come to him the very first time, and he had found out what they had signaled.

The roiling gut, the headache, the nearly overwhelming urge to run—they were with him now.

Carefully he lifted his eyelids just enough to peer through his lashes, and scanned what he could. There was no one behind him, no sound of anyone breathing nearby. Flexing his fingers, Tollson opened his eyes and glanced about. Every nerve was on edge. His whole body felt wired and ready to go.

There were three low-burning fires sitting in a row near the open garage door. The flames threw off myriad shadows along the inside of the building, making it difficult to see whether the movement in the corner of his eye was real, or an optical illusion. The wagons were parked at their backs, the animals bedded down as comfortably as possible in the nearly freezing temperature. Tollson made a mental note to himself about the temperature flux in the middle of what should have been the dead of summer—summers that were in the past now, like carefree days on the beaches while wearing nothing but a swimsuit.

The sound of something falling and making a clinking sound had him up and running toward it before his blanket had the drifted to the floor. The outcast whirled in surprise at the enormous shape of the man hurtling toward him, and he turned to try and wriggle back through the slit in the wall.

Too late. Tollson had him by the scruff of the neck and threw him backwards, over his head. The man landed in the middle of a pile of melted used tires with a shout. It was enough to awaken everyone else to the fact that the two renegades allowed to go free had found two more cronies to join them before returning to finish

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what they'd started. One was standing watch just inside the huge open garage door. A third one had made it to one of the supply wagons, but a guard quickly dispatched him.

The fourth, however, pulled a large butcher knife from his belt and hefted it. With a scream of defiance, the man started straight for Faith, who had finally pulled herself from her bedroll and was scrambling for her rifle.

Tollson viewed, analyzed, and came to the conclusion—all within the span of a single heartbeat—that the man would reach her before she could aim and fire. That meant Tollson had to get to him first.

Unaware of the smile that came over his face, he launched himself at the attacker, running swiftly before going low for the tackle. Both of them landed heavily on their stomachs, but Tollson had both arms firmly around the man's legs. Undaunted, the attacker half-rolled onto his side and raised the knife to slice downward at the arms wrapped around his calves. As the knife descended, Tollson slapped the blade to one side and managed to snag the wrist. A quick flick of his own wrist, and the outcast's narrow bones snapped like dry tinder catching fire.

The man cried out in pain as he wilted in Tollson's grasp. Getting slowly to his feet, Tollson stared down at the man who had tried to attack him. Unfortunately, he wasn't able to tell if this guy, in his piecemeal clothing and month-old beard, was one of the original two, or one of the new recruits. He glanced around, looking for the man he thought he'd seen running away earlier, one of the two outcasts from the original ambush. None of the bodies were that man. Then again, maybe he'd only imagined he'd seen the guy. Hell, it had been seventeen years.

"Hey, man, did you know you're bleeding again?"

Glancing up at who had spoken to him, Tollson cast a quick eye at the widening stain on his coat sleeve. As if by magic, pain blossomed from the wound in his arm and arched to his fingers and

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his brain. He had been so focused on getting the outcasts that he'd lost all connection with his body in order to do what had to be done. It wasn't the first time such a thing had happened. It wouldn't be the last.

Seeing that Tollson's attention had been directed elsewhere, the man at his feet found the small dagger he'd hidden at his back. Without any warning, he pulled it free and tried to ram it upward into Tollson's abdomen.

Tollson saw the silver gleam at the last possible second and turned sideways to avoid the blow. At the same time, he reached for the arm being extended and grabbed it above the wrist. Turning, he jerked the arm across his chest, and his left arm jabbed backwards. The elbow caught the outcast directly in the center of his face, breaking his nose and front four teeth. The dagger clattered on the cement floor as the man moaned in pain and surrendered.

A low whistle of appreciation got Tollson's attention. Faith, Chip, and one of the guards he didn't know by name were watching wide-eyed.

"Jesus, Tollson!" the woman breathed heavily. "You said you didn't need a gun. I can see why! Damn, you're good!"

"He's better than good," the unnamed guard commented as he continued to stare at Tollson through squinted eyes. "Hey, Polinski!"

"Yeah." Their leader came forward after checking to see how much, if any, of their supplies had been confiscated. The guard nodded in Tollson's direction.

"Did you see him fight?"

Polinski grinned. "Sure did. What you did takes years of training, ain't that right, Tollson?"

Before Tollson had the chance to respond, the guard broke back in. "I'll bet there's more to it than that," he told them.

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“What do you mean?” Chip asked as they watched Faith go over and help him off with his short coat in order to examine the fresh bloodstains on Tollson’s sleeve.

“You’re the Silent Wraith, aren’t you?” the man asked Tollson directly.

Everyone paused for a half-dozen heartbeats. It was Faith who brushed off the comment. “Next thing you know, you’ll be telling us is that Art is really Spiderman.” She almost giggled.

Chip leaned over and swatted the guard on the shoulder. “C’mon, man. You know that’s all kid stuff. Made-up stuff. There’s no such person.”

The guard, however, insisted. His eyes remained glued to the man getting his arm rewrapped in bandages. “That’s what I used to think, but looking back on what we’ve heard, and what we’ve been told, and what we’ve just seen... There really is such a person, isn’t there, Tollson? They don’t call you silent because you move like a ghost, all quiet and unnoticed. They call you that because of your muteness, ain’t that right? You’re called silent because you can’t talk. And because you can’t, you don’t make a sound when you strike.” He motioned toward Tollson’s bloody gloves. “You don’t use a gun because it makes too much noise. It all makes sense now, guys. I’m telling you that man is the Silent Wraith. Ask him if you don’t believe me.”

Polinski snorted. “Awright, I enjoy a good joke as much as anyone. Might as well get this cleared up right now so we can get back on the road. Tollson, is Avanti right? Are you the Silent Wraith?”

Tollson glanced from one man to the other, finally resting his gaze on the clear brown eyes not six inches away from his as Faith finished her doctoring. Once she was done, he reached down into his back pocket for the little notepad and pencil, and quickly scratched his answer.

I never gave myself that name

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*you can call me whatever you want
doesn't matter to me*

Seeing their incredulous looks come over their faces, Tollson shrugged and walked back to where his backpack still sat on the ground. Hefting it over his good shoulder, he turned around to see them still standing where he'd left them. Finally they dispersed to take care of the last of the attackers, and Faith handed him back his notepad.

"Have many figured out your secret?" she wondered aloud.

Tollson shook his head.

"Bet you want us to keep it sorta under wraps, then, huh? Well, don't worry. We feel ourselves lucky we came across you when we did. Sure will make this trip back a whole lot easier on our minds." Throwing a grin at him, the woman added, "By the way, is there any chance there's not a Mrs. Silent Wraith, seeing as you're traveling alone?"

A tiny grin creased the corner of his mouth. How many times had he heard that same hopeful question in one form or another? Giving her another shake of his head, he went to park his butt in one of the wagons before they continued on through the icy night.

Chapter 5

The sun did little to provide any heat once it rose. But of course, it hadn't given out much in the way of warmth for the past seventeen years. Nowadays, it was nothing more than a celestial lamp hanging overhead.

Two of the guards had switched places with the original drivers. The man called Art Avanti drove the wagon Tollson was seated in. Ever since they had left the scorched and abandoned garage in the wee hours of the morning, little had been said.

Fortunately the weather didn't cause them any major concerns. The roads were clear of ice, and it looked to be in the upper thirties by the afternoon.

As to what had happened to the bodies of the scavengers, well, Tollson didn't ask. He really didn't care one way or another, to be honest. His job was to protect and defend. It wasn't part of his job description to question the aftermath.

Just before dawn Polinski had them halt for a short while to boil snow. It would be enough to serve a small bowl of oatmeal to everyone. The pale, watery sun did little more than reflect off the ice crystals clinging to the burnt stumps of what had been trees.

Tollson glanced upward, remembering something his teacher had told him long ago when he had been in elementary school. When there had been elementary schools. Something about how all the plants needed carbon dioxide to breathe, and they would

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expel oxygen. Which was why mankind needed the rain forests to survive, in order to provide enough oxygen for man to live.

There weren't any rainforests left, now, anyway. But neither was there that much of a population depending on it. Not when nearly seventy percent of mankind had perished under the initial burn, and another fourteen or fifteen percent had been unable to survive the first freezing year which immediately followed. When temperatures had dropped to below zero across the entire planet.

What trees and flowers and plants that were left on the planet were tucked away in some lab somewhere. Or in an underground greenhouse, or whatever it was people called those things where the roots were suspended in a liquid culture rather than in good old dirt. Hydroponics? Yeah, that was it. Hydroponics.

Tollson let his eyes wander around the barren, snow-covered land they were traveling over. The trees up on the surface were dead. All of them had burnt to a crisp when the sun had exploded so many years before. The grass and flowers and bushes, and every crop planted by farmers—gone. Seared to nothing right down to the roots when the temperature had climbed to over three hundred degrees that night in February.

A quiet chuckle reverberated in Tollson's chest. At last his father could no longer complain about the weeds taking over the yard.

"Hey, Tollson?"

He turned his face toward Avanti seated next to him. The man slid his eyes over in his direction. It was the first time the guard had spoken to him since he'd taken the reins.

"You know, now that I get to thinking about it, I don't remember where you said you were headed when we hooked up."

Out came the little notebook. Tollson gave it a quick once-over before opening it. The cover was missing, and it was just about used up. He guessed he must have been carrying it around for nearly two months now. When he had been living at the

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survivalists' camp, he must have gone through one of these things in a week. Barely enough time to put any sign of wear and tear on it before reaching for a new one.

eventually Austin, he wrote.

"Well, you said you were looking for family. Did they live inside the city limits? Or in the hill country?"

hill country

little place called Renoir

In France, the tiny town, population just under two thousand, would have been pronounced like the famous artist's. However, like many places in Texas, the native twang often reinterpreted how it should have sounded, for something that felt a bit more comfortable in the mouth. Hence, true natives knew to call it "Renner".

Since the expansion and growth of the state's capital city, many of the outlying smaller towns had been swallowed up, to become more like bedroom communities or suburbs. Renoir was one of them. When the company Drew's father worked for decided to relocate him to their Texas branch office, Cort Tollson had moved down ahead of his family to begin his new job. Once David and Drew were finished with school in Tulsa, Teena would bring the rest of the family down, and hopefully Cort would have found a new home for them by then.

It was pure luck someone in the office told Tollson about the sleepy little burg with its old-timey appeal and its ranch-style homes. It was through more sheer luck that Drew would meet the freckled-face tomboy who lived two doors down, and their friendship would forever change his life.

Tollson saw Avanti grin at him. "Hey, I once had an aunt and uncle who used to live in Renoir. Ever hear of the Fairbanks? Curtis and Velda Fairbanks?"

AAA propane co?

"Yeah! That's the one! You knew them?"

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*sure did
nice people, what I remember
of course, that was seventeen years ago
memory is a bit hazy*

Avanti nodded. "I can understand. So you're heading for Renoir. Real pretty place, or it used to be. Of course, it got scorched. Most of the town got burnt to the ground, just like everything else. Good luck on finding survivors."

Tollson nodded. Up to this moment his life had been nothing but thin fractures of time carved out of luck and fortunate happenstance. Lucky to have lived through the apocalypse, when nearly ninety percent of the world's population didn't. Lucky to have survived the brutal attack on his family. Lucky to have been found by the members of the survivalist camp. Lucky to have been given as normal a childhood as was feasible, despite the conditions and the weather. Lucky to have grown into the kind of man he was today, with his unique fighting skills, thanks to his adoptive father and uncle.

Staring at the stub of pencil in his hand, Tollson prayed his luck would continue to hold out. He had no idea who or what was left in Renoir, but he was damned and determined to find out.

Something niggled in the back of his mind, and Tollson gave the driver a nudge with his good elbow.

you never told me where we're headed

Avanti gave a little laugh. "Not quite Austin, but it's in the hill country. It's a settlement we named Promise." Throwing a half grin at his rider, he added, "Make all the jokes you want to, Tollson, but it's a tight little community we've got going. We've got some good, fresh water and a small underground lake bed to fish from. We've carved homes in the cliffs and hills. Made ourselves a real nice place to live and raise families. And it's out of the way to where the scavengers can't sneak up on us. That is, if they can find us." The man paused long enough to wonder if he

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could pry a little more out of the enigmatic figure sitting next to him. “Were you planning on coming down to check on your kinfolk before heading back north? Or were you thinking about settling down? Or...”

no ties

Tollson scribbled, and left it at that. If truth be told, he had made no other plans beyond getting to Renoir and looking for Jo. It had been his single purpose in life growing up. That, and learning every trick he could in order to survive the journey. Because traveling the two-thousand-plus-mile trip alone and virtually unarmed would take a whole handful of virtues like courage, and strength, and stamina, and “pure-dee ol’ luck”, as Uncle Carter called it.

And what would he do once he got there? What would he do, or say, if he found Jo alive and well?

Oh, God, he must have imagined hundreds of scenarios in the years he was growing up. What did one say, or do, when he discovered the one person who had meant more to him than his own family? How did one approach that person after seventeen years?

Christ, how would she look after all that time? Try as he might, Tollson had never been able to get any kind of mental image in his mind, other than the fact that she would still have those cornflower blue eyes and that deep russet-colored hair he sometimes used to tease her about, calling it “beef jerky brown”.

“Is not beef jerky brown! You take that back!” she shouted at him. Her face was so flushed with indignation, her freckles stood out like spots on a dalmatian.

Drew laughed again and reached out to tug on one of her pigtails. Jo’s hair was so long, the ends of the braids slapped against her back and sometimes got caught in the waistband of her jeans.

“I oughta tell your mamma you either need to get a haircut or a dog’s license,” Jo snapped back before spinning around and taking off for the

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playground. Less than a minute later she was eyeing him from the safety of a group of fellow classmates. Didn't bother Drew any as he blew some strands of his own hair out of his eyes. Come after school, things would be right again between them just in time to walk home together.

The memory came with a ghost. Unconsciously Tollson drew a hand through his shaggy hair. When was the last time he had taken a moment to examine his appearance? More than a week had gone by since his last spit bath. And shave? He scratched absently at the growth covering his cheeks and chin. He'd always been fair-haired, but unlike his father, whose beard had been reddish in color, his continued to be just as blond as the rest of the hairs growing on his body. If he was planning on finding Jo, if he found her, he damn well better be looking a helluva sight cleaner than he did at that moment. Or else the woman may not want to have anything to do with him.

Tollson felt his heart stop beating for almost two seconds. There. He had finally confronted the possible truth. It had been a long time coming, but seeing as he was almost there...

They weren't children any longer. They were adults. A man and a woman. And because of that, the dynamics between them would be different. No more rainy days scooping up pollywogs from the drainage ditch in front of the house and putting them in old mayonnaise jars. No more spitting watermelon seeds at each other whenever their parents got together some summer evening to share conversation over a ruby red beauty.

So what did he hope to discover when and if he found her?

If she'd survived, Jo could be married. She could already have a husband and possibly a kid or two. If she did, could he handle it? Could he still resume their friendship on a purely platonic level? Or would her husband object to his wife renewing an old acquaintance of the opposite sex?

His shoulder twinged, making him grimace. *Sweet Jesus, man, just why are you trying to find her?*

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How many times had he asked himself that question? Tollson shook his head. How many times had he avoided answering it?

The odds were not good. In fact, they were worse than piss poor. This whole venture could be nothing more than a proverbial goose chase. So he gets back to Renoir to find it just another blackened, flat piece of ground like so many other towns. Then what?

Well, at least that question was easier to answer. If Jo was gone, there were plenty of other places where he could ply his trade. Plenty of little one-horse communities—stockades and citadels like Promise—who were always in need of another strong, able body, well-versed in survival tactics and hand-to-hand combat.

Somewhere out beyond they all heard a dog howl. It appeared animals had managed to survive better than humans, probably because their instincts were much better in tune with nature. Of course, what they fed upon was anybody's guess. Mankind was still too busy trying to keep a slippery grip on living without having to worry about the rest of nature. Nope, keep one's own attention directed at keeping body and soul together, Uncle Carter always chastised him, and let Nature take care of her own. Nature would always have a way of coping.

In the meantime, the closer they got to Renoir, the tighter the knot became in Tollson's stomach. And with it came the sad reality that if he did find her, he wouldn't even be able to call out her name.

JoBeth Wythe

Bethy

Jo

Without realizing it, his lips formed her name. Despite the lack of sound, it was almost like a prayer.

Chapter 6

Yesterday, November 20

Three days before Thanksgiving. They couldn't stay long enough to have Thanksgiving together?

Drew banged a fist on his thighs in despair as tears rolled down his cheeks. They were supposed to have moved in June, right after the end of school, but for some reason or another plans got changed. They had to leave now before winter got a good foothold, and the worst of the weather hit up north.

It was cold down in the little hollow that he and Jo referred to as "our place". It used to be the den of some wild animal, now long gone. But the tiny cave was the perfect size for the both of them, and they often snuck off with food and toys, and sometimes a book, to sit and talk and snack and read until the sun went down, and it got too dark to read by.

Sometimes they would throw rocks into the tiny creek that flowed in front. In the springtime, the creek swelled. And one year they got so much rain, it overflowed the bed, nearly threatening to engulf Mr. Morningroth's backyard.

There were always interesting things living in the creek. All sorts of bugs and swimming creatures that fascinated them. The hollow was perfect for juvenile scientific investigation. It was also the most secluded place to go to whenever things got bad at home, not that anything really bad ever happened. Yeah, there were the

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occasional squabbles between their folks, but moms and dads sometimes yelled at each other. Sometimes for a good reason, and other times for no reason at all. But in the end it didn't matter because they always made up, and they always got to be stronger because of it.

Which was why Drew had sought out the hollow when things got too unbearable. Like now. Right at this moment, the Mayflower moving van was sitting in the Tollsons' driveway (and halfway across the street, blocking passing traffic), while three big guys carried out boxes and furniture from Drew's house and put them in the back of the truck. By tonight they would have everything loaded, except for the stuff his mother and father had packed in their two vehicles. Tonight they would spend the night at the local Motel 6, and hit the road bright and early tomorrow morning, heading for Maine. With luck, Drew's father commented, they would get to their new home in time for Thanksgiving.

"Some Thanksgiving," Drew muttered softly. "What's there to be thankful about?"

"Drew?"

The voice came from overhead. Presently, Jo slid down the short embankment to join him. He moved over enough to let her snuggle in beside him. Once settled in, she snaked an arm around his waist and laid her head on his shoulder.

They sat that way together in silence, soaking in and memorizing every precious moment left to them. Presently Drew wiped his eyes and nose with the hem of his t-shirt. "Not fair," he muttered.

"Will you think of me?" she asked, almost hesitantly.

"Yeah. Promise. All the time." He turned to look at her and caught a whiff of her hair. It smelled like bubble gum from the shampoo he knew she used. "Jo?"

"Yeah?"

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“You won’t forget me, will you?”

She tilted her face to meet his eyes, and once again Drew stared into those sparkling blue depths. “I’ll never forget you. You’re my bestest friend ever, even if you are a boy.”

“One of these days, Jo, I’m coming back here. I’ll come back to see you.”

“You better. Or else I’m never going to forgive you.”

They stared at each other for what seemed like a hundred heartbeats. Then, as if by some unspoken wish, they leaned in toward each other until their lips touched. It was a tentative, almost frightened sensation, sharing their first ever delicious feeling of warmth upon soft warmth.

Drew broke contact first to stare into Jo’s flushed face. She tasted so good, it was scary. No wonder people did it so much on television and in the movies.

“Jo?”

“Huh?”

“You taste like peppermint.”

“That’s ’cause I’m sucking on one,” she replied, showing him the dissolving little white disk on her tongue. “You taste good, too. Like spaghetti. Wanna kiss me again?”

“Okay.”

But this time they forgot to make allowances for their noses, and they bumped in passing. Jo began to giggle as she rubbed the tip of hers. “I wonder if grownups bump noses.”

“Naw. They have a lot more practice at it,” Drew replied with a child’s wisdom. But rather than try again, they cuddled closer to watch the water run by in the creek.

Their contact was as natural to them as breathing. They shared nearly everything, did nearly everything together, except for those things which morality and common sense dictated they couldn’t. But otherwise the world had been left open for them to explore.

“Drew?”

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“Yeah?”

“Call me sometime? Let me know what Maine’s like?”

“I’ll call you every week. Promise.”

“Promise?”

“Cross my heart and hope to die.”

She gave him a little dig in the ribs. Drew grinned and tried to wiggle away from her ticklish fingers. “Don’t say that,” she admonished him. “Don’t ever say things like dying. I don’t want you to die.”

“I won’t die if you won’t,” he stated matter-of-factly, as if mentioning it made it inarguable.

“Promise?”

He gave a loud, noisy sigh. “One of these days, when we’re bigger, I’m going to come back here and get you.”

“Where will we go?” There was no doubt in her mind he would do exactly as he said. After four years together, Jo knew her friend was as good as his word.

“I dunno. Where do you want to go?”

“I wanna see the Grand Canyon.”

He made a face. “Why would you wanna see an old hole in the ground? Let’s go see the ocean.”

“You mean, like the beach?”

“Yeah. We could go fishing for sharks, like that guy on that pier did that one time. ’Member?”

She tightened her arms around him and rested her chin on his shoulder. Drew reached around and pulled her close enough to where they were sitting pressed thigh-to-thigh. “You know what I’d really like to do one of these days?”

“What?”

“I don’t care where you take me. I don’t care where we go. I just want to be with you. Sleep in the same house, and wake up in the morning with you already there. Wouldn’t that be cool? Maybe we’d get to share a bunk bed. How neat would that be? We could

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talk all night long. We'd never have to wait for our moms to let us know when it was okay to come over. We'd never have to have our moms tell us it's late, time to come in and take a bath and go to bed 'cause it's a school night. None of that stuff. Just you and me, and never having to be apart ever again."

"Yeah. That would be the greatest. But we're not old enough to do that kind of stuff yet."

"No, not yet. But one of these days."

"Yeah. One of these days." He craned his neck to look at her again, and this time they didn't hesitate to share another soft kiss. A slightly longer one, in fact. "Got another peppermint?" he asked as they pulled apart. Jo dug into her jeans pocket for the one she'd saved for him. She watched as he unwrapped it and popped the candy in his mouth.

"Drew? I won't have another best friend like you. School is gonna be strange with you gone. I'm gonna miss you a whole bunch." She trembled a little in his arms, and he could tell she was on the verge of crying again. She seemed to be doing that a whole lot recently, ever since they had found out about Drew's father's transfer. Girls tended to cry a lot, and Jo was no different.

He gave her a squeeze. "Me, too."

More silence ensued. It would be getting dark soon. Their parting was inevitable, no matter how hard they both wished otherwise.

They shared a final kiss, the softest one yet, with mouths closed and lips pressed tightly together. Without another word, they climbed out of the hollow and walked hand in hand back to the Tollson house.

It would be the longest night of their young lives.

Until there came the apocalypse.

Chapter 7

Three days went by with little or no difficulty. They met no other scavengers during their trip, or at least they never spotted any.

The hole in Tollson's shoulder closed up enough to where he could move it slightly without too much pain. Talk was minimal, which was okay with him. Talking meant a lot of writing on his part, and most of the time he wasn't in the mood to converse. On top of that, he wasn't accustomed to having others around. After the death of his brother and parents, he had become a solitary soul, even after being adopted by Carter and Ferris Kreate. Once he learned how to protect and defend himself, he had set out on his mission to return to Renoir. It was the only thing that had kept him sane while growing up—going back to that little town in Texas to find his dearest friend.

On the second day out, Tollson had ventured over to the second wagon and thrown back the tarp to see what was under it. The first wagon he already knew held their supplies and a hefty load of assorted clothing and blankets. However the second one remained a mystery, and it was that wagon the others fiercely guarded.

It was no surprise to see the bundles of armament roped together. He gave a low whistle of appreciation. The number of pistols and rifles was one thing, but it was the amount of ammo

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they'd managed to load onto the vehicle that impressed him the most, not to mention the empty casings, bags of powder, and shot.

Polinski rode up behind him and waited to see his reaction. Tollson simply shook his head and replaced the tarp. In their world today, weapons were worth more than gold. There was no telling what the settlers had traded in order to obtain as much as they had sitting in the bed of the wagon, and Tollson didn't want to know. It was none of his business anyway.

Nearly all the factories which had manufactured the guns in the first place were gone now, which was why Tollson had chosen to place his trust in learning every style of hand-to-hand combat fighting he could. Didn't matter if it was dirty or not. Eventually, he knew guns would become obsolete, and the man who could hold his own with his bare hands, a knife, and anything else he could obtain would be held in highest regard.

Also, when Tollson decided to venture away from the safety of the little mountain community in Maine, he knew that if he carried any kind of shotgun or revolver with him, he could be killed on sight, without a second thought. By making it known to whomever he came in contact with that he was unarmed, they usually made the mistake in believing he was an easy target. Because of their mistake, they would often attempt to shed him of his clothing and backpack of staples.

No one ever made that mistake twice.

* * * *

It was late afternoon when the caravan came to a halt, and Polinski rode up to stop beside Tollson, who had taken up the reins for his tour that day. The sun had begun its descent, and a wind had kicked up from the northwest. The weather was changing, and it would never be for the better. Not anymore.

At Tollson's questioning glance, Polinski pointed to the road. They were at a major intersection of sorts. It was hard to tell

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because the signs no longer existed, but by the wide expanse of tarmac, it had been an important junction two decades earlier.

“If you’re still wanting to go to Renoir, this is where we have to part company.” Pointing northward, Polinski said, “About twenty, twenty-five miles or so, I don’t remember exactly how far because it’s been years since I was there, but you take this highway north about that far until you get to 262. It’s the next big intersection, so I don’t think you’ll miss it. When you get there, turn east, and you should hit Renoir right after you cross the Lower Navidad. The river’s probably gone, but the bed should still be visible.”

Tollson nodded. He remembered the Lower Navidad River, although it was more of a large, overgrown stream than a real river. It was a branch of the Lower Navidad that fed the little creek that had run behind his and Jo’s houses.

Leaning over the pommel of his saddle, Polinski gave him a sad look. “When you’re done there, if you decide you’d like to come to Promise and take up residency with us, you know you’d be more than welcome.”

Rather than write his next question, Tollson chose to use a form of “pidgin” sign language that most people tended to understand. The caravan’s leader had been quick to pick it up so they could communicate easier.

How do I get there?

This time Polinski pointed down the road they were currently on. “Stay on this highway for another fifteen miles. You’ll come to a side road that sort of looks like it’s meandering back into the middle of nowhere. You can’t miss the cutoff if you look for a big-ass boulder sitting on the shoulder. You’ll know what I’m talking about when you get there. Anyway, take the dirt road and you’ll come right to it.”

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Sliding out of the seat, Tollson thanked everyone for their hospitality and accepted his backpack from a teary-eyed Faith, who got up on tiptoes to place a quick kiss on his cheek.

“You take care, you hear me? Come to Promise.”

He nodded at her, then shook hands with the others as they said their goodbyes. Not one for long farewells, Tollson turned his back on them and began the final leg of his journey to find what was left of his old home.

As he'd expected, the clouds rolled in not long after he'd set off. The sun was quickly swallowed up in a swirl of ice crystals that soon managed to jab icy fingers through his heavy insulated coat.

It was too late to backtrack and rejoin the caravan. Even so, there was no way he was going to. Not when he was so close to what he'd been dreaming of for more than half his life.

A small tumble of rocks formed enough of a wind shield for him to erect his small tent. Inside the shelter he heated up a packet of soup over a can of Sterno before hunkering down for the night.

He slept deeply and without worry. During storms like this, chances were zero to none anyone would bother him before daybreak.

Morning dawned calm and crisp. Tollson chewed on some jerky, rather than take the time to fix breakfast over a campfire.

He was anxious. No, more than anxious. With every passing mile his skin tightened, and the blood in his veins felt like it was bypassing his lower limbs to rush straight to his head.

She wouldn't be there. He knew beyond any doubt there would be nothing left in Renoir. Nothing. And no one. But he prayed he might find some clue, some hint or idea as to where she might be. Where she might have gone. It was a long shot, but it was all he could hope for.

Drew Tollson had learned a lot in the past seventeen years. Hunting and tracking were among his best skills. If there was even a shred of evidence left behind, Tollson knew he would find it.

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The 262 cutoff was easy to spot once he reached it. Because of the thin layer of ice covering the buckled roadway, Tollson stuck to the shoulder, thus making good time.

The bridge over the Lower Navidad was intact. As he'd suspected, the stream was barren. The foliage which had once lined the banks with lush vegetation had vanished long ago, leaving behind something that looked more like a dry crack in the earth than a small riverbed. What little snow that managed to melt on rare forty-plus-degree days would disappear into the sterilized soil.

Tollson paused. Should he stay on the road and follow it into town? Or cut through the back pasture until he reached 407 Mesquite Road?

Suddenly the years blew away like the last wisps of fog on a sunny morning. In his mind Tollson recalled every step he used to take between his backyard and hollow. Without realizing what he was doing, he half-jumped, half-stumbled down the embankment and began to follow the riverbed. Screw the township proper. He could always investigate what remained after he'd had the chance to do what he had traveled long and far to see.

The distance seemed shorter, as he knew it would be. Back then he had been a chubby little kid with fat legs and a short gait. Hard years in between had turned the overweight preteen into a lean and muscular man. Long legs ate the distance, cutting the nearly ten minute hike in half.

Tollson raked his gaze over the distance horizon and finally spotted the row of homes long before he knew he would have if the trees and brush had survived. There were six of them left standing. One he knew without a doubt would have been his old house, 403 Mesquite. The other at 407, had been Jo's. Mr. and Mrs. Kindletons' place, the house between them, would be so much tinder by now—that is, if it had managed at all to withstand the years.

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Living in the Texas hill country, the ground was saturated with sheets of limestone, shale, and flint. Huge, flat slabs of rock littered the soil like an unwanted root system. But as it was so plentiful, and because farmers and developers were constantly pulling them out of the ground in order to plant crops or pour a level foundation for the next home, it wasn't uncommon to have the rock as part of the building material. Limestone and shale were often used in place of brick for the outside of a home. Or for interior decorating like fireplaces and bathrooms. Pools, gardens, and patios were almost always lined with the rock. The stuff was everywhere, plentiful and free. All that was needed to obtain it was a little muscle to haul it off to where it was wanted.

Tollson's and Jo's home had been made of rock. The Kindletons had opted for some of that fancy siding from Sears. Tollson paused in his tracks as he stared off into the distance. The roofs were gone, but 403 and 407 remained standing. 405 was a pile of rubble lying between them.

There was no sense in going to his old home. He had no idea who had moved into the place after his family had left Renoir, and he didn't care to find out. Like an arrow he moved purposefully toward his destination as his heart sped up. Without realizing it, his walk morphed into a quick jog, soon slipping into a run as he covered those last few hundred feet to the Wythes' back porch.

The wind around him remained still. The sun threw what brightness it could through the blue, cloudless sky. But even at its brightest, it cast no more light than a forty-watt bulb.

When he reached the sliding glass patio door, he noticed huge chunks of broken glass littering the ground. He discovered the lock was busted when he grabbed the door's handle, and that was enough to let him know no one had lived here in some time.

Swallowing around the tightness in his throat, eleven-year-old Drew Tollson slid open the door and stepped into the Wythes' living room.

Chapter 8

It was so different from what he remembered, it hurt.

Everything flammable was gone—furniture, books, Mrs. Wythe's beloved baby grand that had sat in the unused living room. Even the carpeting had been ripped up to serve either as fuel for a fire, or as a makeshift barrier for warmth. The roof had collapsed, but most of what had fallen into the main den was gone.

Slowly, Tollson tread over the unidentifiable debris and went into the kitchen. There was no escaping the ghosts which scampered just out of his field of vision. Two children who raided the vegetable bin in the bottom of the refrigerator because that was where Jo's mom kept the fresh fruit. How many meals had he shared with them? There was no telling. Again the cabinets had been pulled off the walls, or sledge-hammered into kindling, from the looks of it. Oddly enough, the aluminum table with its glass top still sat near the big window. By some miracle, both top and window were intact. He knew there was no use checking the pantry for supplies. Turning on his heel, Tollson left the kitchen and headed down the hallway, searching for the first bedroom on the left.

Here the roof was slanted at an angle inside the room, leaving little space to crawl around in. But Tollson was unperturbed. Instead, he focused on what remained, and tried to recall the way it had been seventeen years ago. The bed, the little rag rug, the bookshelves and desk, even the curtains were gone. The walls,

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though, had retained their pale yellow coloring, with the stenciled daisies circling the room just below the ceiling.

Tollson felt a tightness in his chest that threatened to squeeze all the air from his lungs. He knew this bedroom as well as his own. In fact, he'd spent more time over here than he had in his own house, especially when David had some of his school cronies over to listen to CDs.

He shuffled over to the tiny closet—everything appeared incredibly smaller than it had looked back then—and saw where the clothes and shoes had been ransacked. Empty wire hangers sat on the pole like abandoned skeletons. He wondered if Jo's family had done it, or if it had happened after they had left.

Had they left? Or did they die in that initial firestorm? Tollson shook his head to rid himself of the vision of charred remains lying scattered about the house. He couldn't think that way. He had to believe they had managed to survive, just as he and his family had survived. After all, they had kept in contact with each other by phone, just as he had promised, right up until that fateful day.

* * * *

Drew stood, bouncing on the balls of his feet, as his father called up the number on his cell phone. They had arrived at their new home not half an hour ago, and already Drew was bugging them to call and let Jo know they'd arrived.

"Mitch? Hey, old man! It's Cort! Yeah, we just got here, and I thought I'd give you a call to let you know. Say, is JoBeth nearby? She is? Could you put her on? Drew's about to drive me nuts over here."

Leaning over, he handed the phone over to his son and gave him a wink. Grinning, Drew gingerly placed the instrument to his ear. "H'lo?"

There was a bit of static, then a familiar voice spoke up from the other end. "Drew?"

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"It's me!" Drew burst out enthusiastically. "We're in Maine! You should see it, Jo. It's got so many trees, but not like the trees where you are. These are different. Like pine and stuff."

"Dad says I might be able to fly up there this summer to visit!" She bubbled over the cell, and Drew could imagine how she looked as she spoke to him. She would be wearing her favorite pair of jeans, the ones with those stupid pink flowers on the back pockets. Her hair would be in one long braid down her back. He could envision her in his mind's eye as clearly as if she was standing right in front of him. "Wouldn't that be the greatest?"

"Oh, man, yeah! Dad says there's a lake about a mile away. He might take me fishing soon, but Mom says we gotta unpack everything first."

A slight pause answered him, then Jo's voice wavered hesitantly over the line. "I really miss you, Drew. A lot."

Her confession stung. For a moment there he had gotten so wrapped up in the newness of his surroundings, he had forgotten how she might be feeling. "I miss you, too, Jo. Bunches. How you doing? Whatcha been up to?"

"I went down to the hollow today."

"Oh? Is it okay?"

"Yeah. It's the same. I started to go over to the library to check out a couple of books, but it's too hot out."

Drew nodded, not thinking that she couldn't see his reaction. "It's hot here, too. Some guy at the gas station said he couldn't remember the last time it hit over a hundred. Dad told him we got a hundred degree temperatures in Texas almost every summer."

"Yeah, but it's not summer," Drew's father broke in, holding out a hand. "It's still winter. Look, sorry to cut this short, but it's time to call it a night. I need to speak with Mitch again, little man."

"Hey, Jo? My dad wants to speak to your dad again. I'll call you again real soon, okay?"

"Okay. I'll wait for it. G'night, Drew."

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“Night, Bethy,” he hurried to tease her, then quickly handed the phone back to his father before she could retort. He giggled slightly, but remained standing next to his father to listen in on the conversation.

“Mitch? Huh? Oh, yeah, it’s hot here, too. Climbed up to nearly a hundred and two, they say. It’s still sitting at the century mark as we speak. Yeah? Uh-huh, I hear ya. Yeah. There’s a large lake about five minutes away. They call it a pond up here, but I checked. It’s deep enough. Yeah. Well, what do you suggest? Okay. Okay, I will. Look, you take care of yourselves, too, and I’ll give you a ring on Thursday. We’ll let the kids talk again then. All right. Thanks again, Mitch. Goodnight.”

Closing the phone, Cort Tollson stared down at his son sitting at his feet. “Think you can hold out for two days before needing to talk to JoBeth again?”

Drew nodded his head, not because he agreed to the man’s suggestion, but because he knew he had no other choice. The question had been more of a statement than a request.

* * * *

Tollson glanced upward as a flake of snow drifted down in front of him. The sun had been steadily growing hotter and hotter, and extending its heat for longer and longer periods of time. There was no longer any temperature peak in the afternoons. Once the sun rose, the weather became sweltering by nine a.m., then increased by maybe two or three degrees during the day. It wasn’t until the sun began its descent that the air cooled, and the earth had a chance to fan its burnt surface.

He remembered how his father continued to watch the sky. The television remained on all day, usually on the Weather Channel, as everyone pitched in to get their new house in a liveable condition. The ceiling fans ran constantly, but they did little to dispel the Sahara-like atmosphere.

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They had the rest of the week to settle in before Cort Tollson had to report for work on Monday. Drew knew his parents were worried about something, but they never let on to the boys. Drew figured it was adult talk, like it usually was. Stuff that didn't affect him directly, and that was okay. Grownups spent too much time worrying anyway.

Tollson scanned the room with a keen, observant eye. Crouching down, he ran his fingers through the remains, searching for any sign, any clue as to what might have happened. To where they might have gone, if they had managed to escape—although escape in the literal term would be a laughable concept, given the fact that man would not have been able to escape the inevitable when the galactic star exploded.

Using his skills and training taught to him, Tollson could see some vague signs of habitation after the initial blast. Again, he scoured the room, when he caught sight of the writing on the rear wall, inside the closet. A tiny smile curled his lips. Getting to his feet, he stepped over the roofing tile and pieces of sheet rock to look once more at the scribbled, childhood writing:

Jo and Drew 4 ever

It was written in black magic marker. When the manufacturer said it was permanent, they'd meant it. Of course, Mrs. Wythe had never known they had written it there. Jo had kept it covered up with the Barbie playhouse she'd gotten one Christmas and never played with.

The house was drawing a blank. Irritated, Tollson left the bedroom and quickly checked what remained of the other rooms. When they yielded nothing notable, he went to investigate the one last place where he might find some hint. The garage.

The garage had been Mr. Wythe's haven, just like it had been for Drew's father, only for different reasons. Where Mr. Tollson liked to putter around in his yard and do odd home repairs, Mr. Wythe babied a 1980 Corvette, keeping it under a big green

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blanket-like covering, even when it was parked inside. The Wythes' other ordinary, day-to-day vehicles were relegated to sitting outside on the driveway, with just the shade of a huge pecan tree to give them any sort of cover.

The panel door leading to the garage was gone. Probably used as firewood like all the other furniture. Standing in the doorway, for the first time since he began his journey, Tollson allowed a tiny spark of hope to ignite inside his chest.

The Corvette was gone. Instead, there were clear signs that the family had moved into this area, and had used this one room to live and sleep in. The roof and ceiling were intact. The rock walls had been reinforced and covered with rolls of pink insulation to help keep out the worst of the weather. Where the washer and dryer had been sat a small wood-burning stove, the flue winding out through the dryer duct. Tollson briefly wondered how they'd kept the smoke from being noticed from the outside, then shook his head. Didn't matter now, anyway.

They had lived through the Apocalypse. Jo had made it through the worst of it. Which meant there was a chance they could still be alive. Somewhere. But where? Why would they leave the relative safety of the house? What, or who, could have driven them away from it?

He glanced back at the destruction marking the rest of the house. A lot of it was making sense to him. If they had survived the blast, then it had been them who had sacrificed their home in order to obtain the wood and other combustibles needed to keep them warm. Tollson wondered how Jo must have felt, having to go through it. Watching her beloved bedroom torn apart and fed into the stove. Not having anyone to share her special thoughts and fears with. An icy shudder of guilt zipped down his back, and Tollson tried to shake it off. They had been children. Innocent children. What had occurred had been beyond everyone's control.

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Tollson exited the house the same way he'd gotten in. Rounding the side of the home, he found the 'Vette, parked beside the garage, and still tucked underneath its tarp. Next to it was a sedan, which had to be Mrs. Wythe's. Mr. Wythe drove a truck. Tollson remembered overhearing him remark to his dad one time that he'd never drive anything but a pickup. Seeing as there was no truck anywhere nearby, Tollson surmised the man must have packed up his family, loaded down the back bed with whatever they could, and fled. Or gone someplace he believed was safer.

Sighing heavily, Tollson leaned against the house. He was feeling somewhat lightheaded and more than relieved. Jo was alive. He knew it. He could feel it in his bones. He just had to find her. That was all. Find her, make sure she was okay and happy, or as happy as one could be, living in a post-apocalyptic world. Then he could go on with his life. Maybe find someone he could manage to dredge up some feelings for. Possibly have a family of his own.

God knew he had tried to have some kind of relationship with a woman before, back in Maine. Never happened, though. It was as if his final promise to Jo that he would come back for her had closed off his heart to everyone else. No other woman interested him. Never had.

At first that had frightened him, until Uncle Carter came into his bedroom that one night and sat at the foot of his cot.

* * * *

"You doin' okay?" the grizzled old man had asked.

Drew nodded without turning over, but kept his back to the man.

"Well, I was wonderin', considering Peg's cryin' her eyes out. I thought the two of you were good for each other."

A shrug of the shoulders was his answer. Carter stared at his calloused hands lying on his knees. "You're still thinking about that girl down in Texas, aren't cha?"

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This time Drew rolled over enough to give him a wary look. “Hell, son, you don’t even know if she’s alive. You gotta stop livin’ in the past and start takin’ advantage of what’s in the here and now. Peggy’s a right smart young woman. You’re both nineteen. Maybe it’s time you got a little place of your own, the two of you.”

Drew shook his head and went back to facing the wall. Carter knew that tactic all too well. When the boy shut a person out, there was very little that could pull him out.

Giving the kid a pat on the leg, Carter left him alone. Drew would probably pine for that little JoBeth girl for the rest of his life, or until he was handed proof positive she no longer existed.

* * * *

Well, she existed. Or at least, had until her family had left the house. When that was, and where they had gone remained a mystery. But Tollson hadn’t spent more than half his life promising himself he would find an answer to give up now.

One way or another he would get his answer. Either he would find where she was today, or he would find where she’d perished. Or he would die trying.

The lines of determination creasing his forehead deepened as Andrew Michael Tollson left what was left of the Wythe home and headed for town.

Chapter 9

The lone figure trudging up the road was enough to alarm the guard standing watch. Although it didn't look like the guy was packing, it was always better to be safe than sorry.

"Go get Polinski," he told the runner, who had answered his signal. Three minutes later the man in charge of security joined him at the outcropping.

"Whatcha got?" the man asked, taking the binoculars from the guard to see for himself.

"Single intruder. No sign of a weapon, but you know as well as I do that doesn't mean anything. He could have it hidden." The guard watched as Polinski adjusted the field glasses. A moment later a big grin eased over his face. "Drop the alert," Polinski ordered. "It's that guy we were telling you about."

"You mean the Silent Wraith? He's coming here?"

Polinski handed back the glasses without commenting and hurried down the caliche slope. Tollson would be coming via the road entrance, as it was referred to, and Polinski hurried to get there before another alarm went out.

By the time he got to the outer wall, word had spread throughout the community about their visitor. Which was why Polinski didn't try to hide the sense of pride he felt that the man had taken him up on his invitation. The Silent Wraith. In Promise. It was almost like having a real live celebrity in their midst.

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Tollson continued his steady tramp through the light layer of snow. The weather had been behaving the past couple of days, although the air remained sharp and crisp. He remembered years ago his father explaining why central Texas never got snow. Something about the humidity and all. At the time six-year-old Drew didn't understand. All he knew was that winters down here sucked because he couldn't make a snowman or go sledding. Tollson snorted softly. No snow in Texas? It seemed more like a fairy tale now that Texas ever had blistering heat. Was there any place left in the world that didn't get snow or ice every friggin' day of the year?

Tollson was even with the man before he paused and gave Polinski a long look.

"Glad you decided to grace us with your presence," Polinski drawled. "I'll tell you right now, up front, word about how you came to the caravan's rescue has gone through this place like wildfire. So don't be surprised if you get hit up for an autograph or two. Or six. Or sixteen."

Tollson threw him a grin and nodded, and the two men entered the community.

Polinski kept up a steady stream of talk, pointing out certain details about the place, while Tollson's sharp eyes scanned the area. "At present we have a little over sixty people living here. Men, women, and children. Most of them are area people who survived more out of luck than skill. They congregated together after the apocalypse and made a solemn vow to help and defend each other against predators and the like, which is why this place got named Promise."

They entered a valley of sorts. Caliche walls arched overhead on both sides, and Tollson could see how rooms and homes had been dug out of the hard rock like rabbit warrens. The place vaguely reminded him of cliff-dwelling Indians he'd seen once in a book.

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“Think of us as summer camp that got racheted up a notch. That area over there is married housing, be that as it may. Single males are roomed over in that section up top, and females on the opposite side.”

Tollson pulled out the new spiral memo book he’d found by accident in Renoir and jotted a quick question.

what about orphans?

Polinski shook his head. “No orphans here. I mean, yeah, we got kids who’d lost their parents, but we placed them with an adult as soon as we could. Most of them are grown up now, anyway. What children are here now were born after the apocalypse, and we’re very protective of them. This new world isn’t friendly any longer to the little ones, and we figure they need all the help and support they can get.”

They need all the help and support they can get. Tollson knew exactly what the man was talking about. Seventeen years ago, he had been one of those lost and terrified children when he’d been picked up by the scouting party from the survivalist camp. If it hadn’t been for them, he wouldn’t be here now.

Walking out in the middle of the little valley between the high walls made Tollson feel conspicuously like a target. People they passed stopped to stare or whisper to the person they were with. However, since Polinski didn’t seem to find their behavior unusual, he tried to ignore them.

They left the open area and went inside one large, cave-like opening. The room immediately vaulted up into a high-ceilinged expanse filled with tables and chairs cobbled together from scrap metal. The smell of something cooking wafted over to them, reminding Tollson he hadn’t eaten properly in a couple of days. Polinski noticed the man’s interest.

“Hungry? It’s about meal time. What say I introduce you to a few of the more prominent members of our little society, then we can have a bite to eat?”

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Tollson gave him a nod, and Polinski led him over to a nearby table where three men were already seated. One of them was Chip Duluth, who had been with the caravan. The short redhead jumped to his feet upon seeing their visitor, and gave his hand a hearty shake.

“Hey, good to see you again, man! How did your venture over to Renoir go?”

Polinski waved him off for the moment. “Let me do the introductions first, Chip. Carlos Villafranca works as part of security. The guy beside him is Abel Andrade, who is one of our Triad council members in charge of supplies and acquisitions. You already know Chip, who is also part of security. Guys, let me introduce to you Mr. Drew Tollson, a.k.a. the Silent Wraith.”

The other two men got to their feet and extended their hands in greeting. Introductions over, they all took their seats at the table.

“Chip, would you go get Mr. Tollson a bowl of chili?” Polinski half-asked, half-ordered.

Not appearing to be the least upset by the command, the young man hurried to comply. Tollson raised an eyebrow at Polinski.

“Oh, and in case I forgot to elaborate, I’m also part of the Triad. I’m in charge of security.”

“Chip said something about you going over to Renoir?” Villafranca commented.

Pulling out the notebook, Tollson quickly scrawled
what is this triad?

“Mr. Tollson is a mute,” Polinski quickly explained to the others before turning back to their visitor. “We don’t have a mayor or city council, or anything like that around here. There’s three of us who make the main decisions with regards to daily living, but we each have a group of advisers. We’re called the Triad. I’m head of security, Abel handles food and supplies and the like, and Joe is

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in charge of the day-to-day running of the town. The domestic stuff.”

The interior of the cave-like dwelling was warm. Tollson shrugged off his heavy coat as Duluth hustled back with an aluminum cafeteria tray containing a bowl of chili, a small dinner roll, and a few pats of butter. Tollson stared at the food in surprise, then gave Polinski a questioning stare.

The big man laughed at his reaction. “This place has a few surprises tucked away in various little holes. We have a small farm and a few head of cattle, not to mention some greenhouses where we raise what we can, like oats. The fare’s not fancy here, but it’s filling. Eat up. What can we get you to drink? Water okay? We also have beer.”

Tollson started. *Beer?* Common sense suddenly gave him a swift kick in the ribs, and Tollson shook his head. He pantomimed ocean waves, and Chip ran off again to get him a glass. The men were polite enough to let him dig in, even though it was clear they were ready to bombard him with a hundred and one questions. Tollson let them stare. It wasn’t the first time he had been the center of attention, and it wouldn’t be the last. Didn’t bother him. He was in friendly territory for the moment, and his next thought was that he could stay at least a few days. Long enough to get well-rested before taking off again.

Taking off again. Where? Tollson mentally shook his head. After he had left the Wythe residence, he had gone back to the hollow. It had been more of an act to cleanse his memories than anything else. Of course, the place had collapsed in on itself so that it no longer resembled the little hidey hole he and Jo had used. So much so, it had taken him a good ten minutes to find it.

Afterwards he had gone into town and painstakingly investigated each and every building that remained standing. That alone had taken him nearly three days, even though downtown, main street, and the square were no bigger than a single city block.

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Renoir had been founded in 1899. Most of the businesses and buildings had been built out of slabs of limestone and granite, and they had withstood time and weather for over a hundred years with little wear to show for their longevity.

When he had been a kid, Tollson had investigated every nook and cranny in every building. He knew the backrooms and storage closets as well the owners. And when Jo had moved in, they had snuck underneath some of the gaping foundations and pretended to be miners exploring caves.

Looking back on it, Tollson knew his parents, his mother especially, would have had a royal conniption fit if they'd known what he and Jo had done. Didn't matter now, anyway. Besides, all that snooping finally paid off. He'd found a stash of goodies including three more memo books, and a box of already-sharpened pencils—all of which now lay at the bottom of his backpack.

Once he had staved off the worst of his hunger pains, Tollson opened the memo book and shook a finger in Villafranca's direction.

*I used to live in Renoir just before the apoc
went to look for signs of survivors
found some evidence but the place is deserted*

"Any idea where they might've gone?" Villafranca inquired.

Tollson shrugged and shook his head.

"More 'n likely they went into Austin," Chip voiced aloud what the others were thinking. "We hear there's quite a population there."

why not go there yourselves?

"Too big," Polinski answered. "Too many people mean bigger problems and more of them. No, thank you. There's a lot of reasons why small communities like ours exist, and that's one of them."

"So you think the people you're looking for went to Austin?" Chip asked.

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Tollson gave a half shrug, making it clear he really had no firm thought on the matter.

“It’s very possible they did.”

Polinski added, “A lot of people from up north migrated down here after the weather turned sour. A large number ended up in Austin, but I heard even more went further south, down into Mexico. I guess they figured it would be somewhat warmer in this region than it was up there.”

Tollson stared at the big leader. A lot of people from up north migrated down here after the weather turned sour. At the words, he thought back on the attack on the caravan yesterday, and the outcast who had run away. The outcast who looked so much like the man who had caused him more heartache and misery than even the apocalypse. The thought of that man still being alive left a sour taste in his mouth.

Someone he didn’t know came up to ask Tollson if he’d like more chili. After politely declining, he was asked if he’d like dessert. *Dessert?*

Polinski chuckled. “Seems to me it’s been a while since you’ve had dessert. What’s on the menu, Jeff?”

“Nothing fancy. Fried cinnamon breadsticks with vanilla ice cream.”

you know you make it difficult for a fellow to think about leaving

This time Polinski laughed out loud, clapping a hand to Tollson’s shoulder. Getting to his feet, he said, “Look, I’m going to run over to the dorm to see if I can find Joe and get you set up with a room for the night. Don’t go anywhere until I get back.”

That being said, he hurried off. Tollson watched him go until Villafranca leaned over to wave a hand in front of his face to get his attention.

I’m mute not deaf

“Oh, sorry. I was gonna ask you about where you’re from. You said you used to live in Renoir?”

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Tollson nodded.

"But you moved away? Before or after the apocalypse?"

Before

"Where'd you go?"

Maine

"Is that where you learned how to fight like you do?" Chip slipped in.

Another nod.

not so much fight, defend myself

"That reminds me. How's your shoulder?" The young man explained to the others how Tollson had taken a bullet during the raid on the caravan.

better thanks

"Might want to have Dr. Donna take a gander at it, anyway. Wouldn't hurt," Andrade commented.

you have a physician?

Chip grinned. "Fresh out of UT medical school. I think she was starting up a private practice as a children's doctor somewhere near Rolling Hills when things went to hell in a handbasket." He caught sight of something over Tollson's shoulder, and he nodded in that direction. "Ah! Looks like Ross managed to round up our elusive third part of the Triad."

Tollson swiveled around in his seat. At first glance he realized Polinski was accompanied by a female, rather than another man, and he automatically got to his feet. A second look at the slender young woman, and he felt his face growing taut and cold as blood rushed straight to the center of his chest. The woman was staring at him in disbelief. Her movements slowed as she seemed to hesitate to meet him. Wide, cornflower blue eyes glittered with gathering tears, and her mouth hung open in undisguised shock.

Polinski glanced from one to the other, noticing how the both of them appeared numb. If he didn't know any better, he might have bet they had met before. "Jo? This is the guy I've been talking

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about. Meet Drew Tollson, also known as the Silent Wraith. Drew, this is the third member of our illustrious Triad, JoBeth Wythe.”

Their eyes never wavered from each other’s face, searching for some hint or clue that the person before them was who they claimed to be. Finally, Jo raised a trembling hand, and in a soft, tear-filled voice, whispered a single word.

“Mikey?”

Before he could answer, her eyes rolled up into the back of her head, and she slid to the ground in an unconscious heap.

Chapter 10

Despite the fact that Polinski was standing next to her, it was Tollson who reached her first. He cursed silently as his arms went around the still form and pulled her into his embrace.

It was a miracle, finding her this way. Although he had hoped and prayed they would be reunited, Tollson knew deep down he had never expected to find her. It was all he could do not to bury his face in the neckline of her bulky sweater and start sobbing. Jo. His Jo. Alive and well, and grown up.

Without thinking, he got to his feet and lifted her against his chest. A little jiggle of his elbow rolled her head onto his injured shoulder, but he felt no pain.

“This way!” Polinski motioned. “We can lay her down back here!”

Villafranca said something about getting the doctor, and hurried off.

They rushed to carry the woman into a backroom adjacent to the kitchen before word of what had happened got out and alarmed anyone. Chip drew the curtain to afford them some privacy as Tollson gently lowered her to the ground. Behind him he could hear the men talking, but the rest of his attention was focused on the woman lying inches away from him.

Her hair was still a deep russet color, if he could trust the single candle sitting on the metal desk. And it was braided into a

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single plait down her back. A smile touched his lips at the realization.

She wasn't a little nine-year-old girl any longer. She had grown into a woman, with a warm, curvy body and a face that had haunted his dreams for seventeen years. He had wondered what she would look like, how she would have changed. He didn't have to wonder any longer.

"You left this in the mess hall," a voice commented by his elbow. Tollson glanced up to see Andrade dropping his backpack and coat on the desk. He gave the man a nod of thanks.

Polinski leaned over to watch the man brush away loose tendrils of hair from the woman's noticeably pale face. It didn't take much to realize something big had just happened. "How's she doing?" he whispered, and got a shrug in answer. "I've never known Jo to faint like that. Even when she got sick, which wasn't often, she kept dogging whatever she was doing. Damndest thing. Hey, Drew? Why did she call you 'Mikey'? You two know each other?"

Before Tollson could give him an answer, Villafranca rushed in, throwing aside the cloth curtain. Right behind him was a tall, slender, blonde woman. She immediately dropped to her knees and pressed two fingers to the underside of Jo's neck. Gray eyes stabbed at Tollson.

"She took one look at you and fainted, huh? Is that what happened?" She peered under one closed eyelid, giving a huge sigh of relief. "She doesn't feel like she's got a temperature or anything. She's probably been pushing herself too hard these past few days, but what else is new? That's Jo. Hi. I'm Donna Bednorz, but everyone calls me Dr. Donna." She stuck out a hand with long, tapered fingers and shook Tollson's. He felt her firm, no-nonsense grip and smiled.

"So you're the big kahuna who's come to visit?" Before he could answer, she got to her feet and dusted off the knees of her

jeans. "Give her some peace and quiet, and she'll come out of it soon enough. It's nothing serious, as far as I can tell."

"You might also want to check his shoulder," Villafranca commented, pointing toward Tollson.

Donna screwed up her nose for a moment in thought as she stared at their visitor. "Did I hear right? You got a bullet in the shoulder?"

Tollson made a motion, making it clear the bullet wasn't inside. The physician nodded, understanding.

"Well, I can't get a good look at it in here. I need more light. Let's move outside."

Tollson balked, keeping his ground. The woman he had been searching for these past seventeen years lay in a little heap at his feet, and he was damned if that distance would get any wider. Not now. Not ever again. Giving them a vehement shake of his head, he jabbed a finger at his chest, then directed it downward in front of him. To his utter shock, Donna signed back.

Don't worry. We'll be right outside.

A glance down reassured him Jo was still out of it. If truth be told, his shoulder had been giving him some grief. He needed someone competent to look at it. Yet, every cell in his body cried to remain with Jo. It was common sense, finally coming up to bat, that made him change his mind. Reluctantly, he followed the others out of the tiny room and took a chair near a lantern suspended from a hook on the wall. Undoing the buttons on his shirt, he pulled it off and lifted his thermals underneath as his eyes remained riveted on the curtain less than a dozen feet away.

"Let me know if it hurts," Donna ordered as she began to prod the healing wound. At one point she touched something still tender and Tollson hissed. "Can you move your arm without much trouble?"

He nodded.

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“That’s good. The wound looks clean. The bullet might have nicked the humerus, which is why you winced back then. Just take care of it, is all I can offer. Give it a chance to heal.” Standing back slightly, she continued to give him a scrutinizing stare as he pulled his shirt back on.

What? he gestured.

The woman was all business. He liked that about her. But it was the intense looks that made him uncomfortable.

“Nothing. It’s just that my female intuition tells me there’s a lot more going on here than what we can see. Do you have any idea why Jo crumpled like wet tissue?”

He glanced around for his memo book, checking the pockets of his pants and shirt. Andrade spoke up. “I put your writing book in your backpack.”

Donna shook her head. “Doesn’t matter. Talk to me, Mr. Tollson, the way you know how.”

How do you know ASL?

“I was going to be a pediatrician before the sun went blooey. I did my internship at the children’s state hospital for the deaf.” She graced him with a wide smile. “Any more questions?”

Jo is why I’m here,

he admitted, pausing to let her interpret for the others standing around them.

She and I grew up together in Renoir.

“Grew up together? You were childhood sweethearts?” Donna asked.

We were best friends. Closest friends. My father got transferred to Maine right before the sun blew up. I promised her I would come back for her. One day. I never....

He paused to collect his thoughts.

Guess I never believed I would find her.

“One day?” Polinski repeated. “You mean, you’ve been searching for her for the past seventeen years?”

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No. Only for the past fourteen months. But I have been meaning to return for that long.

“So all that time you were waiting for the right moment to go looking for her, is that it?” Villafranca asked. “And that’s why we came across you when we did. You were on your way back here to look for her, right?”

Tollson nodded, and Andrade gave a little “wow”.

“How can you be certain our Jo is the same Jo you’ve been looking for?” Donna asked.

Instantly he could remember the tears in her eyes, and the way her lower lip had quivered when she’d said his name. The name he couldn’t stand when he was a child. The name no one else in his life had ever used. The name she had murmured in shock before going out like a light. Tollson swallowed hard and nodded.

Not a doubt in my mind.

Andrade gave another little “wow”.

Chip sniffed.

Even Dr. Donna appeared affected by the story. She started to ask him another question when a loud voice suddenly demanded, “Who are you?”

All eyes riveted on the woman standing in the doorway. Her face was flushed, and she appeared to be clutching something in her hand. Tollson started to get to his feet when Jo marched over to where he was sitting.

“Answer me! Where did you get this? Who are you? I wanna know, and I wanna know now!”

A piece of paper fluttered into his lap where she’d thrown it. It was the half strip of pictures they had taken at the booth in the mall that day so many years ago. A day that was now just a memory. A fairy tale, almost, except for the scrap of paper. She must have dug into his backpack.

Slowly, Tollson stood and noticed how her eyes followed him. Taking in his appearance, his bedraggled appearance, he

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bemoaned. He needed a shave, and a haircut wouldn't be a bad idea, either. God, he must look a mess.

They were no longer the same height. At six foot two he had a good eight inches on her. Plus the fact that his training, and the past year's journey to get down here, had toughened him up. Put some muscles on him.

The dumpy little boy with the cotton-white hair was gone. Before her stood a stranger with light blond hair and a body that would make any woman salivate with envy.

Slowly, Tollson picked up the strip. Pointing to it, he then pointed to her and to himself. The message was clear.

Jo slowly shook her head, still unable to believe. "Talk to me. I know you can speak. Tell me who you are really!" Tears were running down her cheeks, and for the first time Tollson noticed she still had her freckles, although they had faded somewhat into the cream-colored skin.

Sadly, he shook his head.

I can't speak, he signed, and the doctor repeated for him.

Jo squinted her eyes at him. "Why? What happened?"

I don't want to talk about it right now.

Believe me, Jo. It's me. I'm Drew.

I came back for you like I promised I would when I moved to Maine.

Another minute passed as she digested this information. Then it was as if everything fell into place, and she could accept the miracle of his being there, of his coming back as he had told her he would so long ago.

Lifting her arms, she burst into noisy tears and walked into his embrace. Tollson pulled her against him, burying his nose in the juncture of her neck and shoulder. Closing his eyes, he could feel his whole body trembling as his senses tried to memorize her all over again, from scratch. Replacing years-old memories with fresh ones.

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Regardless, one truth was undeniably real. She still smelled like the Jo he remembered. Sweet. Warm. And now with a few more curves than what he recalled. She felt so good, so right within the circle of his arms. Tollson sighed, knowing he was on the verge of a good cry himself. However, now was not the time or the place to let go. Not yet. Later.

He started to pull away from her slightly when a strange voice caustically remarked, "I didn't know you were such a fan of our visitor, Jo."

It was as if someone had thrown cold water over her. Tollson's eyes widened as he felt her body go stiff at the comment. Stepping away from him, she turned to face the man who had entered their little group.

"What's your problem, Brennan? What are you doing here?"

"I don't seem to be the one with a problem," the man replied. "I was just curious as to why you were cuddling up against this guy."

He was tall and slender, but not very muscular. Tollson gave him a quick evaluation. The man obviously had a face that would attract girls, but his attitude needed a serious adjustment.

"What business is it of yours?" Jo shot back as she wiped her face with the sleeve of her shirt.

The gesture brought a smile to Tollson's face. Some habits never changed.

"And you didn't answer my question. Why are you here?"

"I came to tell our guest we're putting him up in Old Man Tucker's place. Or did you forget you'd asked me to make accommodations?" He crossed his arms over his chest. "Good thing I showed up when I did. I don't appreciate finding my woman in the arms of another man," the guy snapped.

Wide-eyed, Tollson turned to Jo for verification. She seemed to read his mind before he could make a gesture. "Drew, this is Brennan Runnion. We used to be a couple. Got that, Brennan?"

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She turned to face the man once more. "The operative word here is used. Past tense."

"Yeah, yeah, I heard you," Runnion acquiesced, but not completely. "It seems we've also had this same argument before. We break up, then two months later you come begging me to take you back. Things are good for a few weeks, then you call it off and leave again. To be frank, I'm getting tired of the same old cycle."

"Well, this time I mean it," she told him. "I want you out of my life. Permanently."

Runnion sneered. "Why? So you can rub yourself up against our famous visitor? Maybe throw in a little humpty-hump in the sack as part of the welcoming?"

"Brennan, I think you've said enough," Polinski finally broke in. "If she says it's over, then it's over. You've done what you were ordered to do. Now, go."

"This isn't over," Runnion told them, his gaze never leaving Jo. "Not by a long shot. Oh, and, Mr. Tollson, a little word of warning. If she does decide to grace your bed with her presence, I hope you have a hot water bottle nearby. Because Miss Frigidaire has a very hard time warming up, if you get my drift."

"Fuck off, Brennan!" Jo yelled.

Raising his hands in surrender, Runnion sauntered off.

Jo clutched her arms as if she had been overcome with shivers. Unsure what to do, Tollson signed for clarity.

Where is this Tucker's Place?

"I'll show you where it is," Chip started to volunteer, when Jo interrupted.

"No. I'll show him." Rubbing her arms for warmth, and with her head lowered, she walked out the door without checking to see if Tollson was following her. She would instinctively know he would.

In fact, she would know he would, no matter where she went now. He had said he would come back for her, and he had fulfilled

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that promise. They were together again, as it should be. As it was meant to be.

For the first time in seventeen years, Drew Tollson felt complete.

Chapter 11

Yesterday, February 6

It had been one hundred thirteen degrees since before eight that morning. The big thermometer nailed to the tree outside the kitchen window only went up to one hundred twenty, making Drew wonder what would happen if it got hotter.

The electricity had been out since Thursday, but Cort Tollson had bought a generator to help keep the refrigerator going. On Saturday he unhooked their gas range from the main line, just to be safe. They took to grilling their meals outside, cooking everything over an open flame.

The trees surrounding their house were dying. Cort was afraid to water them to try to save them, for fear the family would need the water for themselves at some crucial future time. So they sweltered in the heat from December through February.

The news around the world sounded even worse. Thousands were dying in Australia, which was in the middle of its summer season, under temperatures reaching over three hundred degrees. Africa was also slowly broiling. News reports told of trees exploding into flames. Whole species of animals were being wiped out under the relentless sun. Scientists even mentioned that the space probes on Mars were sending back temperature readings of inhabitable range—up to the forties in some areas during daylight hours.

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Teena Tollson turned on the battery-powered radio every hour on the hour to get the latest information and weather updates, then turned it off right afterwards to conserve the batteries. When she wasn't cooking, she took to cleaning their clothes in the sink and hanging them over a line in the garage. For Drew, watching TV and playing video games was a thing of the past. He had yet to be enrolled in his local school, and from the looks of it, it would be a while longer before he could get the opportunity, since the local school district had closed its campuses until the crisis had passed. Alone, bored, and desperately missing Jo, he took to spending long hours simply sitting on the porch and watching the traffic go by, since it was too hot to go exploring.

Sunset came at six thirty-eight. Once the sun went down behind the treetops, the air cooled. Somewhat. By eight o'clock the thermometer still hovered in the nineties.

No rain had fallen in the past eighty-three days. None was predicted to fall, not even a trace, for the next sixty. Rivers and lakes were drying up. The snow was disappearing from the peaks of all mountain ranges. The oceans were evaporating at a visible rate.

From the scientific community came the explanation. The sun was dying, and this unexpected burst of radiance was its final gasp before it imploded. No one knew how long the world had before it released its one remaining wave of energy. Nor could they estimate how long the flare would last. They knew even less what the ramifications would be—what lasting effects would forever change the earth and life upon it. They could only guess, and even then their theories were mere shots in the dark.

When sunset descended upon the northern hemisphere, every living creature breathed a sigh of relief that they had survived another day. The night would give them the chance to lick their burns and hope to make it through tomorrow.

They had no clue there would be no tomorrow.

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At four minutes past one in the morning, Drew felt his father shaking him as he called his name. "Drew! Get up, son! Now! We gotta go now!"

Dragging open sleepy eyes, Drew was surprised to see the day shining brightly outside. Confused and disoriented, he pulled on a t-shirt and jeans, and was in the middle of trying to find a pair of socks in his dresser when his mother ran into his room. "Come on, Drew. We gotta go now!"

Grabbing his shoes, she snatched a handful of his shirt with her free hand and half-carried him out into the garage, shoving him into the backseat and tossing his shoes at him. His father and David were throwing some things into the trunk before jumping into the car themselves. Cort Tollson tossed two life vests into the front seat as David jumped into the back with two more.

"Put the vests on, boys," he snapped in a hard, tight voice.

Drew had never seen his father drive as fast as he did that morning. Staring out the window, it soon became clear they were heading for the lake. For what reason, he had no idea.

"Dad? Where are we goin'?"

"We're going to the lake," his mother answered. The air conditioner in the car was going full blast, but very little of it was making its way to the backseat.

"What time is it?" Drew asked. He normally didn't sleep so late that it would be broad daylight when he crawled out of bed. But for some strange reason, his body felt as exhausted as if he'd just gone to bed.

Once again Teena Tollson turned her head slightly so he could see her profile. "It's a little after one."

"In the afternoon?"

"No, Brewski. In the morning," David snapped in a condescending tone.

"Oh, yeah, right," Drew spat back.

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Their mother intervened before things went any further between the two. "David's right, Drew. It's still the middle of the night."

Drew took all of five seconds to digest this bit of news. "How?" Outside the window the world was as bright as a cloudless day.

A frown suddenly creased his face. No, wait a minute. Yes, it was daylight, but it was a funny color of light. Orangish, kind of. And how come there weren't any other cars on the road?

"Mom, is the sun exploding?"

Both parents glanced at each other, then Cort Tollson tightly answered, "Yes, Drew. It is."

They reached the lake in less than five minutes. By the time they reached the parking lot, they could see the lake bed several hundred yards in the distance, glimmering like a fiery blanket. Not long ago the water had been up to the pier, lapping against the pylons which supported the short boardwalk.

"Everyone out! Run to the water! Hurry!" Cort Tollson shouted to his family. "David, help me with that canoe over there!"

Drew started to protest when his mother grabbed his hand and made him go with her. Underneath the relentless rays they could feel their skin burning with each passing second. When they reached the water, his mother didn't stop, and went splashing into the warm water, pulling Drew along with her. Not far behind them Drew's father and older brother followed, carrying the long wooden canoe above their heads.

"Go deeper!" Cort called out. "Go as far out as you can! Try to make it to the middle of the lake!"

Struggling in the depths, Drew threw his arms around his mother's neck as she blindly felt her way along the bottom of the lake. Moments later, Cort and David joined them, swimming toward them while keeping the canoe upside-down overhead.

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Drew stared in surprise as his mother took one end and his father took the other, keeping him and David in the middle. David was taller than he was, but his brother still had to support himself on their father's shoulders to keep his head above the surface. There they struggled to remain afloat in the warming water while the sun beat down on the overturned canoe.

"Don't touch anything made of metal," Cort ordered. "If you have to grab something, make sure it's wooden."

At first, Drew wondered why there was a high-pitched hissing sound coming from all around them. Peering through the narrow space between the side of the canoe and the surface, he could see huge columns of smoke rising from the banks.

"That's not smoke, Drew. It's steam. Look closer. You'll see the water's boiling where it's the most shallow."

His father was right. Even where they were, the water was growing noticeably warmer. As he watched in fascination, he could swear he could see the water level in the lake slowly falling as the scorching sun drank. There was a huge, oblong rock in the shape of an airplane at the water's edge. Right now most of it remained submerged except for the left wing, which sat like a white, bleached bone.

"What if the water gets too hot?" Teena asked her husband. She didn't dare speak of them possibly boiling to death in front of the children, although the prospect was all too real.

"Mitch says the sun probably won't stay hot long enough to get the whole body to that point."

Cort kept urging them to go further and further into the deepest part of the lake. If it weren't for the life vests, Drew would have given out long ago. They frequently had to throw water on their faces, or duck beneath the surface, in order to find some small measure of relief.

"How long do you think this will last?" Teena asked her husband at one point. Her arms ached from holding the canoe, and

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underneath the interior the air was quickly becoming humid and steamy.

Cort shook his head. "I don't know, honey, but Mitch seemed to think no more than an hour or two."

"An hour or two?" Her voice hitched with unshed tears. Her husband tried to soothe her.

"Have faith, honey," he spoke in a calm voice, hoping their sons wouldn't start crying, either. "Remember, if it weren't for Mitch, we wouldn't have known what to look for. Or be prepared for it, and know what to do when it came."

Hearing his father speak of Jo's father sent a spasm of sheer panic through eleven-year-old Drew. "Dad?"

"What, son?"

"There's...there's no lake where Jo is. How is she gonna live?" Already he could feel the tears stinging his eyes, and he knew that when his older brother saw him crying, he would get ribbed mercilessly for being a weak baby. But he didn't care. Thinking about Jo facing this same terror was almost too much for him to stomach. Thankfully his father knew just what to say to give him some measure of assurance. His eyes riveted onto the airplane-shaped rock across the lake. The water was down past the tail and body, and was sliding over the lower right wing. Before too long the entire rock would be above lake level.

"Drew, Jo's probably safer than we are right now. After all, her father knows more about the sun and the solar system than most people on earth." He gave the little man a small smile. "Don't worry about her, son. She'll make it through this just fine, just as we will."

Drew didn't respond. No matter how hopeful his father sounded, it wouldn't stop him from worrying. In fact, he never stopped worrying for the next seventeen years.

Chapter 12

When Polinski had introduced Jo as JoBeth Wythe, Tollson could swear his heart slammed back into place. Not only was she alive and well, she hadn't taken a husband. Or, if she had, she'd gotten divorced and gone back to using her maiden name. Either way she was free for him to claim, and he intended to. The sooner the better.

Slinging his backpack over his uninjured shoulder, and picking up his coat with his other arm, Tollson followed her out through the mess hall and back into the narrow gorge. She continued to walk just ahead of him with her arms tightly crossed in front of her, her head down.

He had never seen her like this. This side of her was unfamiliar to him. Mad Jo he knew well. Too well, considering all the teasing they had done to each other when they had been children. He was also very familiar with Upset Jo. And Happy Jo. And Just-Woke-Up Jo. Not to mention Christmas Day Jo and Birthday Jo.

This stance, and the way she seemed to be avoiding looking at him, was confusing and frightening him. Moments ago he had held her in his arms, and she had kept murmuring over and over, "Oh, God, Drew. Drew. Drew. Oh, God. Drew," so softly, he was sure no one else had heard her.

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Well, it didn't matter. Jo's moods changed frequently and without warning. Give her a little space and some time, and he knew she would start talking again.

They took a set of metal steps leading up to a row of caves. At least on the outside they looked like caves dotting the sides of the cliffs. That was part of the design of the place. In the event they were besieged or inundated with unwanted visitors, all they had to do was disappear into their individual lairs until the danger had passed. Or, as he surmised with an expert eye, lay in wait for the enemy to fall into their trap. Boom—a perfect ambush.

Once they reached what Tollson mentally checked off as the second floor, Jo led him up a second flight of stairs at the opposite end of a narrow overhang. He immediately gave a mental thumbs-up to the location. It had quick and easy access without having to pass by any other openings.

At the top was a single cave, and she ducked through the low opening. Tollson had to bend over a bit more to fit, but once inside discovered he could easily stand. The ceiling rose nearly two feet above his head.

They were in a narrow tunnel that wound around a short distance before opening up. Less than ten feet from the entrance someone had sunk a metal pipe between the walls, then draped a length of heavy fabric over it. Not only would the makeshift door give him privacy, but it would keep out the worst of the weather. By the time he got to the inner chamber, Jo had lit a small lantern and was replacing the chimney.

The room was sparsely furnished with a roll-away bed, a makeshift bureau made of scrap iron, an old leather trunk, and a table with a single chair. The mattress was missing on the bed, and he knew that if he checked, the dresser and trunk would be empty as well.

"Walter Tucker was one of the founding members of Promise," Jo said in a soft voice.

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Tollson turned back to see her staring at the lantern light.

"He died two weeks ago. He was eighty-three? Or four?" She shook her head. "I don't remember. Anyway, this is where he lived. His wife died when the sun exploded. I-I'll get someone to bring you up a mattress and some linens."

She glanced up at him finally, and he could see tears swimming in her incredible blue eyes. "How long were you planning on staying?" Once again her lower lip was trembling.

He knew she was fighting the need to run back to him. To seek solace in his arms like she used to do whenever she was upset or in trouble with her parents. Well...sometimes the need ran both ways. Tossing his backpack and coat onto the bed, it took him less than four long strides to reach her.

She melted into his embrace, her fingers digging into his back and neck as she clutched him as tightly as she could. This time he had no qualms about what he wanted to do next. Lifting her face, he waited for her to raise her eyes until he could see his reflection in them. Then he lowered his mouth over hers.

Seventeen years ago they had shared their first-ever kiss on the mouth. Three times they had pressed their lips together, just like they had seen adults do. Innocent kisses that had tasted like peppermint and spaghetti sauce. Kisses that had been pure and uncomplicated. Kisses that had meant nothing more than a silent, unspoken promise.

Her mouth was hot and wet, and she tasted like cinnamon. He felt her breath catch in her throat as his tongue sought hers, met, and sealed together. These were lovers' kisses not meant for children. He pulled back, questioning her with his eyes, and giving her the chance to stop him. Jo refused to let him go as she hungrily reached for him, melted into him, and silently demanded an end to years of loneliness. His fingers dove into her hair, massaging her scalp with his fingertips.

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He heard her moan, and the vibration of her lips against his was more intoxicating than the richest wine. Releasing her face, he wrapped his arms tightly around her and pressed her hard against him.

For years no girl or woman had been able to penetrate the barrier he had erected around his heart. Time and time again he had tried to form some kind of emotional bond with someone he felt he might be able to spend the rest of his life with. Time and again he had honestly made the attempt to feel some kind of spark, some depth of emotion, that would tie him to another. But it had never happened. It wouldn't happen, and for the longest time Tollson had feared he had lost his ability to love just like he had lost his voice.

That no longer was the truth. He could love. And he did. With every breath in his body, and every pulse of his heart.

He loved Jo. He loved her so much, he felt as if he was caught in a blinding snowstorm with no idea which way to escape. As if he would want to escape the feel of her hugging him. Or the feel of her trying to kiss him back as tiny whimpering sounds reverberated in her throat.

He had never ceased thinking of her. She had even invaded his dreams when the nightmares had ceased to torment him. Appearing like a stick figure with hair that glowed like fire in the sunlight, he had the hardest time trying to envision what she would look like grown up. How she would have changed. What her body would look like with womanly curves, or her face once it grew fuller and more mature.

When puberty struck him, his dreams of Jo had gotten more erotic, more sensuous, and often left him shaken and spent. In the dark of night, in his mind he tried to make love to her, but it was like stroking off to a faceless entity with russet hair and a teasing, girlish voice. An almost-woman who smelled of peppermints.

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He no longer had to dream or try to imagine. She was alive. And real. And, God help him, more desirable than he had ever believed possible.

The more she rubbed against him, the hotter the tiny room became. A burning ache centered itself between his legs, forcing Tollson to finally pull her away from him just long enough to let them catch their breaths. And their sanity.

Without giving her the chance to question why he had suddenly drawn back, he went over to his backpack and pulled his memo book from a side pocket. Reaching out, he grabbed her by the wrist and led her over to where they both could sit on the bed's bare springs. Quickly, he began writing.

I'll stay as long as you want me to

Jo glanced at the words, then leaned heavily against him, bringing her arms around his writing arm as she pressed her cheek against his shoulder. His bad shoulder. Tollson gently eased her face a bit so it wouldn't pain him.

"We're not children any longer, Drew," she murmured in a hushed tone. The sound of her woman voice was an aphrodisiac all by itself. It was starting to drive him crazy.

no we're not

Biting his lower lip, he added,

Tell me about Runnion

She made a face, which let him know the subject was a sticky one. "What's there to tell? I thought I was in love with him. No... I guess I wanted to believe I was in love with him. What a joke. Brennan doesn't care for me." Adjusting her position slightly, Jo moved closer to him. The heat between them increased. The tightness in his pants was becoming unbearable.

we've lost a lot of time, Jo

"I know. I just...I just..." She gave a big sigh. "I know I'm going to wake up tomorrow and think you've been nothing more than a beautiful, sad dream. I just know it."

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why?

“I dunno.” She sniffed and used her shirt sleeve again to wipe her nose.

were you ever married?

This time she lifted her head to give him a surprised look. “Married? To whom? Brennan? Oh, don’t make me laugh. But I’ll be honest with you. When I was nineteen I thought I’d found someone I wanted to marry.”

what happened?

She shrugged. “I didn’t love him, so I called it off. I couldn’t...how can I explain this? It was like I didn’t have the capacity to love. Like someone had reached inside me and turned off that switch. Know what I mean?”

He nodded to show he truly understood. His switch had been turned off, too.

what about now?

“Whaddaya mean?”

is your switch still turned off?

Jo lifted her eyes to stare into his soft amber brown ones with their almost grass-green flecks, and suddenly they both knew the answer. Her lips were incredibly soft. In the lantern light her face seemed to glow. She melted against him, and slowly, without realizing it, Tollson fell back onto the bedsprings, bringing her with him.

What began as passion boiled over into near frenzy. He had waited, and prayed, and dreamed of holding her, and touching her, and loving her like this. Without restrictions or worry, or the threat of danger. The pad and pencil clattered on the rock floor, unnoticed.

His hands dove underneath the bulky sweater and t-shirt she wore to find her skin like warm, living silk. She took a ragged breath as flesh touched flesh, and he looked down to see her watching him with eyes that had darkened to a midnight blue.

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Taking one of his hands in her own, she lifted it until his palm cupped a breast. She wore no bra, and probably no panties, either. His thumb rasped over the nipple, and the feel of it puckering round and tight sent another overwhelming throb of fire straight to his lower abdomen.

Jo closed her eyes and moaned. She wiggled herself between his legs, and the pressure nearly sent him off. It wasn't until she lowered her face to nuzzle the skin underneath his ear that her simple act of affection reminded him of his haggard appearance.

Carefully, Tollson rose into a sitting position, although the growing pressure in his pants almost made it impossible.

"No." Jo clutched the front of his shirt to stare at him beseechingly. "No, don't stop. Please, Drew." She pressed her breast into his hand, silently begging him to caress her again. Instead he gently pinched her nipple, feeling it respond a second before he withdrew.

Finding the pencil and pad, Tollson hastily scribbled his next words, despite the fact that he could barely hold the pencil steady in his shaking hands.

*we'll have our moment, Jo
but first it might be a good idea
if I could get a bath*

It took several seconds for the meaning of his words to sink in. She gave a little laugh, then dropped a light kiss on his stubbled cheek. "I'll have Cameron show you where you can clean up. I need to make last-minute rounds, anyway."

They remained holding each other, both of them hesitant to separate. Finally, after another quick kiss, this time on the lips, Jo got to her feet and bounced out of the room, leaving Tollson to try and control his racing heart before that Cameron fellow came to get him.

Chapter 13

Word spread quickly about their visitor. Spreading even quicker was the news that he had come for one of their own, and what a juicy bit of gossip it was. Although Jo's family had come to Promise barely a year after it had been founded, the little girl had practically grown up in their midst. In all those years she had never acted like the typical young lady, or even a typical teenager. She rarely hung around others her own age, and they often commented how it wasn't right for her to always be such a brooding, sad-looking little girl.

One thing was certain, however. She was exceedingly bright, just like her father, whom they learned had been a professor of science at the university. And although she often cut her classes while growing up, her teachers couldn't fault her. When she decided to return to her lessons, they found she continued to pound out better than average grades. In short, missing a few days here and there didn't prevent her from acing her exams, as it should have.

It wasn't Jo's penchant for playing hooky that made people talk about her, though. It was her need for independence. The fact that she had no close friends, and that she avoided gatherings of any kind. Whenever people saw her, she was usually in the middle of untangling some detail relating to whatever was going on in the encampment at the time. When she had hit sixteen she'd been assigned to work under Stella Charles, who was the Triad leader in

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charge of domestic details. Stella often commented to Ross Polinski and Abel Andrade, the other two Triad team leaders, that if anyone had the gumption to take over the job when it was time for her to retire, it would be JoBeth Wythe.

“I don’t care if she’s just sixteen,” the older woman had commented on more than one occasion. “She’s got the common sense to know what needs to be done, and the balls to do it. I’ve never seen such a tough hide on such a young child before.”

Stella died barely eight months later from what they could only guess was cancer. By then Jo had turned seventeen. Regardless of her age, they offered her the position, and put it up to a vote to the rest of the community. The others knew Stella had taught her well, and believed Jo would only get wiser and better at her job as time progressed. The decision had been predestined. Since that time JoBeth had thrown herself into her work, with little time, if any, for a personal life. That didn’t mean several young men of the community didn’t try their luck at courting the striking young woman with the flashing blue eyes.

When she was nineteen, she seemed to get somewhat serious about one young man named Michael Gretchens. Michael and his mother had been found by an incoming caravan and brought to Promise. It appeared she had taken a liking to him. Still, it surprised everyone when, one evening at supper, they announced their engagement. But by the next morning Jo had called it off. Soon after Michael and his mother left Promise to head for Austin, and they hadn’t been heard from since.

For the next seven years Jo’s romantic trysts were short-lived and infrequent. Her current—if current was the appropriate term—liaison with Brennan Runnion was the longest one she had ever committed herself to. It didn’t matter that they spent more time apart than they did actually being together.

Today, a handful of people had witnessed something, though, that made them wonder if their Jo was about to go through a

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transformation. The fact that she had fainted was enough to worry them. But it was watching her break down in tears and clutch this total stranger as if her life depended on it that floored them. Jo never cried. When her mother had died, along with her little sister, she didn't shed a tear. At least, not in public. And when her stepfather had left Promise, abandoning her to the townspeople, she never even gave a hint that his desertion upset her.

Who was this Drew Tollson? Who was this man who had waited seventeen years to be reunited with their Jo? The little burg of Promise couldn't wait to find out.

Jo stood in the shadows as she watched the two men in the distance. Cameron had gone to fetch Drew and show him where the showers and toilets were located. From where she watched she could stare to her heart's content, and at this moment she wanted to feast on the man her best friend had become.

He hadn't changed. Oh, yes, there were some important details like the fact that he was so much taller than she was now, and he had muscles that made him look like someone had sculpted him out of clay and fired him until he was rock hard and covered in a fine glaze. His hands had been warm and calloused, but so careful. They had shaken when they'd touched her.

Yet, she could still see vestiges of the little boy who had tagged along behind her at first like a lost puppy, only to become such an important part of her and her life that, whenever they were apart, she felt incomplete. And he had done it by simply being there—to listen to her, to hold her when she most needed it, to share in a secret because she knew he'd never tattle on her...or to offer her the one thing she wanted most of all. Unconditional love.

A little shiver ran through her, and she felt tiny fingers of anticipation tickle her in her most sexual places. Her nipples strained against the fabric of her t-shirt. And she knew that if she put her hand down there between her legs, her jeans would be moist. The discovery surprised her.

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He wasn't a little boy any longer. Neither was she a little girl. It was hard to let go of the images that continued to swirl in her mind, images which had been the only things left for her when Drew had moved away.

As the years had drawn out, and her body had changed, she'd started to experience certain feelings she'd never had before. Especially whenever she thought about Drew. She wondered if he had lived through the apocalypse. If he was a man now. And if so, what he would look like?

More importantly, if they ever met again, would he remember her? Would he have these same kinds of feelings for her?

A more violent shudder ran through her, catching her by surprise by its force. When he'd held her, some deep, almost primal flame had gone through her. It was as if she wanted to do more than hold him. Do more than touch him. She wanted him sexually, as if the act would finally cement something she had known all her life—that she and Drew were two broken pieces meant to reform into a whole.

She had been stunned to feel a thickness straining against her stomach as they'd held each other. More than that, her own body had answered his. Even now, it was still answering his silent call.

She and Drew were going to make love for the first time. Tonight. Already she could feel the heat rising to her face. This had never happened to her before, this almost animalistic sensation that felt like it was going to drive her to the brink of insanity if she had to wait much longer. A tiny voice deep within her seemed to be saying that this was why she had been created. This was why she had waited. Tonight would be a thousand memories and discoveries, all rolled into one.

She watched as he disappeared into the bathing area, wishing she could see the expression on his face when he saw the shower set-up they'd installed and perfected some years back. Before the

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great blow-up, water had been a commodity. So scarce, it was sold and hoarded almost like precious metals. After the big explosion, it was no longer an issue. Water was abundant. Hell, overabundant. A week didn't go by that it didn't snow, even in the middle of summer. In this new era, firewood and anything flammable had become the next legal tender. But those first couple of years, when the plants and animals kept dying, and food got harder and harder to find, and keeping warm was almost impossible...

Jo slammed the lid down on that chest of memories. Still, some still managed to leak out. Yes, things had been rough. But nothing, nothing compared to the nightmares she'd had about what might have happened to Drew. Although her stepfather tried to reassure her by telling her he had given Drew's parents everything he could to help them through the catastrophe, it wasn't enough. Telephones were gone. Electricity no longer existed. The distance between Renoir and Maine seemed farther away than it did to the moon. There was no way she could find out if he had managed to survive. And as the years passed, she had resigned herself to the fact that he hadn't.

It was hard, growing up with other kids her age, among a bunch of giggly girls who had less brains than a sack of dirt. And the boys? Vacuous. Jo ran the word around her mouth. It was one of her favorite words, vacuous. Yeah, some of them had been kinda cute, but she could hold a more intelligent conversation with one of the livestock.

"Jo? You got a sec?"

She turned around and pulled the hood up on her coat. The wind was picking up as the sun went down. "Yeah, Rosalinda. What's up?"

It was a minor problem, one of a hundred that popped up every day. It managed to keep her busy, but her mind continued to churn in time with her stomach.

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She'd lost her virginity to Michael. He had been blond and brown-eyed, and reminded her so much of Drew that she had tried to force herself into some kind of emotional attachment. But it didn't work out. He wasn't Drew, and never would be, and for her to try and pretend otherwise would have been the worst mistake of her life.

After Michael left, she tried to make do with simple, no-strings-attached relationships. If there had been a nunnery nearby, she would have seriously given it some thought. No man excited her. No man could bandage that sore that never scabbed over and never healed.

Okay, so then Ross had found her over in the laundry room to tell her they had a visitor, and could she get him a room assigned for the night?

* * * *

"You won't believe who the guy is," he tried to intrigue her. It didn't, but she pretended to rise to the bait.

"All right. I'll bite. Who is it?"

"The Silent Wraith."

"Quit screwing with me, Ross. I gotta lot of work to do. We're already short-handed in the laundry room, and I promised—"

"I'm as serious as a heart attack, Jo. Remember the guy we told everyone about?"

"You mean the one you said took down a bunch of those scavengers barehanded?" She paused with suds up to her armpits to stare at him. "That guy?"

"Yeah." Ross had a grin on his face that nothing but the truth could have put there. "Before we dropped him off at the junction, I invited him to come stay a while. He took us up on our invitation."

"How long's he gonna stay?" Already she was mapping out available rooms over in the male dorm in her head.

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Polinski shrugged. "You need to come meet him. We're over at the mess hall having supper."

"You mean now? But you just told me to get a room ready for him," she started to protest.

Taking a clean, dry towel from a nearby pile, he tossed it at her. "You're one of the Triad. You need to introduce yourself first, then you can take him to wherever you plan to put him up."

* * * *

So she had followed him back to the mess hall. The man they called the Silent Wraith had his back to her, but something about him had begun to blow whistles and wave red flags in her mind. The closer she approached, the more she felt as if the world was about to tilt at another impossible angle, and there was no damn reason she could find for feeling that way. Or prevent it from happening.

Except it had something to do with the stranger. The stranger with light blond hair. Then he had turned around to look at her as Polinski did the introductions. Looked at her with those light brown eyes that were almost gold in color. With little green flecks in them.

The face was older. More haggard. Covered in golden stubble.

"Jo? This is the guy I've been talking about. Meet Drew Tollson, also known as the Silent Wraith. Drew, this is the third member of our illustrious Triad, JoBeth Wythe."

Her Drew. Her Drew who had said that when they grew up he would come back for her.

At that moment her shriveled heart had opened to his presence as her mind tried to grasp reality. The truth. Her Drew.

She had reached out to touch him, seeking that one last bit of proof to let her know he was as real as the quaking in her knees and the fog enshrouding her mind. Dimly she remembered calling him by the one name he'd never liked her to use, just to see if it got a

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reaction out of him. Because her Drew would object. Her Drew would make a face or protest at being called Mikey.

Too bad she never got the chance to see what happened. She'd blanked out as if someone had unplugged her.

At some point she had awakened to find herself in one of the back counting offices Abel used to do inventory. There were voices coming from outside, none of which sounded unfamiliar. But there was a strange coat and a backpack sitting on the table. A solid black backpack, without trim or any other color on it. Drew always fought with his mother every year before school began because he wanted a solid black backpack, and Mrs. Tollson always thought one with a little color or decoration didn't look so "blah".

She'd started digging into the backpack, looking for evidence to prove...what? That he was her Drew? Or that he wasn't? In a tiny zippered pocket inside the main compartment she'd discovered the half-strip of two photos from the picture booth. The other half, the half that had been hers, had been lost years ago. But he had managed to keep his half. He'd kept it.

Her Drew had kept his half, and his word.

Tears rolled out of her eyes and down her cheeks. Jo hastily wiped them away before anyone could see them. God, she could still feel his hands on her. And his mouth, his kisses. No, they weren't children any longer. They were adults.

Now she knew why she had never been able to find someone to take his place. *Because when you love someone this much, your heart won't accept a substitute.*

Quickly, she hurried to her own apartment to grab a clean set of clothes before she made her way to the women's side of the baths. Her emotions were shivering as much as she was, but it wouldn't last much longer. Not anymore. Tonight, she and Drew would keep each other warm. And they would talk—or she would talk and he would listen. And they would make love. Their first time.

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He had promised to stay as long as she wanted him to. Jo wiped another large tear from her face. Good. That was good. That would give her plenty of time to work up the courage to tell him how much she'd missed him. How she had worried and cried over the thought of losing him because she still needed him. And how much she loved him.

Tomorrow seemed forever away.

Chapter 14

He couldn't sleep. It didn't matter. He was so wound up, he could sense every sound filtering through the wool curtain in the entryway.

The wind had picked up outside. If they were lucky the snowfall would be light. Tollson didn't think they were in for any bad weather, for the next few days at least. The air didn't smell right, for one thing.

But there was one thing he could smell. Or thought he could smell.

Jo.

She was going to come to him tonight. He would bet blood on it. Seventeen years had led him to this place, this time, this night, and every muscle in his body thrummed in anticipation.

While he was taking a shower in that bathhouse that had nearly bowled him over, a mattress had been put on his bed, along with fresh, clean sheets, two pillows, and pillowcases. Three hand-sewn quilts were piled on top, in case he needed more than one for warmth. It was a double bed, thank goodness. Even lying in it alone, he practically filled it up.

Christ. Ancient Romans didn't bathe in a room as fancy as the one they had here. It was like showering under a waterfall. A rock waterfall. With warm water and soap, to boot.

They had a mess hall. An honest-to-God medical doctor on call. Gardens. Livestock. A bathhouse and dormitories. And he'd

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never know it at first glance. The place should have been named Well Kept Secret.

Tollson rolled onto his back and laced his fingers behind his head. His toes tingled inside his clean socks. It had been a while since he'd changed into clean anything. That was one of the reasons why he'd made it a point to venture into any towns or habitations he came across on his journey down here. There was always one or two women who would do his laundry for the price of a smile and a little attention. After tonight's hot shower, his body continued to radiate heat, and would for some time. At the moment he didn't feel the cold seeping into the room.

The interior of his cave, for want of an apt description, was blacker than a well digger's grave, as his father often alluded to. Of course, Tollson had no idea why the term used a well digger, but the grave part he could grasp. He'd put out the candle before lying down, and for the time being he felt no need to get up and relight it. None of the dorm rooms had windows, as far as he could tell, not that it would have made any difference. Even on those rare cloudless nights when the moon was visible, it was so pale it was sometimes difficult to locate in the sky. The sun just couldn't throw out enough light to make it shine anymore.

He could suddenly hear the wind howl a fraction louder. A second later, the sound became muffled. Someone had come through the blanket door. Years of survival training made him slip out of the bed to go stand against the wall where the doorway was located. He could feel the icy wall at his back as he pressed himself against it, waiting to see who had ventured inside.

Soap. Warmth. And an unmistakable scent that reached inside his gut and squeezed.

"Drew?" whispered a voice almost too quiet to hear.

He backed away and deliberately made a noise so she could hear where he was. Without seeing her, he could tell she was startled.

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“Drew, where are you?”

Feeling his way over to the table, he lit a match and held it up a moment. Her face looked pale in the flare.

“You frightened me.”

Sorry, he signed, hoping she would at least grasp a little of it. Once the candle was lit, he turned back to look at her. She was wearing a dark cloak, maybe blue in color. It enveloped her from head to toe.

Her eyes looked black in the dim light as she stared at him. She was afraid and hesitant, and God knew he was just as nervous. Even more so, although right now she wouldn’t know that. Or why. Not yet, but soon.

“Can we talk?”

He nodded, taking her hands. They were cold. Drawing her over to the bed, they sat together on the edge. Jo continued to stare at him, as if she was still having a difficult time acknowledging the fact they were finally reunited. He knew the feeling.

She let him take her hands and rub them between his own to warm them. He saw her take in the simple t-shirt and soft cotton pants he wore. When they had been kids, and had gotten the chance to go camping together, he always slept in a t-shirt and his briefs. Jo usually wore a sleeveless undershirt and her panties, the kind with either hearts or flowers all over them. Camping had always been fun with Jo. They’d lay in their separate sleeping bags and talk until a parent threatened to tape their mouths closed if they didn’t go to sleep.

They got to go camping together, spending the night in the same tent. And when they went on vacation together, they got to sleep in the same bed, next to the grownup’s, where they’d huddle underneath the covers and whisper and giggle until it also got them in trouble. But for some strange reason, they never got to plain old spend overnight with each other in their own homes. Whenever they’d questioned their parents as to why not, the only answer they

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were given was that “it wouldn’t be right”, whatever that was supposed to mean.

From the distant look on her face, Tollson wondered if she was thinking the same thing. He paused and reached for the pad and pencil he’d left on the table, just in case.

talk to me, Jo

She took a ragged breath and lowered the hood on her cloak. She’d left her hair loose, and tonight it looked like burnished chocolate. Tollson was tempted to run his fingers through it, but stopped himself.

Then realized it no longer mattered.

Reaching up with his free hand, he threaded his hand through the thick, glossy strands. Jo closed her eyes and tilted her head back slightly to savor the touch. The movement revealed the long, translucent column of her neck, and Tollson leaned toward her to press his face against it.

Without a word he guided her back onto the bed, rolling slightly so that his body trapped hers without crushing her with his weight. Her neck held an ocean of fragrance, and he lapped it slowly, tasting and savoring it. He could feel her heart thudding under his tongue.

Jo raised her hands to circle the back of his neck, pulling and holding him tightly against her. He had never touched her like this before. He had never heard the blood gushing through his veins like it did now, speeding like runaway train straight to his groin.

“Drew?”

He managed to lift his face enough to see her eyes. They were caressing him. Honest to God, he could tell she was caressing him with her eyes. Her pupils were large, bottomless pools.

“Make love to me.”

He had been expecting her to ask. Jo never backed away from anything. When she wanted something, she asked for it. Or demanded. Or begged. Begging worked really well for her. And,

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yes, he wanted to make love to her. It was all he had thought about as he'd showered, trying to tame the erection he'd never managed to subdue since those first precious minutes he'd kissed her and touched her. But before they did, he had tell her something.

She looked hurt and confused when he pulled away from her in order to reach once again for the notebook. Giving her an apologetic smile, he quickly wrote

I'm going to need your help.

"What do you mean? What kind of help?"

I need you to show me how to make you happy

She stared at him for another long moment, when it dawned on her. The expression on her face was a delight to witness. "You've never made love to a woman before?"

He shook his head.

A second later she screwed up her nose at him. It was Jo's "I don't believe you" look, unchanged even after all the passing years. "Don't tease me, Drew."

cross my heart and hope to die

They studied each other's faces, knowing the fear they were trying to ignore. It was an enormous chasm they were about to cross. Together. But Shangri-la lay on the other side, and they had all night to get there.

"I love you, Drew," Jo confessed in a tiny voice. "I mean, I love you love you. I never stopped thinking about you, but I thought I was never going to see you again. I'm sorry I didn't believe you."

don't apologize

you had no way of knowing

Putting the pad and pencil back on top of the table, he reached for her cloak to pull it off of her. A grin came over his face. She still wore those sleeveless t-shirts. A pair of loose-fitting cotton pants were tied around her waist. He watched her toe off her sneakers before crawling into the middle of the bed.

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She would need to teach him. Show him. Guide him. It would be a memorable night of exploration for them both.

Jo took the initiative, as he knew she would. It had been that way when they were children. She got the bright idea, and he tagged along. Most of the time. Yes, there was the odd incident when he would want to go somewhere and check something out, and she would follow. But usually he was content to sit back and observe her unceasing curiosity at work.

She lifted his t-shirt over his head, letting the garment drift to the floor beside the bed. Her eyes widened as she reached out and placed a palm against his sternum. He knew what was going through her mind. She was comparing what she was seeing to her memories. To the summers they had played with the lawn sprinkler in the yard. He'd had a boyish chest back then, pale and smooth. Those days were long gone.

Her long fingers traced sculpted muscles, caressing the light furring that ran in a thin line down his stomach and disappeared below the waistband of his pants. She paused only once over the thin white scar just under his left pectoral. She glanced at him in question, but he shook his head to let her know not now. *Later. I'll tell you later.* She seemed satisfied to wait.

Her fingertips left tiny trails of fire in their wake. When she brushed his nipples, they responded by jumping to attention, making her laugh softly. "God, you're beautiful."

She continued to explore him, eventually reaching the ugly wound in his shoulder. She glanced back up at him. "Does it hurt?"

He held up a thumb and index finger a fraction of an inch apart. Jo nodded.

Her hand wiped his ribcage. Her nails lightly raked the skin there, making him jump. His reaction got a giggle out of her. "You're still ticklish there, aren't you?"

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Tollson reached over to point at her feet, making it clear that he remembered where she was just as ticklish, and gave her an impish smile. Jo giggled.

That did it. He couldn't wait any longer. His hands went up behind her and pulled her against him as he swooped down to take her lips. She parted beneath him, beseeching silently for him to claim her. All of her. Now.

Wave after wave of heat flashed through them as his tongue tangled with hers, and his hands shoved her more firmly along his body. Unconsciously one hand dipped upward into the warm wash of hair cascading down her back and over her shoulders. His other hand found her slim waist, then probed further downward, until they reached her pants. There was nothing to prevent him from slipping inside and finding her buttocks, clutching their firm roundness, then shoving her along that part of him that continued to swell and jerk, demanding release.

His heart was pounding like a runaway team of horses, galloping in mad frenzy. Jo was moaning softly and trying to pull him closer to her, against her. Inside her.

Grabbing her t-shirt, he jerked it over her head so he could finally see what he had briefly touched earlier. Her breasts were small but beautiful. Round and perfectly formed. Her nipples were the same color as her hair, enticing him to taste their richness.

He pushed her backwards onto the sheets, following her with his lips and tongue until he reached one dark, tight peak. Sweet heavens, but she tasted even better than any dessert. Rich and soft. Her skin was creamy white, and more fragrant than any perfume.

It felt like every nerve in his body had taken a direct route south, forcing him to focus on the growing need to consummate untold years of wishful, wet dreams.

One hand cupped the breast he continued to suckle, swirling his tongue around the tip and gently teething it until she jerked slightly beneath him. Quickly he glanced up into her face to see if

he was hurting her. There was no pain evident in her smoldering look.

“That feels so good,” she admitted in a whisper. It was all he needed to know. He bent over to take her other breast when she ran her fingers through his hair.

“Touch me...there.”

She lifted her hips so he could slide the pants off of her. Seeing her lying across his bed, gloriously naked and open to him, brought a wave of dizziness. It was too incredible, too unreal, and way beyond anything he had ever imagined. Yes, he had seen naked women before. There had been plenty of females who had hoped to coerce or coax him into having sex, but he had never taken it to that level. Never wanted to, and had never felt the urge.

Not until now. Now it was like his whole world had been building up to this moment when he and Jo could finally be the one complete person they had been predestined to be. They were half-souls, born apart by mistake. Incomplete until they could come together and form that perfect union of body, heart, mind, and soul.

Slowly, he trailed his fingers down her quivering abdomen until he reached the soft pillow of dark curls. Tentatively he reached down even further, touching the folds of her lower lips, then deeper. She gasped lightly and spread her thighs further apart as he stroked her, letting her moistness coat his hand and fingers.

She was like wet silk. Warm, vibrating, wet silk. Tollson shook his head. It was getting more and more difficult to concentrate on what he was doing. Primitive voices in his head were urging him to take care, to crawl up over her beautiful body and slide deep inside her. But he couldn't. Not yet. Although he didn't want them to, the caustic comments Runnion had made about Jo being frigid during sex stayed with him. That alone made him all the more determined to bring an end to it, no matter how

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much he wanted to sink into her. After tonight, he prayed she would never have that problem again.

Her hand reached down to touch his wrist. Glancing up, he could see her watching him.

“I want to feel you inside me.”

Tollson tried to hide his smile. They had always been of like mind, sometimes completing each other’s thoughts and sentences. That bond, apparently, still remained.

He stood up just long enough to shed his own pants. Jo’s eyes riveted on his erection, and Tollson wished he had the ability to ask her what she was thinking. But things had progressed too far for him to stop even for a second. He would ask her later. Later, when they were finished.

Sliding over her body dragged a low groan from his chest. She lifted her knees as he moved into position, and then, without warning, he began to shake. He felt her frame his cheeks between her hands and lift his face until she could see into his eyes, calming him.

“One day you’ll speak to me again,” she whispered as a tear fell from his lashes. “One day I’ll hear you tell me you love me.”

Lowering his face so she could kiss him, Tollson reached down to find where he needed to go. He fumbled around, nervous as hell, when suddenly he was there. Jo moaned into his mouth as he pressed into her body where it was hotter and wetter than anything he could have ever imagined. Sliding inside her as if it was the most natural thing in the world. Fitted and tailor-made.

Suddenly he didn’t need for her to tell him what to do, or how to do it. It was as if someone had opened up a book of instructions and poured them into his brain. Pushing further into her, he watched her face to catch every nuance. Every moment of passion and pleasure.

Withdraw, enter, withdraw, in. Slow to pull out, rough and fast going back. Christ, it was so simple, yet it the most fantastic

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feeling in the world. He couldn't explain how, but he felt as if he was getting thicker every time he dove into her pliant body. Either that, or she was closing down on him, as if she wanted to keep him permanently snug and deep within her. He had to move faster. Why, he couldn't explain. He just knew he had to. Faster and deeper. Keeping the rhythm constant until he was nearly pounding into her.

She was tightening up, and her face was twisting into a picture of absolute rhapsody. Her hands clutched his back, digging her short nails into his skin as he began to pile-drive into her.

It was coming. Building. Lifting them like weightless entities in the darkness. He could no longer control the situation. He could only bury his face in her ocean of chestnut hair spread across the sheets and bury himself inside her where she was hotter than the sun had ever been.

A thin, high scream echoed in his ear a split second before she took off. She became a bottle rocket, exploding into a million sparkles of light just as her legs clamped around his, holding him firmly inside her, preventing him from leaving.

Two seconds later, and his own dam burst. Tollson gasped for air as his hips jerked uncontrollably and his body continued to want to melt into hers. It wouldn't stop, this release that defied description. It felt too damn incredible.

At some point he could finally breathe, and his brain managed to send orders to the rest of his body. He slowed down, resting briefly, relishing the aftermath and vaguely aware of the tiny kisses Jo was placing on his sweaty cheek and jaw. Reluctantly he pulled out and rolled sideways so as not to smother her. It was then he felt rather than heard her crying. Alarmed, he opened his eyes and reached for her. Her eyes were wet when she glanced up at him. Instead of answering his silent plea, Jo scooted closer until their bodies were once again in full contact, skin to skin, and they cuddled. Gently, he gave her shoulder a little shake.

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“I’m okay,” she managed to whisper. “You didn’t hurt me.” If it were possible, she drew tighter against him. “I love you, Drew. God, I love you so much.”

He kissed the top of her head, then lifted her chin, forcing her to look at him. He wiped the tears with his thumb, questioning her with his eyes. Sniffing, Jo managed a weak smile. “I’ve never come before.” He lifted an eyebrow. She responded by nodding her head slightly. “I know you find it hard to believe, but it’s true. I’ve never had an orgasm before. Until tonight. Thank you, Drew.” Sighing heavily, Jo detached her chin from his hand and nuzzled his neck. “Hold me?” came the muffled request. Her lips tickled.

Too astounded to try and think about it, Tollson continued to caress her back and buttocks as his body continued to wind down. He had no recollection of falling asleep with his Jo lying peacefully in his arms.

Chapter 15

Yesterday, February 28

When the trees died around their house, Drew's father hired a man to come cut them down and take them away, until there was this huge circle surrounding the building, which made their new home look bigger than it actually was.

It was a brick home, and Drew had overheard his parents one evening talking about it. It seemed his mother had been hoping for one of those log cabins that were so prevalent up in Maine. Cort Tollson would have the final say about it.

"Mitch said it had to be brick or rock, not siding, and for God's sake not wood!" Drew was glad his father had listened to Mr. Wythe, and that his mother finally agreed.

He heard later that the sun had erupted for over three hours that morning nearly a month ago. When it was over, and the sky had gone dark once more, they had stumbled back to shore, faces scalded, almost overcome from heat prostration and dehydrated, despite lying submerged under the water all that time. But they were alive.

Thank goodness they hadn't locked the car doors on their rush to the lake. The keys didn't fit the locks any longer. The trunk had sealed shut on the car, so David was forced to crawl through the opening in the back seat to reach the gallon jugs of water Cort had

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put there. The water was warm, but it was the most delicious stuff Drew ever put in his mouth.

They walked all the way home amid more devastation. Everything was on fire. Or melted. Or charred beyond recognition. Twice Drew's mother tried to avert his eyes whenever they came near a body and weren't able to avoid it.

Things had spontaneously combusted, like firecrackers. Homes and cars, especially. If it weren't for the scattered fires, it would have been too dark to see, since there was no more electricity.

Several times Drew wanted to ask his father if their house had burned up, too, but he was terrified what the answer might be, so he didn't. It wasn't long before he got an answer.

Drew's mother fell to her knees and cried. Their home was still there, although the outer ring of trees beyond it were smoking stubs, like extinguished candles. Quickly, they went inside where they covered the worst of their burns with aloe cream and tried to get some sleep.

Later that morning, when true sunrise came due, the sun seemed farther away. And paler, and definitely nowhere near warm enough to do any good. Drew had to put on long pants and a sweater for the first time in what felt like ages. That afternoon it snowed, and it snowed every day after that.

Their house had a basement where Cort had managed to fill with foodstuffs and supplies before the apocalypse, as the radio had been calling it. They were very careful to hide the fact that they weren't suffering like so many others. Many nights Drew helped his father bury their garbage deep enough to where the roaming dogs that had survived couldn't sniff it out and dig it up.

They were isolated, literally in the middle of nowhere. An easy target if anyone cared to follow the little dirt path off the market road.

Their idyllic life lasted twenty-two days.

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Drew was awakened by the sound of something crashing. A glass something breaking. His first sleep-fogged thought was that something had fallen over in the living room or kitchen, and was about to go back to sleep when he got this funny feeling in the pit of his stomach. Like he wanted to throw up, only worse. The prickly feeling spread into his lungs, making it hard to breathe. Then it trickled into his hands and fingers, and then into his feet. It was like a voice inside his head was telling him to move. *Go! Get out of here! Run!* Then the door to the bedroom banged open.

Four men reeking with something that turned his stomach had entered their home and were ransacking it for anything edible. Drew heard his mother scream and his father pleading for them to take whatever they wanted, “but for God’s sake don’t hurt us.”

Two hairy arms seized him and dragged him off the top bunk. Someone else had David and was carrying him kicking and screaming into the hallway.

He was so terrified he wet himself. The man who was supposed to take him stepped back in disgust. “Fucking kid’s peed himself!” he yelled to whoever he had to answer to.

“Bring him in here anyway!” came the answer.

The man shoved him hard against his back. “Move it, kid! I ain’t about to carry you!” Drew stumbled but managed not to fall. Numb, he walked under his own power into the living room where two men with flashlights were tying up his mother and father and brother with plastic bags saved from the grocery store. Drew’s father had a red smear on the side of his face, and his mother was crying uncontrollably, but silently.

David’s face had gone whiter than paper. He looked like a ghost. Drew’s captor pushed him next to his brother and proceeded to tie his wrists together behind his back. It was then the last man came pounding up the basement stairs.

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"You were right! There's a goddamn supermarket downstairs!" he exclaimed in delight. "How are we gonna carry it out of here?" one of the men wondered aloud.

Drew's captor sneered, and Drew remembered where he had seen the guy before. It was the tree cutter who had come last month to trim around their house.

"Fuck the carrying. Where would we take it? Why not stay here until it's gone before we hafta head out?"

The other three found his reasoning sound. The man standing behind Drew's father gave him a push. "What about these four? What about them?"

"Not a problem," the guy standing by the basement said, and pulled a big knife from his waistband. Walking over to David, he jerked back the teenager's head and cleanly sliced through the boy's throat.

Drew screamed, as well as his mother and father, as they watched David fall to the tile floor like a disjointed puppet. Blood was spurting over them like a garden hose gone crazy. Waving his glistening knife toward the other three, the man calmly ordered, "No sense letting them live. They'll eat up what's now rightfully ours. Kill 'em and throw their bodies out back."

Drew's mother was next. The man who had carried her from the bedroom slit her throat, too. Drew continued to scream and scream as her blood, still warm, sprayed droplets over his face.

Cort Tollson begged for their lives until the man behind him rammed his knife into the side of his neck. The last thing Drew remembered about his father was the look of sorrow in his brown eyes as his life poured out.

"Shut the fuckin' kid up!" someone shouted to be heard above Drew's shrill shrieks.

That was when something slammed into his chest. Hard and hot. The cry in his throat stopped in mid-breath. Unable to

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breathe, Drew blacked out, falling forward to land face first on top of his mother's lifeless body.

He woke up so cold, he was unable to move. Until he discovered it was David's body, and part of his mother's, lying on top of him. The four men had thrown the family out into the backyard, just beyond where the stubble of trees remained.

Slowly, painfully, Drew managed to get to his feet. He had no idea that his family's bodies had kept him from freezing to death in the sub-zero cold, but that would soon change. Not unless he found someplace safe, and soon.

The sun was starting to come up. It would be dawn before too long. Covered in blood, and hurting in ways he had never felt before in his life, eleven-year-old Drew Tollson stumbled away from the house.

Less than an hour later, three men from a survivalist camp ensconced deep in the woods came across a little boy wandering aimlessly in the middle of nowhere. The kid's hands were tied behind his back, and he was in severe shock and suffering from hypothermia. Worse still, when they examined him as they tried to pry his name from him, they discovered a deep knife wound in the boy's chest. It had just missed his heart by a fraction of an inch, but it was still bad.

Wrapping him in a thermal blanket, they rushed him back to their camp where they nursed him back to health. It was two days later before they found out his name and the fact that he had lived in a house somewhere nearby. But they never discovered the reason why he had been alone in the woods, or why he had been attacked. In fact, they never heard any words at all come from Drew's own lips.

For all they knew, the boy was a mute.

Chapter 16

“Drew! Drew!”

Reality charged back into his brain hard and fast, leaving him gasping for breath. It was black as ink, with no light whatsoever to give him a clue as to where he was. He was on his knees, of that he was certain, bent over his aggressor. One muscular arm had the man pinned down across the throat, and the other hand was gripping the attacker’s skull, ready to follow through with one of a dozen ways he knew would kill instantly.

“Drew?” The voice beneath him wavered, and then he remembered.

Jo!

Immediately he released her from where he had pinned her down, a blanket of fear descending on him. Had he hurt her? Had he done anything to turn her against him?

Oh, dearest God in Heaven, he’d almost killed her!

A deep sob bubbled in his chest as he pulled her up into his arms to embrace her. He was trembling, but so was she. Probably scared out of her skin from his attack. What in hell could have provoked him?

A long minute passed as he continued to hold her, praying she would forgive him. Praying even harder he hadn’t lost her. Then, amazingly, her hands slid up his chest, and her arms wrapped around his neck. Her acceptance wrenched another sob from him. Hot tears fell down her back, onto her thick hair.

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“It’s okay, Drew. You didn’t hurt me much.”

Much?

His arms held her closer, reminding him at last of where they were. That they were alone in his room. And that not too long ago they had made love after seventeen years of frustration.

Slowly he forced his arms to release their death grip on her. He placed a tender kiss on one cotton-soft shoulder, then another, and another, following the path of creamy skin to the juncture of her neck. Slow, loving kisses, up her long neck until he reached her jaw. She started trembling again, but not because of fear.

Under her ear he found the patch of skin that oozed her scent. Her warmth. The fragrance of her hair that was beginning to rush him headlong toward that wall of insanity.

Her breasts were already rubbing against his chest. Their tips were stiff, scratchy. They were driving him nuts. His dick was quickly swelling, prodding her in the stomach as she held on to him for dear life.

A second before he reached her mouth, she murmured against his lips, “I will always love you.” Her confession melted any fears he held.

He fell onto the mattress, taking her with him. Jo spread her legs, encircling his waist as his hands cupped her bottom. He continued to kiss her, taking her tongue and sucking on it, making little wet sounds. Jesus, he could spend the rest of his life kissing her. Loving her like this. As soon as he felt her impatiently shift her hips toward him, he pressed her over his hard length, bringing her down over him. Jo broke away from his mouth with a loud, sexual groan. The sound of it made him go stiffer and longer, if such a thing was really possible. The room seemed to get colder, but Tollson knew it was because of the little beads of sweat breaking out over both their bodies.

The muscles in his arms and legs were well developed. He could bench press nearly three hundred fifty pounds with his arms

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alone. Taking Jo's body and pumping her up and down over him was nothing. He could do it all day without getting tired.

With every movement of sliding her over him, his hips jerked forward to meet her. The act made her breasts jiggle against his chest, and their sweet tickling soon became torture. Jo was holding onto him, arms wrapped around his thick neck. She was already drowning in the passion washing over her like gathering storm clouds. They were lost in the frenzy, and gathering steam.

Her feet locked behind his back. Without thinking or slowing down, Tollson reached behind him and unhooked her legs, bringing them up to place her sock-covered heels on his shoulders. It doubled her over, forcing her to let go of him and lean back into the sheets as she gasped for air. He paused long enough to roll her onto her back. The rearrangement was like setting themselves on fire.

He began to move inside her more rapidly as the first sounds of her impending orgasm rose in her throat. In the darkness he felt her hand reaching, searching for his. Finding it, she led him down to where their bodies were joined. He realized she was trying to show him something. Teach him something. He slowed just enough for her to get her wish.

It was a small nub within her folds. Wet, hot, and hard. She made him flick it with his thumb, and when he did, she jerked her hips off the mattress. "Gentle, gentle," she urged.

Tollson smiled with joy. Not only were they going to turn their switches back on, he was going to get to punch all her buttons as well.

Now it was a whole new ball game.

With one hand planted flat on the mattress, and bent slightly over her, he resumed taking her, loving her with everything he could give. He touched that small button she'd shown him, barely skimming it over and over with his thumb. Jo keened softly as her heat flamed brighter and hotter.

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His fingertips could feel their union, the steady in and out of his body with hers. The slickness, the scent, her response to their lovemaking—time was measured in seconds until their release. He gradually increased the pressure. Then the speed.

Jo came with a scream of pure pleasure. He heard her arms flail against the sheets as her fingers tried to dig deep into the bedclothes. Her body contracted, catching him in a viselike grip as he plunged inside her. Barely able to withdraw, Tollson tried one last time to slide as far as he could into her, when darkness became daylight, and the whole world shook as he also came.

His body trembled like a massive earthquake. His hips continued to ram against the valley between her thighs as they spun crazily out of control. They were oblivious to everything around them, all except for the most glorious feelings of love and sex that had melted and recombined within them.

He was wrung out but not tired. No, definitely not tired. At some point Tollson knew he remained inside her. Stuck, actually. She had closed down on him so tightly, he could barely move, but part of that was his fault, anyway. He was still thick and filling her. Her heat kept him at that point where it would take very little to get him going again. Jo seemed to realize it, too, when she lifted her feet off his shoulders and relocked them around his waist.

They were both sweaty and breathing heavily. It was wonderful just to hold each other as the earth continued to seesaw, gradually slowing down and settling.

The most wonderful place in the world...scratch that. The second most wonderful place in the world was right where Jo's shoulder and neck met. Nuzzling it tenderly, he gave it a kiss before settling his face there. Lying entwined as they were, he could breathe her like spring flowers. Fresh, warm air. The scent of love.

He felt her fingers run through his hair. "Shit, Drew, what have you done to me?"

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The chuckle that reverberated inside his chest vibrated in them both. They rested quietly a while longer. How long, they didn't know, since battery-operated watches and clocks were relics of the past. One of Promise's most prized possessions was an old windup eight-day clock sitting out of harm's way on a ledge inside the mess hall. Since meals were served only at specific times, the residents had developed an innate sense of when it was chow time, and used the clock as reference when they came to eat. Personally, Drew guessed it might not be too long before dawn.

"Can you light a candle so I can talk to you?"

Sighing loudly, Tollson reluctantly pulled himself out of her and away from her to hunt for the candle. The room was freezing. He could feel his skin shriveling. Irritation took over when he discovered the taper had burned down to a stump. Jo sensed his aggravation.

"Candle no good?" She paused, wondering how he could answer her in the dark, when it came to her. "Once for yes, twice for no."

He snapped his fingers once.

"There should be extra tapers on the shelf by the door."

Tapers? Shelf?

Tollson tried to remember if he'd seen a shelf when he had unpacked. Maybe she didn't mean an attached shelf, but one dug into the wall. A natural ledge. Running his fingers at eye level, then lower, he encountered a depression in the rock. It was rough, not smooth, but it held two more candles. Smart. The roughness prevented them from rolling off. He lit the fresh candle and placed it in the can being used as a holder, then brought it over to the bed and set it on the table. That done, he crawled underneath the covers where Jo was waiting for him. She slid into his arms without him having to reach for her.

"Do you have those nightmares a lot?" she asked.

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Her question brought back a trace of the guilt he'd felt upon awakening to find he was about to cause her serious injury. Nightmares? When didn't he have one? Slowly, he nodded.

"Are they about how you lost your voice?"

He nodded again.

Rising up on one elbow, she gazed down at him. The tip of one finger traced the contours of his face, following his brow and eyebrows, along the bridge of his nose to his lips, then over one cheek and up to his chin. "Are your folks still alive?"

no.

"Did they survive the explosion?"

yes.

She bit her lower lip. "How about David?"

no.

Tollson vowed to himself to tell her everything. Later.

In the candlelight her eyes looked like the richest sapphires. Kissing the tip of his finger, he placed it to her lips. She grinned back. There was a redness around her neck, and one thumb-size red mark near her temple. He guessed that was where he had been holding her down.

Sorry, he signed.

"Is that how you say you're sorry in sign language?"

He nodded. Her grin went from loving to playful.

"How do you say 'I love you'?"

It was a simple, universal symbol. Seeing it, Jo barked softly with laughter. "It looks like a 'Hook 'Em Horns' sign."

Tollson answered her with a snort.

"No, no, no, it does," she insisted. She adjusted her position, throwing one leg over his until her knee nudged his semi-erection. The response she got didn't surprise her, but she pretended to ignore it...for now. "How do you sign 'bed'?"

He showed her.

"My name?"

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That one required using the alphabet, but fortunately her name was short. Easy to learn with a flick of the wrist.

“Okay.” Dipping her head, Jo dropped a kiss to his cheek. “How about ‘make love’?”

Grinning mischievously, Tollson made a circle with his thumb and index finger, then with his other hand began running his other forefinger in and out of the hole. Jo squealed in shock and delight, slapping him playfully on his chest.

“Seriously, Drew!”

He replied.

They snuggled together, content and gradually getting warmer as their combined body heat underneath the quilts began to make them drowsy. After a while Jo said quietly, “It’s no fair, you knowing sign language.”

He glanced down where she was resting her head on his collarbone, and gave her a questioning look.

“No, really. You don’t have to yell at me to tell me something. We could be at opposite ends of the mess hall, and all you’d have to do is wiggle your hands, and I’d know exactly what you were saying. Drew, would you teach me sign language?”

He nodded, smiling softly. Her earlier prediction still echoed in his head. *One day you’ll speak to me again. One day I’ll hear you tell me you love me.* Thumping the covers to get her attention, he gave her the sign for bed again.

“Bed,” she responded.

Then another. Jo giggled.

“I love you.”

Lifting her left hand where it was resting on his chest, Tollson pointed to himself, then to her, then pantomimed placing a ring on her third finger. It couldn’t have been any clearer.

Eyes wide, she got up on one elbow and looked down at him. “You really mean it? You’re staying? Here? With me?” A tear suddenly appeared, slipped from her lashes, and fell on his

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shoulder. It was warm. But she still hadn't given him an answer, so he repeated the gesture.

She never gave him a yes or no. Instead she rolled on top of him and began to cover his face with soft, little kisses until she reached his mouth. At which point Tollson took over, ready for lesson number three—consummating their engagement.

Chapter 17

Cameron ran up to the table where Polinski was picking at his breakfast. The boy huffed and puffed a bit before spilling the news. “Abel will be here shortly, but Jo wasn’t in her room.”

“She’s up already?” Polinski tried to guess where the girl might be this time of the morning, considering she wasn’t exactly a morning person. But because she was in charge of the domestic side of things, it could have been anything that had dragged her out from under her warm blankets, which meant she could be anywhere. He was contemplating sending out an All Call to search for her when he was interrupted by the teen’s frantic head shake.

“No, you don’t understand. I called to her, and when she didn’t answer, I peeked inside her room.” The boy paused for dramatic effect. “Her bed hadn’t been slept in! She didn’t go home last night!”

The news had the Triad leader’s interest piqued as much as the kid’s, when the explanation suddenly came to him. “She’s probably over at Tollson’s. Go find out.”

He could swear the teen balked. “The Wraith, sir?”

“Just make a lot of noise. Let him know it’s you. If Jo’s there, she’ll answer.” He watched the boy shuffle his feet a bit, still hesitant, then added, “It’s important she gets here as soon as possible, Cam.”

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“Okay...then it’s true?” The boy gave him a questioning look. Before Polinski could say anything, he clarified himself. “It’s true they used to be sweethearts? Back when they were kids?”

“I think Jo deserves a little happiness, don’t you?”

Polinski continued to stare at the boy, knowing he didn’t have to explain further. Nearly all the residents of Promise had managed to settle in, making themselves a home and resuming as much of a normal life as was possible in this new traumatic era on Earth. Jo was one of the few exceptions. Although she had been part of Promise’s extended family almost from its inception, she had yet to accept being there. She didn’t complain or whine over current circumstances, like so many of the inhabitants did. Still, she never gave the impression she was happy, or at least content. If this man Tollson was her real true love in life, then praise the angels that had led him here.

Another thought flashed in his mind, leaving Polinski with a sinking feeling in his stomach. What if Tollson decided to take her away? After all, it was a distinct possibility. A man of Tollson’s talents and abilities would be more than welcome in any community.

The Triad security leader watched Cameron hustle out the door as Andrade joined him at the table.

“What’s up?” the man asked, dropping his tray in front of Polinski.

“We got raided last night.”

“Again? That’s what? Three times now in the past week and a half?”

“Thirteen days. Two weeks.”

“What they get this time, as if I wanna know?”

“Two head of cattle. Let’s wait until Jo joins us before I say anything more. My men should be here by then.”

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Taking a bite of his bacon, Andrade glanced around the nearly full mess hall. "What could be taking her?" He paused. "Or do I need to ask?"

Polinski threw him a grin. "We can only hope."

"Christ, yeah. That girl's been in need of some heavy duty happiness for way too long," Andrade agreed.

* * * *

Cameron entered the opening to Old Man Tucker's place with more than an ounce of trepidation. If just a tenth of what he'd heard about the Silent Wraith was true, he knew he would have to approach the man's bedroom with category red caution.

Speaking of red, the red piece of material was draped over the blanket blocking the way. Cameron stared at it as his mind argued with himself. Should he obey the rule of red, which was the same as locking the door and putting out the Do Not Disturb sign? Or should he dare it because a Triad leader had given him a direct order? Crap, he hated having to make decisions like this!

One thing was certain, though. There was no way he could leave without knowing something. Lifting the door, he stuck his head inside and listened.

Nothing. No snoring, no...nothing.

"Hellooo?" He gave it a few seconds, then tried again. "Hello? Mr. Tollson?" This was as far as he was going. He'd be damned if he would go waltzing into the bedroom of a known killing machine. He didn't care who ordered him to do differently.

There was rustling noise, then a familiar voice sleepily responded, "Cameron?"

"Jo? Ross's called an emergency meeting of the Triad in the mess hall. Pronto."

"Be there shortly. Tell 'em I'm on my way."

The teen was out of there in a heartbeat.

* * * *

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Jo stretched, feeling the pull of muscles all the way from the tips of her sock-covered feet to the pads of her fingers lifted high over her head. There was no way she would be able to wipe the huge smile permanently adhered to her face. In the words of the common man, she had been loved up one end and down the other.

A large hand crept under the covers and over her abdomen to play in the dip of her belly button. She rolled over to find herself being scrutinized by a pair of tempting eyes. "You're drunk on love," she teased him.

He signed,

More.

It was her fault she'd already learned that one.

"Not now, I'm sorry to say. I wish...I wish we could stay here. I mean..." She blushed, earning a deep chuckle from him. Oh, geesh, if his voice sounded anything like what she could hear rumbling in his chest, she knew she would melt.

Tollson reached up to brush a strand of hair that had caught on the corner of her mouth, letting his fingers linger there a moment. One moment he was the dumpy kid who had wormed his way into her heart. Teasing with her. Playing with her. The next, he was this strapping, incredibly sexy stranger who could do things to her mind and body that frightened her. He was her Drew, and they were going to spend the rest of their lives together. He'd promised her. Could she feel any happier?

Staring at the soft warmth of love in his eyes, Jo was unaware of his hand drifting away from her face, down to where her breasts were pressed along his ribcage, until she felt his fingers caress them. She hated to have to move away but she had no choice. "And please don't try to start something we don't have time to finish. At least, not right now. If Ross has called an emergency meeting, I gotta get my butt in gear." Moving over him, she gave him a quick kiss, although he tried to make it otherwise. A slap to the hand that tried to slip between her legs was also in order as she crawled over

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to the foot of the bed. "I gotta run over to my place and get some decent clothes. Meet you at the mess hall?"

Tollson nodded and watched her go without further interference. As soon as she was gone, he was on his feet and reaching for his pants.

* * * *

Polinski was surrounded by several of his subordinates when he glanced up to see Tollson striding toward him. Alone.

"Jo?"

Tollson gave a gesture that appeared to say, "She's on her way".

Polinski nodded.

"Go get a tray. We might be a while."

He found the entrance to the serving line, and was midway down it when a figure cut in behind him. He didn't have to turn to see who it was.

"Save me some, big guy?"

Jo didn't need an interpreter to understand what the signal meant that he gave her. Giggling, she gave him a little shove. "Hurry up. You're holding up the line."

"Care for some coffee, Mr. Tollson?" the older woman on the other side of the counter asked with a big smile.

Tollson came to a dead stop, giving her, then Jo, a disbelieving look.

"It's instant, but beggars can't be choosers, can they? Don't forget my cup, Laurie." Giving him another little push, Jo led him away from the serving line and over to the table where the others were waiting. No one missed the subtle signals between the couple. In a small community such as Promise, news traveled with the speed of sound.

"Morning, Jo, Mr. Tollson. This is official business, Jo. I don't mean to be rude, but I don't think it would be wise for Mr.

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Tollson to sit in on what we're about to discuss." His eyes went from one to the other as a thundercloud gathered over Jo.

"There's been a few changes," she began, trying to keep her irritation in check. She was about to say more when Tollson placed a hand over hers and turned to where Polinski was leaning on the table across from them. He slapped his memo book down in front of the man and began to write. When he was finished, he shoved it over and waited for him to read it. Hopefully aloud. Polinski obliged.

*if I'm going to be a permanent part of this community,
it's time we learn to trust each other
I'm going to need to be assigned a position or job
best bet would be security
don't you think?*

Around them the other men exchanged surprised looks. Polinski tossed the notebook back at Tollson. "You're thinking of staying on?"

A nod.

He slid his eyes over at Jo, who had scooted over until she sat thigh-to-thigh with the man. There was no need for explanation. Deep inside he felt an overwhelming sense of relief. The man was staying here. With Jo, obviously. And from the looks passing between them, that was probably the best news he'd heard in years. With a start, Polinski noticed she was wearing her hair down, and not in the ever-present braid down her back. Could he even remember the last time she'd worn it loose?

To hell with waiting for the community to vote. It was a done deal anyway, as far as Polinski was concerned, and he stuck his hand out toward the man. "Let me be the first to welcome you into our community, Mr. Tollson."

Tollson shook his hand as he pulled his notebook back toward himself to jot

Drew.

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“Got it. Drew. Gentlemen, Drew Tollson is now a member of our security regiment.” Quickly he introduced the others, including Faith, who had joined them at the last minute. Tollson gave her hand an extra shake.

“How’s that shoulder?” she asked. It was immediately clear she was disappointed she wouldn’t be able to pursue the good-looking albeit dangerous young man. On the other hand, the fact that he had come for Jo, if the rumors were true—and from the current look of things, they were—well, she couldn’t be more delighted. Jo was overdue for some happiness.

fine thanks

“Not to be rude, but can we get to why you called this meeting?” Jo reminded them. She handed Tollson the small pot of milk for his coffee after he sat down. Something passed between them before they started on their breakfast.

Polinski gave up trying to hide his smile.

“Last night during the storm, we were raided. They got two head of our cattle. That makes three raids in thirteen days,” he stated.

Tollson made a gesture. Jo blushed slightly as she turned to interpret. This was going to get interesting very quickly if she wasn’t careful. “He, um, wants to know more.” Glancing back at Tollson, she said, “We’ve been having these raids on our supplies for quite a while now, but whoever is doing it doesn’t always target the same thing. This time it was the cattle. Last time it was the greenhouse, right, Ross?”

“Yeah. They got in and practically cleaned out all the vegetables. Thank goodness we were able to salvage some for ourselves, and save enough seed for a new crop. The time before that they got into the laundry and stole a good dozen blankets and quilts.” Polinski motioned toward Andrade. “Are the missing cattle going to cause an immediate problem?”

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“Let me check on exactly which ones they took, and I’ll get back with you,” the Triad leader over supplies told them.

Tollson waved for attention and shoved his notebook over to Polinski.

when do they hit?

any pattern?

“During the worst of a storm,” Jo answered. “Always, when we can’t see ’em.”

Polinski continued. “When we’re hunkered down and not able to keep a good enough watch.”

same person(s) every time?

“Have no idea. Possibly, considering the M.O.” From the corner of his eye Polinski saw one of his men raise a hand for attention. “Bill?”

“Any idea why the sudden surge in raids? I mean, it’s summer. The weather has its moments, but it’s nothing like it is during the winter months,” Bill Yarrow commented. Two others beside him nodded their heads.

any casualties?

“None so far,” Polinski said.

tracking?

The Triad leader in charge of security grimaced. “How? The tracks would be blown away before we could even begin to know where to start looking.”

mind if I look?

Polinski shrugged. “Knock yourself out. Abel will take you over there as soon as you’ve finished eating.” Giving a wave of his hand, he called an end to the meeting. The men moved to other tables to give the couple some privacy.

Jo continued to watch the man beside her as he put away the omelet and toast. He still had a hearty appetite like he did when they were kids, but of course he was probably just as famished as she was, she realized with another wave of heat rising to her face.

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They must have burned a few calories last night, considering how they never got cold during it all.

A nudge at her elbow made her lift her eyes to see his smiling down at her. He directed her attention to the memo pad being pushed toward her.

how do you feel?

“A bit overwhelmed.”

about?

“Everything, Drew. Last night. You being here. This morning.” Sighing, she rested her cheek for a moment on his shirt sleeve and briefly closed her eyes. “If I’m dreaming, don’t wake me.” She could hear the sound of his pencil scratching on the paper. He gave her a little jiggle to read it.

when can we be married?

Funny how the words got blurry real fast. She started to answer him, but her voice got stuck somewhere inside her throat, keeping her from speaking. As always, he seemed to understand her predicament.

you’re in charge of domestic, right?

This one she could answer with a nod.

is there a place over in married housing

where we could take up residence?

“I can look into it today.” Lifting her eyes once more to gaze into his, she asked him outright what she had been wanting to ask since Cameron had awakened them. “Are you sure you want to marry me, Drew? I mean, it’s been a long, long time. I’ve changed. You’ve changed.”

There. It was out, although it had cost her. She had to offer him a way out, in case last night had changed his mind. Some guys were like that, she’d found out. Once they got a piece, they no longer found they wanted the whole pie, so to speak. There was every possibility her Drew had changed so much that what she thought had been between them no longer existed. There was

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every chance that he had pursued a memory to find her, then found out the real thing was nothing like he'd imagined.

In spite of trying to find a reason, any reason, to push him away, she knew he was still her Drew. Yes, the packaging was different, but his heart hadn't changed. If it was possible to love someone harder and stronger and surer than she did at that moment, she didn't know how. Jo was unaware of how hard she was squeezing her silverware until it bit into her hands. Trembling, she started to say more, when he grabbed the pad and scribbled quickly.

have you had a lifetime of failed relationships?

"Yeah," she admitted truthfully. Shakily.

I've never been able to have one either

it took me a while to understand why

He glanced at her to see if she was following him.

you were meant to be my only love

I was meant to be yours

we were lucky to have found

each other when we were kids

we were lucky to have been able

to have formed that bond

between us because it's that bond

that's kept me sane

the only thing

it's that bond that drove me to

come here

it was my sense of purpose

it led me here to you

you are and will be the only woman

I can and will love

don't be afraid I'll reject you, Jo

it'll never happen as long as I live

I love you

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It took everything in her not to start crying in front of everyone there in the mess hall. Once more Tollson read her. Helping her on with her coat, he led her outside where the blowing snow would force them to lift their hoods, shielding their faces from others. And she could lean in his arms as he kept her protected.

Chapter 18

“Ross wants me to take you over to security when we’re done at the barn,” Andrade told him, giving Tollson a “follow me” gesture.

Tollson locked step with the man as they left the mess hall and headed down the valley. A quick glance backwards was useless in the sudden storm that had blown in from nowhere. He knew Jo had left to “check in”, whatever that meant. He just wished he could have caught a last glimpse of her.

Concentrate. Concentrate. Keep your mind on what you’re doing, for Jo’s sake. The time had come for him to prove himself. More than that, if this was where he and Jo were going to spend the rest of their lives, and hopefully raise a family, Promise had to be one of the safest places on earth. That meant he had to check out their security and see what needed to be tightened. But he wouldn’t be able to do it as long as images of Jo constantly interrupted his concentration.

He flexed his fingers inside his gloves as he followed Andrade. The storm prevented the man from talking as they walked, which was a blessing in disguise. The last thing Tollson wanted was to have the guy giving him important information when his legs wanted to turn his body around and go find Jo. Find her, drag or carry her back to his cave, and do what cavemen have done for eons to ensure the continuation of the species.

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It was like a fever. He was running cold and hot at the same time. Not good. At least, not right now. He still wore her scent on his skin like cologne, pungent and heady. Definitely the sexiest smell he'd ever smelled in his life. If he allowed himself, he could recall the feel of her skin like thick, firm cream in his hands. Splayed over the sheets, her russet hair had been finer than the softest silk.

He paused. He had to, he had no choice. It was as if his heart had suddenly given every nerve inside his body a sharp tug. In response, his skin had pulled inward, tightening over his muscles, and his manhood immediately came to attention.

Not good at all.

But, dearest Lord, how could he control what he felt? Here he was, a twenty-eight-year-old man, and he had finally, finally lost his virginity. It had been the most miraculous experience of his life. Better than any dream. Far better than anything he'd imagined or hoped for. Or wished. What was stopping him from making an about-face and hunting her down, then hoisting her over a shoulder...feeling her perfect breasts bouncing against his back...having that sweet, sweet bottom at face level...taking her up to his room where the bed was still in shambles from the night before...

Jo. JoBeth.

JoBeth Wythe...Tollson.

Damn, that sounded good. He smiled in spite of the biting wind. It had to be in the low twenties, temperature-wise. With the stiff gale, probably drop the chill factor into the minus category. Cold enough to freeze a cup of water if he threw it into the air. But not so cold that it could do anything about the fire between his legs.

That Runnion character, he had accused her of being frigid. Tollson could laugh over that one, as well. He had given her her first orgasm, and two more, to boot. But he knew what buttons to

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push. He knew where she was ticklish, and now he knew how to make her sizzle. But more than anything, he knew why he was the only man who completed her. And so did she.

Shit. Tollson shook his head and chanced a glance backwards. It was no good. It was still morning, and already the coming night seemed a week away. Crossing his arms over his chest, he lowered his head and continued to trudge behind the Triad leader, praying he could muster enough intelligence to do his job. Hopefully Jo would have some answers for him when they joined up later for lunch.

He grinned. Unless they decided to skip lunch. Never underestimate the possibility.

Don't forget she's a bigwig here. Tollson mentally shrugged. Jo's prominence in the community didn't bother him. In fact, he was damn proud of her. Because of her he'd been accepted as one of them before being made to prove himself to the other powers that be. She'd done enough to bring him into the fold. It was his turn now to show them what he could do.

Hurrying to catch up, he tapped Andrade on the shoulder and ducked behind a narrow outcropping of limestone to jot a quick note.

*tell me everything about this place
every location, every name
is there a map?*

Andrade nodded. "I'll give you the short version. Ross has a couple of maps. He can give you a better layout of the place." He gave a wave. "It's just a few more feet."

They reached what looked like another hole in the wall, no different in appearance from all the others dug into the rock. Tollson knew the reason for the sameness. He also knew there had to be an easier way to learn how to get about on his own. And he'd have to learn it quick.

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A little less than fifteen feet down the narrow tunnel, it opened up into a natural limestone cavern. Halfway there he detected the odor of livestock. The vaulted ceiling was a dimly visible roof above their heads. Tollson paused on the wide ledge to stare open-mouthed at the floor below.

The area was separated into three distinct sections. In one, several head of cattle were grazing out of long troughs. Beyond them he could see a section of pigs and some goats. Closer to them were a good dozen sheep or more. It was Old MacDonald's farm gone underground. Andrade chuckled to see his bewilderment. Before Tollson could say anything, one of the workers spotted them and ran up a flight of stairs carved into the rock down along the wall.

"How bad is it?" Andrade questioned the man.

"Statistically they got two head, but it was Willy and Daisy. So logistically they got three."

"Shit! And chances are they stole them for the meat, which means they probably won't care that Daisy was about to drop. Shit on a stick! She was our best producer, too. How'd they get in? Do we know yet?" Noticing the way the man was eyeing Tollson, he quickly introduced them. "Mason, this is Drew Tollson. Tollson, Mason Slavacek. Mason handles the livestock. Ross put Tollson on his security squad. He came with me to check out the place."

The two men shook hands. Slavacek gave a nod. "I've heard about you. Welcome to Promise. You and Jo hooked up, right?"

As he nodded, Tollson warned himself he'd better watch it, or else this place would know every time he and Jo made love. On second thought, screw it. They had waited too damn long and gone through sheer hell to finally get back together. If Jo's little screams of ecstasy made them avert their faces in embarrassment, so what?

Slavacek led them down the stairs, explaining. "They came in through the rear entrance and exited out the same way. Bustos was on watch, but he'd gone out to take a leak and got bushwhacked.

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When he came to, he'd been dragged back into the penning area. He took a quick count, found it short, and notified Morrissey."

Andrade settled his hands on his hips. "How's Bustos this morning?"

"Dr. Donna says he'll be okay in a couple of days. She's got him at her clinic, keeping an eye on him. He's got a baseball-sized lump on the back of his head."

"Thanks, Mason. Well, Tollson, any suggestions or ideas?" Pointing to his left, at approximately ten o'clock, if Tollson used the cavern opening they'd come through as six o'clock, the Triad leader said, "There's the second entrance. It winds downward a bit, then comes up gradually out into an open pasture area. Or what we refer to as a pasture. There's another cavern just before you get there. We keep our horses in that one. And there's also another smaller cavern in that direction." He pointed to one o'clock. "We keep our smaller livestock there, like the chickens, the rabbits, and the half-dozen turkeys." Giving Tollson a dark glare, he added, "Times were tough, those first three years, until we were able to get our feet a little more firmly under us. Food was scarce. It was belt-tightening time, let me tell you, but I'm sure you understand what I'm saying."

Tollson agreed, although his circumstances weren't as drastic as what they had experienced. The survivalists who had taken him in had been more than ready for a worldwide disaster. The food hadn't been fancy, but there had always been enough of it to keep a growing boy and sixteen others from going hungry.

"We still have to watch our rations carefully. Some things we still have to allot in small portions, but compared to the way it had been back then..." Andrade sighed.

Tollson gave him some Pidgin signing, wondering if he could take a look around.

"Sure. Knock yourself out. I'll wait here for you."

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Descending the rest of the way to the floor of the cavern, Tollson tugged off his gloves and threw back his hood. The place was warm, but he chose to keep his coat on.

His biggest question was answered when his feet touched the bottom level. Gravel. The floor had been covered with small, pea-sized gravel, which acted somewhat like cattle-sized kitty litter. Walking among the animals, he noted the few non-beef variety. There was at least one Guernsey that he could identify, and two Jerseys. A large Brahman bull was watching him from the other side of the pen with glittering black eyes. Tollson quickly jumped the fence in order to avoid a conflict.

The paddock gate showed no sign of tampering. However, it was easy to see how the scavengers could get in and make a beeline for the herd. Turning around, he started to trace the path the men could have taken the animals. At the second opening there were two excrement patties near the narrow tunnel leading outside. Apparently the perpetrators had made the animals wait there until they felt it safe enough to proceed.

Tollson paused. Then he smiled. It took him another minute to find what he was seeking—the shovel used to scoop up and distribute the gravel. Taking it over to the second entrance, Tollson gathered up the cow piles and carried them over to where Andrade was watching him in bewilderment.

“Whatcha got there?”

Tollson motioned outside. Andrade got the gist.

“You want to take that over to Ross?”

A nod.

“All right,” he replied skeptically, and led the way, with Tollson directly behind him.

They met no one on their trek to where Polinski housed security. Tollson found himself meandering between the high, narrow walls of a channel before it opened up to where a rough, rock shed had been erected. Andrade went inside without

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announcing himself or looking to see if Tollson was still behind him.

The shed's exterior was an illusion. Once inside he could see how the place had been tunneled out, just like the mess hall and dorm rooms. Polinski was talking to Faith and another man when Tollson walked over and laid the shovel with its contents on the floor in front of him. Pulling out his memo book, he explained.

*unusual footprint in the patty
my guess is you find the boot
that matches and you have
a suspect*

The men peered closely at the nearly dry pile, and noticed what Tollson had seen. It wasn't a complete footprint, but the pattern in the sole that was legible was not the regular smooth print made by ordinary cowboy boots. Polinski squinted at Tollson.

"Forest for the trees, Drew. Thanks. We would've never thought of looking at something like this for a clue. But, of course, our guys have to mess with these things on a day-to-day basis. Did you find anything else?"

it was an inside job

Faith gasped. Polinski held up a hand to stay any further comments. "We've been bandying about that same idea. But what I want to know is what makes you certain? You are certain, right?"

*I've been tracking and fighting
outcasts for many months
when they attack, they don't
care if they kill as long as they
grab all they can, that's what
their main goal is
if you're being hit by
outcasts, they would have
killed your man outright*

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*whoever is doing this knows
the people watching over the
livestock
they know all the ins and outs
of this place, but they don't
want anyone killed*

"That's pretty much what we've deduced," Andrade spoke up.
"What else can you tell me?"

*in a storm, it's easier to take
something small, something
they can stuff inside their
coats, like chickens
or something easier to carry
in their arms, like a goat
I'm willing to bet your cattle
weren't stolen just for their meat
they're probably being bartered
for other goods*

The man standing among them that Tollson didn't know gave a low whistle. "You got all that from a footprint in a pile of shit?"

Grinning, Polinski said, "Drew, Arthur Chambliss. Art, Drew Tollson. Tollson is a professional tracker. He may be wrong, or he may be right. Either way, it wouldn't hurt to check out his theory. Faith, is there a way to make that print a bit clearer? Looks like we're going to be looking at a few boots."

Faith gave a hoot. "Cinderella better watch herself when we find out who's wearing the glass slipper."

The others laughed, and Polinski began giving out assignments to follow up their only lead.

As those under his command left to investigate further, Andrade mentioned, "Oh, Tollson wanted to know if he could see a map of Promise. To get himself orientated with the place."

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“Sure,” Polinski said, walking over to the wall where Tollson noticed two large maps adhered to the wide, smooth expanse of rock. “Just wanting to get a general idea of the layout?” He watched as Tollson scanned the one showing the outline of the town, and the outlying area, and his eyes narrowed. The man’s scrutiny was becoming obvious. “Drew?”

Tollson glanced back, eyebrow raised in question.

“You’re checking up on my security measures, aren’t you?”
does that bother you?

“Yes and no. You’ve been here less than twenty-four hours, and already I feel like I’m having to explain myself to you. I don’t like that, Tollson.”

Sighing loudly, Tollson turned around to face him point-blank.

*no offense intended
but would you mind if I
double-checked on some
things? Let’s not get at
cross purposes here
I don’t want your job
just making you look better*

A full minute passed as Polinski stared at the young man who could have been his son. Yesterday he had heard JoBeth say Tollson used to be able to talk, but something happened after the apocalypse to make him go mute. Something so traumatic that it had shut down a part of him to where he no longer could speak.

Everyone who came to Promise and chose to stay had their own skills they contributed to the community. Tollson’s skills were one of a kind, and he would be an idiot for not taking advantage of them. Yeah, the guy bothered him, but it was because Polinski was afraid the kid was a helluva lot more capable of doing his job than he was.

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Tollson leafed through his memo book and noticed he had already filled it up. Time to exchange it for a new one.

Polinski noticed it, too.

“Bet those things are hard to find.”

Damn right they were. Those first couple of years when the weather had turned permanently cold, and winter was the only season all year round, anything that could be burned for warmth was used. That included all things made of wood or wood pulp, like furniture and buildings. And books. Tollson had mourned the first time he’d seen a library left completely gutted. He loved to read, and the loss had been a nauseous blow to the stomach.

Stuffing the used book into his coat pocket, he tried to make his plans known to the Triad leader. Polinski stared, trying to interpret.

“You’re off to get another book? Okay. Then you’ll be back? Got it. Shit, what I wouldn’t give to have Dr. Donna interpreting for us full-time. But Jo said you were teaching her, right?”

The smile on Tollson’s face came and went in an instant, but Polinski caught it before the guy nodded.

“All right. When you get back I’ll take you on an inspection of the perimeter.”

Giving the man a little salute, Tollson threw his hood over his head and left. Polinski watched him go as he slowly shook his head and chuckled.

Chapter 19

“Hello? Jo? Earth to Jo. You plan on putting that duty roster out today, or are you clutching it like that for security?”

Jo blinked, turning her head to see Shea giving her an amused grin. “Huh?”

The grin got wider. “Girlfriend, what in the world are you doing at work today when Mr. Jump My Bones just got into town after being away for how long? Ten years?”

“Seventeen,” Jo corrected her, and blushed. That was exactly what she’d been daydreaming about. She stared down at the chalkboard she still cradled in her arms and realized she hadn’t finished assigning work stations for her people in charge. But before she could continue with what she had been doing, Shea lifted the board from her lap.

“Nu-uh. No way. No, shut up and listen to me,” the woman ordered in a no-nonsense voice when Jo tried to object. “I can count on one finger how many times you’ve taken off from work. Jo, you are way overdue for a vacation.”

“Where would I go? The beach? Padre Island? I haven’t worn a bathing suit since I was nine.” Jo laughed softly. “Where would I go for a vacation?”

“Welllll...” The woman rolled her eyes suggestively. “I hear Old Man Tucker’s place has a nice secluded entrance. And the guy occupying it now could model for a magazine cover. Tell me.” The

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woman moved a little closer to where Jo was perched on edge of her desk, and dropped her voice. "Just how blond is he?"

Jo burst out in giggles.

"Uh-huh. That's what I thought. I'll bet he's got scads of muscles underneath all that clothing, too, doesn't he, girlfriend? So what are you doing here?"

"Shea, I've got a ton of work to do—"

"And there'll be a ton to do tomorrow, and the day after that, and the week after that. Look, I'll handle the roster. You go put on that bathing suit. No, better yet, don't wear a suit. Go skinny dipping. And go renew old friendships!"

"Are you sure?" Jo asked. She slid off her desk until her feet touched the floor and gave the woman a hopeful look.

Shea tossed her a backhanded wave. "Go! But I get first dibs on all the juicy details tomorrow!" she yelled at the departing figure.

* * * *

Jo practically skipped down the tunnel. A whole day. She had the whole day all to herself. The entire day to goof off and spend with Drew. They could talk over old times, and catch up on what had happened to each other after Drew's family had moved away. Without having to worry about anyone bothering them or interrupt—

She stopped as the implication struck her with both fists. A sex day. She was taking off from work, from her responsibilities, to have a sex day. Her face flamed at the thought. At the same time she could already feel her body taking over, making changes. Readying itself. Anticipating. Anxious.

When was the last time she had actually looked forward to sex? Never, right? But after last night...

She'd been sitting there, doing her damndest to focus on what she had to do, which was assign job detail to the duty roster, but the soreness between her legs wouldn't let her. She could still

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feel him inside her. Oh, yeah, that first time she could tell without a doubt he was a virgin. The way he'd fumbled, all awkward moves and scared he would do something wrong. Or hurt her. But once they'd gotten started, all that had changed, and it didn't matter anymore. Once he'd slid inside her, like some thick, burning rod of velvet-covered iron, she'd lost all intelligent thought. She'd gone into pure carnal mode, and they had morphed into a pair of rutting, mindless animals.

She had never believed she would climax. She had never experienced one, at least not through actual intercourse with a man. The few she'd managed to give herself had been unsatisfying, which had given her the impression she just wasn't meant to have one. Not one of those explosive kinds, anyway.

Thank God Drew had blown that theory out of the water.

Jo threw a hand out to the wall to help steady herself. Shit, now her legs were giving her fits just thinking about it.

She touched her breasts lightly with one hand. He didn't seem to mind she wasn't big-breasted. Weren't guys supposed to be turned on by overendowed women? Brennan liked to taunt her about her small size. He called them walnuts, and it hurt her feelings. But it wasn't her fault she was built like she was. Of course, she tried to compensate, to make up for her almost flat, girlish chest. Nothing seemed to work when it came to pleasing Brennan. That was one of the biggest reasons why she broke up with him as often as she did. Only when she just couldn't take sleeping alone any longer did she beg him to come back to her. Of course, to Brennan, that meant having sex with him. So she'd paid the piper to keep from waking up in the mornings all by herself. She hated herself for her weakness, but there was no other choice.

Until now. Drew hadn't made a face or done anything to let her know her breasts were inadequate. In fact, he actually seemed to like caressing them. And when he licked them and suckled on

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them, she could feel a big bolt of heat slide right down into her womb.

Drew loved her. All of her. Exactly the way she was. They were going to get married as soon as she said something to Ross. Since they didn't have a minister at Promise, he was the next best thing, and he would perform the ceremony.

She smiled. Drew had asked her when could they get married. They had gone through so much, what would be the point in waiting, now that they'd found each other? After last night, there was no doubt in her mind she and Drew were meant to spend their lives together. What changes they had made in the way they thought, in the way they viewed the world today, or in the way they had faced surviving the disaster, had not affected what was between them. Maybe later on they would discover some bumps in the road, but right now all she wanted to do was to crawl into Drew's bed and into his arms. She wanted to melt under his kisses while he branded himself into her flesh.

Bed. Jo mentally switched tracks. They had left the bed a wreck. Not to mention the fact that the sheets weren't exactly fresh anymore. Before she was aware of it, she turned down the next corridor and started heading for the laundry room. She'd grab a fresh set of sheets and pillowcases before going over to the dorm. Oh, and he could use a washbasin and pitcher of water, too.

Damn. She stopped abruptly to glance over her shoulder. She'd totally forgotten about checking to see what was available in married housing. Ross had mentioned last week that Charlie was working on excavating some new homes. There might be one ready now.

You're getting married. Tears rose in her eyes, and she felt a familiar tickling in her nose. Not just getting married, but she was marrying Drew. Her Drew, who was now this hot hunk who'd caught every woman's eye. Oh, dearest Lord in Heaven, if making

love was this wonderful now, what would she like be after several days of it?

Jo began trotting toward her destination.

Ten minutes later she had reached the bottom set of steps leading up to Old Man Tucker's place. She had a fresh set of sheets under one arm, and a set of towels and washcloths under the other—both of them wrapped in plastic to keep them dry.

The wind seemed to have died down somewhat although the snow continued to come down in small, light flakes. Jo lifted her face to look at the gray underbelly of the cloud lingering overhead. It looked like it would storm tonight, which was fine with her. If the weather was going to do the nasty stuff, best it happened after work.

The metal steps had been roughened to prevent slippage in case of ice. Jo hurried up with her load. Barry had told her he'd seen Drew and Abel earlier, heading for security. They were carrying a shovel, but that was all the information he could give.

She had heard all about the incident outside of Waco when Drew had met up with the caravan. At the time she hadn't known that the Silent Wraith they were oohing and ahing over was her Drew. Still, what he'd done had been impressive. With a little luck, he and Ross should work well together.

Reaching the entrance to Old Man Tucker's place—*gotta stop thinking of it that way*—she ducked into the tunnel. The packages under her arms, plus her bulky coat, made her too wide to walk facing down the tunnel. Instead, she had to turn sideways. Good thing the tunnel wasn't long.

Elbowing the blanket door out of the way, she suddenly caught a sound coming from the room. Apparently Drew had come back for some reason or another. It was perfect! Unable to contain the smile on her face, Jo hurried to surprise him, and burst into the room, breathless.

What she found stunned her.

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“What in the hell are you doing?”

Anger and indignation flushed her system with heat. Unconsciously she dropped the packages as she raised clenched fists.

Brennan Runnion looked up from where he had been digging through Drew’s black backpack. From the look of things, he’d been searching for something, but for what, Jo had no idea. The place had been thrown upside down. The drawers in the bureau had been pilfered and shove haphazardly back in.

Not getting an answer, Jo took another step into the room as her whole body shook. “Answer, goddamn you! What the hell are you doing here?” She reached to snatch the backpack away from him, but the man was ahead of her, tossing it across the room where it struck the far wall and bounced off onto the floor.

“Doesn’t have anything of value in it, anyway,” he remarked, then made as if to leave.

Jo gave him a hard shove. “You have no business in here,” she snapped. Her mind was too fogged with hurt and anger to think clearly. “Just wait when I tell Ross what you were doing.”

“You’re not going to tell him anything, dear Jo,” Runnion hissed, turning on her. “Because if I see any of Polinski’s security squad coming for my butt, your new boyfriend is going to have an accident. You understand me, sweet Jo?”

“Don’t underestimate Drew. And don’t think you can stop me with a few threats. It won’t work anymore.”

“Oh, really?” Giving her smile that made her stomach roil with disgust, Runnion took a step closer to her. “Well, I think it will. And you know why? Because you’re a fool, and a tramp, and too fucking stupid to do anything on your own without someone giving you directions. Christ, I don’t know what Tollson sees in you anyway! Frigid bitch.”

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She tried to slap him, but he easily caught her wrist and twisted it. Pain lanced up her arm, forcing Jo to bend over and cry out softly.

“Better not send your new boyfriend out to get even, either. Like I said, he just might come into a bit more trouble than he can handle. I don’t give a shit who he is. You understand me?” Runnion leaned over her so close, she could smell his breath. “Understand me, cunt?” he repeated, giving her twisted wrist another turn for good measure.

Jo cried out, falling to her knees, when suddenly the pain in her arm vanished. Runnion was lifted from the floor and thrown against the wall. A heartbeat later, the man was slammed to the ground, and a knee was pressed directly over his Adam’s apple. Runnion flailed his arms, trying to remove the pressure on this throat, but a pair of hands caught his wrists and bent them outward. A face dark with anger, and two glittering gold eyes bore into his.

The weight on his neck increased until Runnion was sure the man was going to either snap his neck or strangle him. If he didn’t pull his arms from the sockets first. The pain was excruciating.

Then, just as suddenly as the attack had come, Tollson released the man and stood up. Runnion rolled over onto his side, coughing and gasping for air through his inflamed throat. He glanced up to see the man flexing his fingers as he made four distinct gestures: pointing to Runnion; pointing to Jo; grabbing his own throat; then making a breaking motion with his hands.

Without giving an answer, Runnion made it to his feet unassisted and shuffled out of the room. Tollson stuck his head into the tunnel and watched until the man disappeared behind the curtain. Then he turned to Jo and helped her to her feet as he examined the bruising on her wrists.

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Jo wrapped her arms around his waist to hug him tightly. Tollson held her, giving her time to calm down, and thanking the stars he had returned when he did.

He had no idea how much time passed before Jo spoke. "I was bringing us some fresh sheets and towels, and I found him going through your backpack." Raising her head slightly from his chest, she looked up at him, adding, "I don't know what he was doing here. I was going to tell Ross, when he threatened me." Another cuddle and a squeeze. "Thank you."

Tollson nuzzled the top of her head and kissed the part in her scalp. Jo sniffed, then released him to begin picking up the packages she'd dropped. Together they managed to get the little room neat in short order. Snatching his backpack where it lay behind the bed, Tollson checked the hidden compartments to see if Runnion had dipped his sticky fingers in them. So far, everything seemed in order. Either that, or Jo had interrupted him before he'd gotten the chance to check the bag out thoroughly.

Earlier, he had set a few things on several small ledges up near the ceiling, including a stack of memo pads. The trick with the candles had given him the idea. He also knew that most people wouldn't think to search high overhead. Taking down a fresh notebook, he gave her a small smile as he flipped it open.

I came back for a new spiral

She read it and smiled softly. "I never thought I would be happy you needed those. I mean because you were...I'm sorry, Drew. I..."

when do you have to go back?

"I don't. I took the day off. I was going to surprise you, but..."

A large, warm hand cupped her cheek and lifted her face. His mouth came down, taking her lips and preventing her from saying anything more. His face was cold but his kiss warmed her. She had no idea she had raised her hands, and now her fingers were

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fumbling with the closures on his coat. Wanting to dig inside and find his warm skin.

Totally lost within each other, they were never aware of the presence cautiously watching them from around the edge of the doorway.

Chapter 20

Yesterday, April 12

The young man was in his bedroom packing when he got back to the cabin. A long minute passed as Carter Kreate stood in the doorway and silently watched Drew roll and stuff the rest of his things into the backpack, finally zipping it closed. He waited until the kid had thrown the backpack over his shoulder before speaking.

“Did you say your goodbyes to Ferris?”

Drew nodded as he pulled on his gloves. With the advent of spring, or what the calendar noted was spring, Drew would be able to travel most of the day, thus making good time. The boy was eager to be on his way. Ever since the days started inching above the freezing mark, Carter knew it wouldn’t be long before Drew pulled up stakes.

They hugged tightly, both men teary-eyed and not ashamed of it. Carter had lost his wife and young son in the explosion. Ferris had lost his girlfriend. Not to mention their elderly parents. Both men had been out on maneuvers, doing their monthly stint for the Reserves, when all hell had broken loose. Their training had saved them, along with almost all the rest of their platoon.

It was a miracle they’d found Drew when they had. The boy had nearly bled to death, and was suffering severe shock. Since he resembled his own lost son, Carter had volunteered to take the kid under his wing and into his heart, nurturing him and eventually

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teaching him how to fight and survive. Drew took to the drills as if he'd been born for them. Many times he almost pushed himself past his body's limit to build stamina, until Ferris had commented that it looked like the kid had a purpose.

"He acts like he's on a mission," the man stated. They were cleaning their weapons one evening in the tiny kitchen of the shack the three of them shared. The encampment encompassed nine such shacks, built into the hillsides. There were also six underground bunkers that had been filled to capacity with MREs and bottled water. Those bunkers were nearly empty now, the Meals Ready to Eat long gone, but the survivalists had managed to find enough wild game to compensate. For some reason they had never been able to figure out, the animals had come through the worst of the tragedy better than humanity. Nature had taken care of her own. On the other hand, domesticated animals like dogs and cats, not to mention cows and horses, had been among the hardest hit. Powdered milk was a premium. Beef was better than gold.

"You think?" Carter responded. They could talk freely. Drew had gone up the mountain, and chances were he wouldn't be back until after dark.

"Bet it has something to do with that Jo person he talks about in his sleep."

The first time they had heard Drew speak was when the boy had begun to suffer nightmares, screaming about his mother and father, and a David, whom they figured had to be his brother. But during the daylight hours the child remained mute and almost detached from the rest of the world. He made no sound whatsoever. Not even a grunt or a groan. Nor would he acknowledge the fact that he could speak, and that they had heard him and questioned him about what he'd said.

At first the horrors had been nightly. Then a couple of nights a week. By the time Drew was thirteen the night terrors had become infrequent. But when they came, they were chilling to hear.

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From almost the beginning Drew mumbled about a Joe—at least, the two men had believed it had been another brother or a friend the young man had known. Thankfully, there was no blood-curdling fear coming from the kid when he spoke of Joe. In fact, he often would mumble about such things as going camping, or going to some place called “the hollow” where they would play. The kid appeared calm, almost happy, when he was lost in those dreams.

Then, one night, Drew said something about JoBeth, and it was then they knew the boy was speaking about a girl. Or to a girl. His memories of her were his only escape from the horrors he had faced.

The knife wound healed. Even though it faded into a thin, white scar, Drew’s determination to better himself never lessened. One evening after supper he sat down with the two men and finally made his intentions clear.

I’m going back to Texas in the spring, he signed.

Carter and Ferris’ father had gone totally deaf at the age of sixty-two, forcing the rest of the family to learn sign language so they could communicate. It was a lucky coincidence the men would know enough of it to teach the kid.

“Why?” Ferris asked for the both of them. Seeing the boy’s hesitation, he pressed further. “You’re originally from there, ain’t cha?”

Drew nodded as he carefully watched to see how they would react. He owed his life to these two men who had become more than adoptive fathers to him. If it weren’t for one special person in his life, he would never have thought of leaving them.

“Does it have anything to do with Jo?”

The expression on the kid’s face said it all. They had asked about Jo once, many years ago, back when Drew had first joined them. Like what had happened to his family, the boy remained steadfastly quiet about her. Since then they had kept silent about

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what they'd heard and learned during the boy's nightmarish visions.

Scratching the days' old growth on his cheeks, Carter confessed, "We know Jo is a girl. More likely a woman by now, if she survived the blow up. Is that what you're wanting to do? Go see if she's still alive?"

Drew nodded.

I don't know how long it will take me. I have to go. I'm sorry.

"We understand," Ferris told him. Carter nodded along with his brother. Nothing was said about Drew coming back to Maine. Somehow they knew he wouldn't. Even if he never found this Jo girl, they knew that there was nothing here but horrible memories for the kid. If his real home was back in Texas, then they could do little but give him their blessings and pray he succeeded. Or at the least, find some peace of mind. Just so he wouldn't have to spend the rest of his life reliving whatever had brought him to them in the first place.

The two men exchanged hearty whacks to the back. Drew may not have been his own blood, but Carter couldn't have been more proud of the young man. If anything, the twenty-seven-year-old was stronger and more adept at taking care of himself and defending himself than he had ever been. Without question, he knew that Drew would accomplish anything he set his mind to.

Silently both men walked to the front door. The weather was cooperating for once. The sky was clear and dark blue. The sun hung like a weak lightbulb overhead. There was no wind.

Turning to face each other for the last time, Drew signed *I love you. Thank you.*

Carter nodded, unable to speak.

He watched as Drew left the encampment and headed for the small dirt road which would eventually meet up with the narrow two-lane highway some eight miles away. Only when the boy was out of sight did he go back inside the cabin and mourn.

Chapter 21

“I wonder what time it is.”

Tollson shrugged, lifting Jo’s face a fraction from where it was resting in the crook between his neck and shoulder. He rubbed his stomach, then pointed at her.

“Yeah, I’m hungry,” she admitted. “Aren’t you?”

Rolling onto his side, he pulled her tightly against him to where she could see the desire in his eyes. Not to mention that part of him that was swelling up against her abdomen. Jo threw back her head and giggled, giving him the opportunity to nibble on her neck.

“I meant for food, idiot!”

He replied by running his tongue underneath her jaw. Jo shivered, curling her toes in the renewed wake of want that crawled over her skin. They had made mad, frenzied love after Drew had kicked Brennan out. She could still feel droplets of perspiration beading her forehead and upper lip as they lay in sated silence in each other’s arms. Purring, she started to reach for his lips when a loud growling sound interrupted their train of thought. Tollson rolled onto his back in a fit of silent laughter.

“Oh, yeah, and I remember hearing your stomach rumbling in the past, too!” she hotly defended herself. She threw back the sweaty sheets and started to crawl toward the foot of the bed when he dove for her and hoisted her on top of him. Jo sighed loudly, knowing she might as well give in until he was finished teasing her.

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He held up one finger. Okay. It was going to be a lesson or a review. Seeing he had her full attention, he placed his fingertips to his mouth, then to his cheek.

“Kiss.”

Tollson grinned and gave her another sign.

“Fix. Fixing. Or making something.”

The next one was new. “All right, I’m stumped. Gimme a clue?”

Grabbing the notebook on the table by the bed, he hastily scribbled

JoBeth Tollson—when?

She smiled. JoBeth Tollson. Wow. That sounded nice. Suddenly it clicked. “Oh! Married! It means marriage, doesn’t it? When? I haven’t had a chance to talk to Ross. But you were over at security this morning, weren’t you? Why didn’t you say something?”

I thought you wanted to break the news

“Well, yeah.” An idea brightened her face. Dropping her voice, she also gave him a wicked grin. “Why not do it now? Let’s go over to the mess hall and give ’em the news.” A little shriek erupted from her throat as he literally jumped out of bed, tossing her onto her feet at the same time. It then became a contest to see who could dress first.

Jo taunted him as she skipped out the door ahead of him. Her slip-on boots beat his that needed tying. “When we’re finished, we’re coming back here, aren’t we?” She liked the way he took her hand and tucked it into his coat pocket as they descended the steps together. He nodded to answer her.

They discovered that Jo’s internal alarm clock wasn’t too far off. It was a little past noon when they entered the mess hall, which was nearly full. “Let’s go get our trays first,” she suggested, giving his arm a tug in the direction of the serving line. Tollson held up a hand horizontally and made it quiver. “Damn right I’m

nervous,” she admitted. He snorted and pressed a quick kiss to her temple.

The menu was chicken and dumplings. Tollson shook his head in admiration. He hadn’t eaten this well since he’d left Nashville. If he wasn’t careful, he could easily get lazy and lose his edge. A mental note was made to keep up his exercises. Running the perimeter wouldn’t hurt, either.

He glanced over at Jo, who was busy talking to the woman behind the serving counter. Or he and Jo could have another all-night marathon of lovemaking. *Given your choices, which would you take?* And he grinned. At the rate they were going, he would make up for twenty-eight years of abstinence in, oh, about two to three weeks.

They took their trays over to the nearest empty table. Tollson took his seat, then realized Jo was still on her feet. A quick look at her face told him she was gathering her courage to make the announcement. Leaning back slightly in his chair, he crossed his arms over his chest and waited.

“Excuse me! May I have everyone’s attention, please?” Despite her nervousness, she flashed him a loving smile. “I need to make an announcement.”

The room quieted, all eyes on them. Throwing him another glance, Jo opened her mouth to give them all the news when four men came rushing into the hall. When their eyes lit on Tollson, the one in front whom he recognized as a guy name Buddy Rawlson, who had been part of the caravan Tollson had saved, called out.

“Drew! There you are! Ross needs you over at security, pronto!”

“What’s happened? What’s going on?” Jo turned to Tollson in confusion. “Drew?”

He was already on his feet, ready to follow them. Laying a hand on her shoulder, he tapped his wrist as if he wore a watch,

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and made a circle with his forefinger. One hour, he was telling her. She shook her head. It wasn't good enough.

"Buddy, what's going on?" she reiterated as the men turned to leave.

"We were raided again," the man tossed over his shoulder, and they raced out of the room.

When they reached security, Polinski was bent over a table, studying a map along with three of the guards. He gave Tollson an amused grin. "Finally find a new memo pad?"

Ignoring the jab, Tollson raised his hands and gave the man a questioning look.

"We were raided again," Polinski stated. "No more than an hour ago. C'mon. I want you to look it over with us."

As they hurried to where Polinski was taking him, the man gave him what few sketchy details he could. Fortunately the wind had died down enough to let him be heard.

"Faith was over at the north wall on sentry. After Mark relieved her, she decided to come the back way, near the granary. That's when she discovered the break-in."

The granary, Tollson discovered, was a series of hut-shaped buildings built with a framework of scrap metal and chicken wire, then covered with nearly a foot thick wall of homemade adobe from the local clay. Pulling off a glove, he touched the side of one hut. It felt as solid as concrete.

Faith was waiting on the back side for them. Without needing to be asked, she gestured to the two-inch iron pipe embedded about a foot above the ground into the second hut. "I came this way an hour ago to go to the bathroom. That pipe wasn't there. I'll swear on it."

"Who replaced you when you went?" Polinski asked. His eyes shifted back and forth between the woman and Tollson, who was examining the pipe.

"Chip."

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“Did he say anything or see anything, do you think?”

“No. He came over from near the school.” At Tollson’s questioning glance, she clarified. “The school’s in the other direction. Chip didn’t pass this way.”

“How in the hell could someone get that pipe into the hut? The outside wall’s at least a foot thick,” one of the guards questioned. Tollson ran a quick mental checklist, searching for the guy’s I.D. Don something-or-other.

Motioning to Polinski, he made a swinging motion with his arm, aiming sideways.

“A hammer? Sledgehammer?” the Triad leader asked.

Rawlson got down on his knees to peer at the pipe. “Something like a sledgehammer. The end of this pipe looks bashed in.”

Tollson held up two fingers.

“Two what? Two people?” Faith guessed.

Nodding, he held up one finger and clutched the pipe with both hands. Holding up two fingers, he made the swinging motion. It took two people, at the very least, to pull this off—one to hold the pipe, and the other to pound it in. He made another gesture, pointing to his ear and adding a questioning shrug.

“Why didn’t someone hear it?” Polinski guessed. He looked to Faith for an answer.

“I wasn’t listening for anything unusual,” she confessed. “There’s always some kind of building going on and stuff. Besides, I wasn’t expecting them to hit in the daylight.”

“Looky here.”

They looked down as Rawlson pulled a thick length of material from where it had been stuffed inside the pipe. As he did, dried corn started gushing out. Faith quickly covered the end with one of her gloves.

“Gotta find a way to plug this thing back up,” she told them.

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Polinski nodded and ordered one of the other guards to find something to do the trick. "Drew, any chance you can find another one of those footprints?"

Tollson looked around at the solid rock. What little snow there was on the ground had been trampled to the point where it would be impossible to make out any good tracks. He shook his head, but his eyes remained riveted on the material Rawlson held in his hands.

"Jerry, take over for Faith until Larry gets back with something to plug that up. Faith, go ahead and get something to eat before the mess hall closes up. The rest of you, back to the office to pound this one out."

Polinski led them back to security. Everyone seemed surprised to find Jo there waiting for them. Everyone except Tollson.

"Jo?" Polinski blinked at her.

"Your men interrupted our lunch," she told him crisply. "Something about being raided again?"

"They got into the granary this time," Rawlson told her, throwing the material onto the table. "Want me to go get Abel?" he asked Polinski.

"I've already sent word," Jo told the man. Turning back to Polinski, she asked, "Isn't this out of the ordinary? I mean, it's broad daylight."

Polinski snorted. "I'll say it's out of the ordinary. Whoever is doing this just changed their whole M.O." He saw Tollson pick up the material and examine it. "Notice anything, Drew?" If he didn't know any better, he would have sworn the man had turned pale.

Tollson continued to stare at the material in shock. Turning back to the others, he pointed to the material, then to himself.

Jo's eyes narrowed. "What are you trying to say, Drew?" She looked at Polinski. "Where did that come from?"

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"The granary. It was shoved inside a pipe someone had hammered into the back of the bin so they could bleed it for corn. Drew? You know something about this?"

He repeated the gesture. This time Polinski caught on.

"Are you saying that piece of material is yours?"

Grabbing the material at opposite ends, he held it up for them to see. It was a hand-knitted sweater he had brought with him from Maine. Someone had taken it from the drawer.

Jo's gasp coincided with his own thoughts. Polinski, however, had a different idea.

"What is your sweater doing over at the granary?"

"You can't believe Drew had anything to do with this!" Jo quickly bit back. "If you want to learn the truth, go talk to Brennan!"

Polinski blinked in surprise. "Pardon?"

"Ask Brennan how it got there! I caught him ransacking Drew's bedroom earlier. I'll bet he took it with him when Drew threw him out."

The room remained very quiet as Polinski glanced from one to the other. "Okay, there's something here I'm not getting. You're saying you caught Brennan in Drew's room, going through his things?"

"That's exactly what I'm saying." She crossed her arms in a defensive posture Tollson had seen dozens of times whenever she and her stepfather had crossed swords. Apparently the others were also familiar with it.

"Why were you in Drew's room? I take it Drew wasn't there at the time."

"I was taking some clean laundry up there, which is part of my job."

She was clearly on the defensive, for one reason or another. There was a lot more to this story, obviously.

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“And what happened when you caught him in Drew’s room going through his things?”

“I told him I was going to report it to you. And that’s...” She froze for a moment, then glanced over at Tollson.

“That’s what? When Drew showed up and threw him out?”

Polinski watched the silent interplay between the two of them. He saw Tollson slowly shake his head, as if telling her not to say something. Jo backed down. “Yeah,” she finally answered. “Yeah. Drew showed up and kicked him out.”

“And I guess Brennan took the shirt with him when he left.”

Her eyes snapped back up at him. “Of course he did! Don’t you see? Brennan’s trying to get back at Drew by leaving it at the granary!”

“Get back at him...why? I thought you two had split up, or...” Shaking his head, Polinski ran a hand over his cheek and mouth. “All right, Jo. I feel like I’m fighting shadows here. Look, we’re adults here. Why not come out with the truth so we can get on with finding out who’s responsible for hitting the grain?”

He saw the looks exchanged again between Jo and Tollson. Reluctantly she nodded, but not before she walked over to Tollson and put her arms around him. He also draped an arm around her shoulders protectively.

“I, uh...I took the day off from work so Drew and I could be together. I was taking some fresh towels and stuff up to his room to surprise him, when I caught Brennan going through Drew’s things. He must’ve been there a while. The place was pretty well torn apart. Anyway, I threatened to bring it to your attention, but Brennan told me that if I did he would make certain Drew came into some kind of accident, and it would be all my fault.”

“He threatened bodily harm to Drew if you told me about the break-in?”

She nodded. “Yeah. He also had some unkind words to say to me about...well, he called me a tramp, so I tried to slap him. He

grabbed my wrist and twisted it.” She held out her arm and pulled up the shirt sleeve enough so they could see the marks on her wrist. “He would’ve done more except that’s when Drew rushed in and threw him against the wall. He let Brennan know that if he touched me again, he’d break his neck. Then Brennan left.”

“Did you see him take the shirt?”

“No. But like I said, he’d already gone through most of what was there. He probably already had it stashed inside his coat before I caught him.”

“Okay. So, after Drew gave him the warning, you said he left?”

“Yeah.”

“When was this?”

To Polinski’s surprise, Tollson gave a little snort and grinned. Jo turned a bright red.

“Maybe a couple of hours ago.”

“A couple of hours ago?” he echoed. “What in hell, then, kept you from coming over to tell me—”

The simple truth was staring at him right in the face. Behind him Polinski could hear the other guards snickering.

Seeing that they weren’t going to get out of this mess without a bit more honesty, Jo lifted her chin. “Drew and I want to get married, Ross. Would you be willing to do the honors?”

If one shock wasn’t enough to make him tongue-tied, her second little bombshell made it certain. When he was finally able to gather his wits around him, Polinski joined the others in congratulating the couple.

Chapter 22

Tollson came awake with a jerk, throwing himself forward head-first until he was sitting up in bed. He was gasping for air, dragging huge gulps into his lungs as if he'd been on the edge of suffocation for way too long. Beads of sweat dotted his skin. Some collected to run in tiny rivulets over his chest and back. A droplet fell into his eye, stinging it, and he shook his head to clear it.

He could hear more breathing. Breathing that was not his. Automatically his left hand reached out to touch the body that should have been lying beside him, but the covers were flat. His heart dropped painfully into his stomach.

Looking over at the table where the single candle was on the verge of burning itself out, he finally spotted her. She was standing in the shadows at the farthest side of the room. She had wrapped herself inside her cloak for warmth, although he could tell she was shivering underneath it. Whether from cold or fear, he couldn't tell. He prayed to God it was because of the cold.

She was watching him with wide eyes. Watching. Waiting. The look on her pale face was the last thing he wanted to see. Groaning, Tollson reached for the pad and pencil he kept on the table. His hands were shaking.

another nightmare?

He motioned for her to come over. Relief washed over him as Jo came willingly into his embrace.

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"You scared me, Drew," she whispered into his ear as he held her tightly. They were both trembling, and not from the cold. "Do you have these often?" She eased around him until she was sitting beside him on the bed.

Sometimes

did I hurt you?

"No, but, Drew...I'm sorry, but I was afraid you might hurt me again."

Her admission was like a knife stabbing into him again. Only this time it twisted, sending pain spearing through him until it reached his heart.

how long was I like this?

"I dunno. It seemed like a long time."

The covers had been cold when he'd reached for her. It had been long enough for her warmth to leave him.

Tossing the writing materials onto the table, he bent over at the waist and dug his fingers through his hair. He had hurt her last night. He almost did the same thing tonight. The thought of physically abusing her was like bile rising in his stomach, searing his throat with its acidic fear. Tollson was unaware he was rocking forward and back until Jo placed her hands on his skin, trying to soothe him as she made soft shushing sounds.

After several minutes she managed to coax him back under the covers where she joined him. Holding her in his arms, he felt her slowly relaxing against him. Her weariness was evident in the boneless feel of her body as she melted against his warmth. He listened as her breathing slowed, letting him know she felt certain that he wouldn't have another episode tonight. Confident his terrors were restricted to one episode a night. There was no way he could assure her that was the truth.

He could protect her from the outside world, leaving Tollson to wonder how he was going to protect her from his own demons. He couldn't do this to her, having her lie awake night after night,

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waiting for his nightmares to occur and be over with before she could safely rejoin him in bed. It was the last thing he'd ever wanted for Jo. His Jo. The woman who had been the only constant source of hope in his life ever since he was eleven years old.

A tear slid out of the corner of his eye and ran down into his hairline. The nightmares had to stop, because if they didn't, he was terrified he would wake up one morning with his hands around her throat and her lifeless body in his arms.

Pulling her partly on top of him, he almost whimpered when Jo snuggled even closer, bringing an arm over his broad chest. Her russet hair cascaded over his arm and shoulder like a waterfall of silk. She trusted him when he didn't deserve it. She trusted him, but she feared him, too. Tollson decided he needed to ask for help. For the first time in his life he had to seek out someone he could trust enough to see if they couldn't find a way to eliminate the nightmares, or at least put some kind of damper on them.

Tomorrow. He had to do it tomorrow, or else tomorrow night may be too late.

As the night faded into dawn, he lay there feeling her sleep, and letting his mind wander back on the events of the past day. Hoping he could find the trigger which caused him to start reliving his nightmares with a vengeance.

* * * *

After they had announced their engagement to Polinski and the others, Tollson resigned himself to the fact that there would be no more lovemaking the rest of the day. Somehow they ended back up at the mess hall where the news had spread faster than a rampaging tornado.

Jo was promptly taken away amid a bunch of women who were already making plans. She'd stopped to glance back at him when some woman named Shea asked, "When are you planning on taking the plunge?"

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Raising an eyebrow in his direction, Jo half-asked, half-stated, “Tomorrow?” He’d given her a wide grin of approval, and off they’d disappeared into the maze of tunnels where he knew he had no hope of finding her until he’d learned more about this place.

Knowing there was plenty for him to do between now and tomorrow, Tollson had suggested to Polinski that they survey the perimeter. There might be something he’d see that the guards had overlooked.

It had taken them a good three hours to take it all in, but in that time Tollson got to meet the majority of the men and women assigned under Polinski. He also got to observe how the Triad leader handled details such as sentry duty and weapons training. As he’d suspected when he’d first joined up with the caravan, their ammunition was sparse, and target practice was kept to a bare minimum. But the powder and casings they had brought back with them would give them a little more insurance against scavengers.

Unfortunately, there was little he could spot once they ended up back where the granaries were located.

By the time they got back to the security office, Polinski was ready to begin indoctrinating Tollson on the ins and outs of what he could expect in his new assignment if he planned on being a permanent part of their town. The first bit of action was to take him down to where the guns and ammunition were contained. A place they referred to as the Pit.

As he’d expected, the Pit was at the opposite end of town, away from the main living and work areas. Here, the sentries were doubled. No doubt to prevent any outcasts from making off with valuable firepower.

What was more interesting was the fact that bunkers had been built out of scrap metal to hold the weaponry. Tollson debated the issue in his mind. Storing the stuff inside a cave carved in a hill would, in his opinion, be a lot safer and much easier to defend. If

the ammo should somehow blow up, the hill would cave in to smother any further explosions.

His eyes scanned the surrounding area. It didn't make a whole lot of sense why they'd have their ammo exposed at ground level. Not unless there was a reason he wasn't aware of. He asked Polinski.

"Lignite," the man briskly replied. "It's low-grade coal. This area is saturated with it, but in measly little pockets littered here and there. Not enough to make any kind of major mining operation out of it, but we're able to dig out enough so we can use it as our major fuel source." Polinski paused to grin. "Didn't you wonder how we were able to do the cooking? Or have hot water in the baths?"

*afraid of looking a gift horse
in the mouth*

The Triad leader chuckled. "Anyway, to finish answering your question, we were afraid that if the ammo blew, it might start a chain reaction through these hills. There's no telling how much lignite is embedded in this rock. So we built these bunkers to hold the stuff. Of course, since it's all exposed to the open where anyone can see it, I had to double the guards here."

They'd reached a set of stairs leading downward into an arena of sorts. At the farthest end a row of targets had been placed—poles sunk into the ground. Each pole bore a scarecrow figure dressed in tattered clothing and hat.

"Before I can assign you to sentry duty, you'll need to get up to speed with a rifle," Polinski informed him. He gestured to one of the men standing nearby, holding a gun. Tollson recognized it as a bolt-action .308 Winchester. Carter had one like it that he used for hunting.

Hefting it, Polinski began to explain to him how to load the weapon. Tollson immediately stopped him.

I don't use a gun

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“Well, if you’re going to be a part of my security team, you’re gonna need to be able to.” The Triad leader eyed him, and Tollson could see the wheels turning in the man’s mind. It was obvious Polinski was debating whether or not to test his mettle. Well, guess it was time he laid all doubts to rest.

I don’t need a gun

Polinski snorted.

Grabbing the rifle from the man’s hands, Tollson jerked back the bolt to see what they were using for target practice. Rubber bullets, or something very similar. Slamming the bolt home, he tossed the Winchester back at Polinski, who caught it with a look of surprise on his face.

I’m going to come at you

try to hit me

Not waiting for the man’s response, Tollson turned and strode across the Pit area toward the targets. It was a good fifty yards. Maybe a little more. This wouldn’t take long. Once he was even with the poles, he about-faced to find Polinski surrounded by four more guards who were eager to see if the Silent Wraith was everything the stories said he was.

He would need his best mobility and luck that Polinski wasn’t a crack shot like his foster fathers were. They had trained him using homemade paintballs. And those damn things left bruises that took weeks to fade. Although they were smaller and easier to dodge, rubber bullets would sting just as badly. That is, if they hit him.

He removed his coat and draped it over one of the scarecrows. The gloves stayed on. For some reason his hands were always stiffening up on him if they got too cold. He flexed his fingers for good measure and gave Polinski a nod to show he was ready, then he waited for the man to make mistake number one. It wasn’t a long wait.

Polinski dropped his eyes to check the chamber for a round. Tollson took off like a bolt of lightning, heading directly toward

the man. His eyes remained drilled on the Triad leader's face to take his cues.

A guard shouted, alerting Polinski. Quickly he raised the rifle and fired off a round. Too high. Tollson didn't have to give any ground to avoid it. Now for mistake number two. The rifle held four rounds. There were three left, and Polinski sighted carefully to make each one count. His mistake. If Tollson's foster fathers had taught him anything, it was the truth that the longer one tried to get a bead on something, the closer it could get to you. If you had the skill, shoot and don't stop shooting. If you lacked the skill, shoot anyway—you might get lucky and live.

A split-second before Polinski pulled the trigger, Tollson zigged, then instantly threw himself in the opposite direction, hitting the dirt and rolling before leaping back to his feet and resuming the charge. Polinski had anticipated the man to take evasive action, but had planned on a zag to follow the zig. The tuck and roll caught him off-guard, and bullet number two dug a shallow hole in the dirt.

Before he could get bullet number three fired, Tollson hit the two guards standing to Polinski's left. Both men went down on their knees. In less than a heartbeat, Tollson slipped behind him and had the rifle jammed against Polinski's neck, trapping the man's hands under the stock. A knee dug into the small of the man's back bent him backwards, leaving him exposed and vulnerable.

Several seconds passed as everyone grasped the suddenness of the attack. Polinski slid his eyes upward to see Tollson grinning down at him. Slowly, the Wraith pantomimed holding a knife and drew it symbolically across Polinski's throat. Point made, he released him.

It took the Triad leader a good minute to gather his dignity and face the man he had seriously underestimated. "Okay," he

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admitted. "You don't use a gun. So what are you gonna do if you see a scavenger heading for town? Chase him down?"

naw, they usually come to me

Polinski and Tollson locked gazes, neither one budging, until Polinski broke into a smile and chuckled. "Shit, I know when I'm beat. All right. No gun for you. I just hope to hell I never find you on the business end of my sights again."

don't worry, Tollson scribbled.

it's not something I like doing for a living

* * * *

The candle had snuffed itself out long ago. Jo moved restlessly in sleep, rolling over until her back and buttocks were comfortably spooned along Tollson's body. The feel of her awakened the coals which were always smoldering now just below the surface. Ever since he had first touched her, had first kissed her as a man kissed a woman, and had made love to her as a man claimed a woman for all eternity, the embers had never gone out. He wanted her, and with every rustle of the sheets, that need grew hotter and more demanding. If he woke her now, she would move sleepily into his arms and open herself to him. No questions, no rebuffs. Just sweet acceptance and expectancy.

Tollson felt his throat tighten up. After last night, he couldn't do that to her. He couldn't extend her pleasure and make her think everything would be all right, if he later was forced to tear it away.

Jo. My Jo.

Carefully, he slid out of bed and away from her warm temptation. Dressing quickly, he left her alone to rest.

He prayed he could find an answer somewhere.

Chapter 23

It was early. Maybe too damn early. It didn't matter. Tollson knew the longer he put off talking to Bednorz, the less chance he had of having enough private time alone with her. Doctors were notorious for getting bushwhacked into medical emergencies and noncritical situations.

He sniffed the air as he quickly made his way toward where he knew the doctor's clinic was located. Although he wasn't quite sure where it actually was, he felt confident enough he'd find it before too long.

A morning fog lent for shallow visibility. In the summer the clouds were likely to remain on the ground until noon, keeping the area wet. Later on, the wet would turn to ice if the temperature dropped fast enough. Tollson sniffed again. It wouldn't snow, but it definitely felt like a storm was on its way.

The place seemed eerily silent, like many of the abandoned towns he'd traveled through. Once in a while he'd catch a glimpse of an armed guard walking his duty on the outer perimeter, but they were the only signs of humanity he could see.

He remembered hearing that the clinic was off the kitchen. He was betting the farm that the good doctor's personal quarters were just off the clinic, and not in one of the dorm rooms in the cliff. Dr. Donna gave him the impression she was one of those professionals who gave up having a private life in order to serve others. At least, he hoped as much.

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He found the clinic on his second search of the tunnels. The place had open access, although Tollson couldn't spot anything in the way of medicines left in plain sight. Steeling himself, he started a thorough examination of every doorway.

His hunch proved correct. The very last tunnel leading away from the clinic had a cloth blanket barring his way about midway down the passage. But to his surprise, a small bell had been attached to the rock wall next to it. Tollson jerked on the short piece of rope hanging from the clapper.

"Awright! I'm up! What's the emergency?" The voice was muffled. Sleepy. Knowing he couldn't answer her, he waited for her to peek around the doorway. Presently a shuffling sound came from the other side of the blanket, and a bleary-eyed face peered up at him. "Drew? Wha— what time is it?"

He shrugged. Dr. Donna dragged a hand through her long blonde hair. "Are you ill? Is it an emergency?"

I need to talk to you. It's a matter of utmost urgency.

Her eyes brightened. "Give me a sec," she ordered, and disappeared back behind the doorway. Less than a minute later she came through the barrier. She had on a pair of heavy boots and her coat, leaving Tollson to suspect she was still wearing her sleeping garments. They entered the clinic where she took a sharp right and went into the first examination room. The entrance had been fitted with a real door, which she closed and locked behind them. Borrowing his candle, she lit a small lantern sitting on a metal table. Its soft glow brightened the room considerably. After gesturing for him to sit in the chair, she opted to perch on the edge of the table herself. "Okay. What's up?"

He began by telling her everything he could remember about that night the four men had broken into their house to steal their food, but ended up killing the rest of his family. He told her about the knife going into him, and then how he found himself wandering around in the woods. He concluded with the Kreates finding him,

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taking him in, and raising him. Dr. Donna listened patiently until he got to the part about his rescue.

“So, Jo was right. You were able to talk before all this happened? Well, it’s clear your loss of speech is directly related to what happened to you and your family.”

That’s not the worst of it, he signed. Taking a deep, shuddering breath, he plunged ahead.

I used to have nightmares. They were bad. When I was younger I had them almost every night. They occurred less frequently as I got older. But now they’re back and I’m frightened.

“Why?”

I’m strong. I’ve been trained how to protect myself. How to kill with my bare hands. Night before last Jo woke me up. I was having one of those nightmares.

He saw Dr. Donna staring intently at him.

My hands were on her throat. I was choking her. I nearly killed her.

“Did you hurt her?”

To Tollson’s relief the physician’s tone was calm. There was no trace of condemnation in her expression or body language. He shook his head to answer her.

“You said night before last. Did anything happen last night?”

I woke up on my own. I knew I’d had another one. Jo wasn’t in bed. She was standing on the other side of the room, waiting for it to be over. She left the bed to protect herself. If she hadn’t gotten up, I could have killed her.

He stopped to drag a trembling hand across the back of his neck. Tension lay in thick knots under his skin.

Help me, please. Please. I’m frightened I’ll hurt Jo. Maybe kill her. I...I can’t...

Tears filled his eyes, keeping him from continuing. He blinked rapidly to clear his vision, but the weakness persisted. Irritated, he swiped at his eyes with the back of his hand.

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“Drew?” Dr. Donna softly called for his attention. When he was able to look back up at her, she asked, “Do you have any idea what may have triggered these nightmares to start up again?”

No. I’ve tried to think. No luck.

She crossed an arm over her stomach. The other arm she propped on the first, and began chewing on her thumbnail. “Let me get this straight. You’re afraid one morning you’ll wake up and find Jo dead because you’d inadvertently killed her. How is Jo taking all of this?”

She’s scared, but she thinks we can work through it.

“But you don’t.”

Please help me.

She chewed another minute on her nail, then snorted softly. “I’m sorry, Drew. I’m not qualified to handle mental illnesses. But you’ve got all the markings of some kind of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. I’ll bet my bottom dollar on it.”

That’s what I’ve been told.

“Did the doctor tell you what to do about it?”

He hoped I would grow out of it.

“Which you did, pretty much, until you got here,” she noted. Another minute of deliberation passed, when a look of deep sorrow crossed her face. “Drew, like I said, my field of expertise is nil when it comes to mental health. But it’s possible these nightmares, these images of what happened years ago, are coming back because of Jo.”

What? No!

He shook his head emphatically.

“Yes! Listen to me. Listen. You knew Jo when you were both children. You two were close. Closer than friends, right? And then you were forced apart. Soon after that, the sun blew up. Tragedy struck. Your family was murdered, and you nearly died. When you grew up you were allowed to distance yourself from those memories. That’s probably why the nightmares stopped. The

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doctor was right. But since you and Jo have reunited, you've been thinking back on the way it was when you were children. Am I right? Okay. So I'm no shrink, but I'm guessing my diagnosis is in the ballpark. Sad thing is, I don't have any way to help you. Yeah, there used to be medicines available, but I haven't seen those kinds of pharmaceuticals in ages. I'm sorry, Drew. Maybe they'll fade away like they did when you were growing up."

I can't take that chance.

"You don't have much choice. Not if you and Jo are going to make a life together." She suddenly grinned, trying to lighten the mood. "Today's your wedding day. You're going to marry the woman you've spent seventeen years waiting for. Don't let this setback get to you. At least not today. You'll work it out, Drew." Leaning toward him, she placed a hand on his arm. "Trust me. You will."

He didn't respond, but neither could he look her in the eye. She had no idea what he'd been through. She had no inkling of the kind of torment he went through—was going through. After a while he gave a barely perceptible nod and rose to his feet.

I may need you again later, he signed.

"My door's always open."

Tollson left the clinic, emerging into the neo-white morning. People were moving about, most of them heading for the mess hall for breakfast. The young and the old. Mothers and fathers with their children. A young woman bouncing a new baby on her shoulder. An elderly couple holding hands.

He felt drained. Numb. His heart continued to beat, but it no longer held a purpose except to sustain his body. It had a tight, almost painless feeling to it, as though it had been squeezed dry, then left in a wadded mass in the center of his chest.

After all these years of dreaming, praying, and hoping, to finally find her and love her, and be loved in return—for nothing.

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He stopped, swaying slightly on his feet. A wave of dizziness broke over him, followed by a roiling feeling in the pit of his stomach.

Should he stay? Or go? Should he risk remaining in Promise with Jo? Or did he love her enough to honor his promise to himself to protect her for the rest of her life? When, ironically, protecting her life meant no longer being a part of it.

Heat rushed through his body, making sweat pop out all over his skin. The doctor had been honest in her evaluation. Yet he knew she was right. There couldn't be any other reason why the nightmares had started up again.

His beautiful Jo. *My Jo*. Tollson realized he had no choice. He could fight it all he wanted, but the truth was undeniable. If he stayed, if he married Jo and remained in Promise, he eventually would kill her. He had to leave. Leave her, and leave Promise. And leave behind his heart so she could live.

The future never appeared as bleak and as empty as it did at that moment.

Chapter 24

“There you are!”

Tollson glanced up to see Jo’s friend Shea advancing toward him. Seeing the look of determination on her face, he had the feeling he had been her intended target.

She snatched his arm and flashed him a big, toothy grin. “Have you eaten yet?”

He gave her a no.

“Then let’s go fill you up, big boy.” She literally began to drag him toward the mess hall. “Jo assigned me to take care of you until the wedding. Which means you need a good breakfast in you before I take you over to Miguel’s. Do you have a nice white shirt?”

Another no.

“Thought so. Well, Miguel will get you fixed up good. C’mon. Pick your feet up. I swear, if I didn’t know any better I’d think you were deliberately dawdling.

He managed to slow her down enough to pull out his memo book and jot a question.

where’s Jo?

“Back at her place getting ready. In less than three hours you’re going to have to face practically all of Promise. I can’t remember the last time we made such a to-do about something.” She gave him another dazzling smile. “Personally, I’m dying to see what you’re gonna look like all fancied up.”

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Tollson was never more thankful when they entered the mess hall, and Shea left him to fend for himself. He'd half expected her to cut up his food and spoon feed him.

Emerging from the serving line, he could see why she had disappeared. Sheets had been braided together and hung from the ceiling like gigantic ropes of white licorice. A small dais was being erected at the far end. Strips of chrome had already been hung strategically to reflect the dozens of white candles that were being placed about the room. Once everything was lit, he could see how the whole place would glow and glitter in the reflected light. While all the preparation was going on, people were eating breakfast and getting ready to go off to work.

This couldn't be. Mentally shaking his head, Tollson was unaware he had left his tray behind and was heading directly for the doctor's quarters. In less than three hours it would be too late. He couldn't do that to Jo. He couldn't marry her and then desert her. He couldn't do that to her, which meant it had to be stopped now. The preparations, the wedding—halted immediately.

Dr. Donna was between patients, carefully making notes, when he burst into the clinic. She glanced up, surprised, as he gestured for her to follow him. Without questioning why, she got up from her desk, knowing what he intended to do, and dreading the outcome.

Jo is in her room. Where is it?

The physician tilted her head in the direction of the women's dorms, where they were heading. "First landing, on the right side, third from the end."

I need you to translate. Writing will be too laborious.

"I understand. But, Drew, you don't have to do this."

I can live knowing I've left her with a broken heart. I can't live if I leave her with a broken neck.

Unable to answer him, she hurried to keep pace with his long-legged, determined stride.

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He took the half-dozen steps leading up to the first landing in two leaps. The closer they got to Jo's room, the faster he moved. Bednorz could see the tension building in the man's face and in the way he continually gripped his hands into fists. It was like watching a wreck about to happen. Or the death of something too pure and good that couldn't be allowed to live. Her stomach lurched, anticipating the outcome. Knowing it wouldn't be happy, nor would it be the end.

These two people needed each other. They had paid every debt owed to be with each other. There was no doubt in anyone's mind that Drew and Jo were one soul trapped in two bodies. After seeing the two of them together, it was as if a puzzle had found all its missing pieces to finally become a whole picture. A picture of happiness and contentment. The truest picture of love that she had ever witnessed.

Tollson charged into the tunnel entrance, almost colliding with a woman on her way out. Dr. Donna gave her a quick hello as she hurried to keep up. Midway down, Tollson threw back the blanket doorway, then held it open for her. Curtly she gave him a thank you and kept going. They entered the small room together to find Jo sitting on the edge of her bed with two other women. All three looked startled when they entered.

As Tollson signed, Dr. Donna translated. "I need to talk to you alone. It's important."

"Now?"

"It's important," the physician repeated. Her eyes went from one to the other, trying to catch the signals which would give her some kind of hope this wouldn't turn out the way she knew it would. Tollson was breathing heavily, his face flushed. He looked like he was on the verge of passing out or crying, and it was taking everything in him to hold himself back. The doctor knew he was a man on a mission determined to follow through, despite the agony

involved. Swallowing hard, she kept her eyes glued on his hands as they began to sign as soon as the others had left.

"I'm sorry. We can't do this. I can't do this. Every night we spend together I'm putting your life in danger. It has to end. Now."

"Wh-what are you trying to tell me?" Jo whispered. Her throat was already closing up on her, making her voice sound weak and small.

"We can't be married. I can't risk putting your life in danger because of me. Please forgive me. You know I love you. I love you so much this is tearing me apart. But if I stay, I could accidentally hurt you or kill you—"

"What do you mean if you stay? No, no!" Instantly Jo was on her feet and rushing toward him to grab two handfuls of his coat. "There is no decision to make, Drew. You're staying here in Promise. We don't have to get married, but you're not leaving me. Not ever, do you hear me?"

Slowly he pulled her hands off his coat as they stared into each other's faces, into each other's eyes. He signed again.

"What kind of life would we have?"

"It would be together, that's what kind," she argued. Tears were rolling down her cheeks, and she tried to wipe them away with her hands. "I was miserable with you gone. And you told me yourself you had no life, either. That's why you came looking for me. And now you're telling me you're thinking a-about leaving?" Her voice hiccuped. Her lower lip and chin began to quiver.

Briefly, Dr. Donna lowered her face and tried to compose herself. This was the hardest thing she'd ever had to face. It was even worse than letting someone know that a loved one had died, because at least she could begin that person's healing process. Give them a sense of closure. There was no closure here. No hope. No sense of purpose. Just big, black, empty holes. Sniffing loudly, her eyes went back to Tollsons' hands.

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“Do you know what it’s like to see you looking at me in fear? Do you have any idea how much it tore me up to see you standing on the other side of the room because you were afraid of me? Do you know how close I could have been to killing you?” Shaking his head in agitation, Tollson pressed on. “I’m a sick man. Mentally sick. And the doctor has nothing to give me to cure me. I love you. I will love you for the rest of my life, but—”

“If you love me that much, you’ll give us a chance,” Jo argued. “You’ll stay here. We’ll sleep in separate quarters. I don’t care! I can’t take another day not having you here. Not ever again. Your parents took you away from me once. I was nothing after that, especially after the sun blew up. And you know why? Because I couldn’t hear your voice anymore. B-because telephones no longer worked, and there was no way to f-find you. Or see if you had survived. Or know if you were well.” She sobbed softly. Fighting the overwhelming need to surrender and let the darkness swallow her was taking everything out of her. But she couldn’t give him up. She wouldn’t. “Oh, God, Drew. I was never the same after that. Never...until you turned around two days ago and looked at me. And then it was like the most incredible feeling came over me. You were my sun, and just like that the world was all warm and green, and full of flowers and brightness again.”

The doctor looked to Tollson to see what his response would be. The man’s hands were stilled as he drank in her confession. His face was lined with a mixture of love and pain. Her own tears were rolling down her cheeks and dripping off her chin. She was surprised when Jo turned to address her directly.

“Is there anything that can be done to help him?” she asked tearfully. Begged.

Dr. Donna shook her head with deep sadness. “Nothing medically. Not anymore. I’m sorry.”

Lifting her arms, Jo once again claimed a firm grip on his coat. “If you fear getting married, I can honor that.”

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"That is not what I fear," the doctor translated Tollson's sign language.

"Do you fear loving me?"

"Never."

"Do you fear sharing a future with me?"

"How can we have—"

"Answer me, dammit!"

"Having a future with you is all I've ever wanted. It's all I've ever dreamed of. It's all I'll ever need," he admitted. His gestures were slow and getting slower. Dr. Donna didn't know if he was relenting, or merely on the verge of walking out without further argument.

"Then if you love me, you'll give us a chance. Love me, Drew. Stay and love me. It took you a long time to get over your nightmares before. Do you love me enough to take the time to let them go away again?"

Tollson closed his eyes and threw back his head. Moving closer to him, Jo reached up on tiptoe to kiss his skin that peeked out above the collar of his shirt. The feel of her lips was nearly his undoing. Unconsciously his arms went around her to pull her tightly against him. Jo let go of his coat and threw her arms around his neck. His shoulders jerked with emotion, and he looked down to see her reaching for him.

They had no knowledge of when the good doctor left them alone. He took her mouth, and she opened up to him as her hands reached past the open coat to where his shirt was tucked into his pants. Frantically she fumbled to pull it out of the waistband, trying to find the warmth of his skin.

Tollson tasted her tears and the sweetness of her mouth. Her tongue was teasing, making him crazy as he sucked on it. Even her saliva was like honey, trapping him with its delicious moistness.

He dropped a hand to her buttocks and shoved her hard against him, where her abdomen rubbed fiercely against his

growing erection. He heard Jo's breath catch. As her slow, soft moan filled him he could feel her hips moving against him. The friction caused by her gyrations became too much to bear. Her legs parted slightly, as if the barriers of cloth could magically disappear, and he could slide his thickness between her thighs.

Almost as one mind, they released each other and reached for their own pants. It became a race to undress. Just when Tollson managed to get his second boot untied and off, Jo pushed him onto his back on the little bed and started planting wet, noisy kisses across his chest. Her tongue was a whip of heat, the tip of it like a brand as she found his nipples, licking and teething them until he couldn't take any more of her torture. Her hands found his thickened cock. She began squeezing it, stroking it, and Tollson knew he wasn't far from reaching his pinnacle.

Once he managed to shake his pants off where they had puddled around his ankles, he lifted her from where she was leaning over from the side of the bed and placed her on top of him. She wriggled her hips again as her body settled over his, her wet lower lips enfolding his pulsing length.

Tollson dug his fingers into her hips and raised her up. Wordlessly, Jo reached down to take him and guide him to the well of fire he sought. They both moaned in mindless pleasure as he inched himself into her depths. Her muscles quivered from his invasion. Her inner folds seemed to be sucking him greedily into the deepest part of her. She moved once to adjust to his penetration, and it was like setting fire to a keg of gunpowder.

He started pumping her over him, literally ramming her up and down over him. Her own hands dug into his chest, over his ribs, and her face contorted with passion. Jo cried out his name, begging for more. Needing all he could give her until there was nothing left to give. Or until there was no more strength left to take it. Her loose hair flew about her back and down her front, concealing her small yet perfect breasts with their russet-colored

tips. Desire flooded their senses, overwhelming everything until all that was left to feel, or see, or hear, or smell was the explosion coming to a rapidly expanding head within them.

The little bed rocked with their coupling, yet Tollson continued to pound himself up into her as his hands mercilessly pistoned her down over him. A tiny whine had begun to build up in her throat. She was breathing heavily but her eyes remained closed as he brought her closer and closer to flashpoint. Suddenly the whine rushed out of her as a thin, shrill cry, and he could feel her body convulse, the walls of her chamber closing down with the force of an iron trap. The burning friction caused when they shut down over him was the sweetest pain he had ever endured. His own hips left the bed as his body found release. Pounding, pounding, in a frantic, useless attempt to bury himself as far and as tightly as he could inside her. His fingers clutched her as he stopped fighting nature's way, and let the diamond-bright orgasm wring him out until he was left spent and dripping with sweat. Jo fell over him, her breathing like heaving bellows. Her body shivered once, then twice, in the aftermath.

Long minutes passed as they silently savored the downslide. The passion they had shared. The love between them that was as solid and real as their skin-to-skin contact. Then Jo slowly reared up from where she had been draped over his chest, and their connection was like striking flint to steel, setting off sparks. Before he knew it he had swelled inside her again, ready and needing more. The look she gave him with her cornflower blue eyes told him she also wanted it.

"Stay with me, Drew," she whispered throatily. She moved over him provocatively. Teasing him with their combined wetness as fingers of heat began to claw over his nerve endings. "Stay and do this to me every day. We can beat this. I know we can. Please? Promise me?"

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Instead of answering her, Tollson lifted her off of him. Jo gasped in surprise at the feeling of loss without him inside her. Until he arose from the little bed and tossed her back down upon it, belly-down, facing the tiny pillow. Before she could ask him what he was doing, he lifted her buttocks toward him and reached between her legs to find her core. Jo groaned loudly. She shifted slightly to give him easier access, and spread her thighs to let him in.

He thumbed her folds, finding her trembling in anticipation. His own penis had swollen to bigger proportions, if that was even possible. Carefully, slowly, he entered her, sliding thick and hot until he was sheathed all the way to his hilt. Groaning again, Jo threw back her head as her feet locked behind his knees.

He had to stop. He had to savor this—this position that gave him the most powerful erection he had ever felt in his life. She was bent over, bowing face-down away from him as if in supplication, letting him take her in the way he had only dreamed about. His Jo, who had made a man out of him.

He withdrew slowly, then slid back into her faster.

“Oh, God, Drew. More!”

There were reddish marks on her hips where his fingers had held her. Sliding his hands over the creamy expanse of her back, his fingertips could feel the ridge of her spine. Moving under her ribs he found her breasts. There he could tease her nipples, tweaking the puckered tips between forefinger and thumb while he nuzzled her shoulder blades. Suddenly he cradled her upper thighs with gentleness, separated them, and burrowed himself back inside her.

“Drew!”

She turned on his switch.

He was an animal determined to impregnate his mate. Driving himself deep then deeper past silken muscles that never stopped stroking him. Harder and harder into the raging fire of her body. The sound of their heavy breathing became punctuated with the

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slap slap rhythm of skin hitting wet skin. The air was soon perfumed with the scent of sex.

Tollson groaned with her. He was lost inside her. All feeling had left him until the only thing remaining in sharp focus was the overpowering climax surging from the center of his body into his turgid erection.

Jo began to tremble beneath him. Her hips were bucking, and her head was down as her hands dug furrows into the sheets and mattress. Suddenly her head flew back and she shrieked. Her entire body spasmed for the second time, but this time Tollson continued to ram himself into her. Her inner muscles constricted and tried to hold him still, but he mercilessly plowed through her channel, never slowing down. Jo shrieked again, unable to believe her orgasm continued to roll through her with heavy waves of pleasure.

And then it came, like third-degree burns from the inside out. Tollson felt as if every bone in his body liquified until he was left unable to move. Unable to pull away. Unable to do anything but fall heavily forward. He landed partly on top of Jo, partly to the side, as his body continued to surge.

He felt exhausted but energized, both at the same time. Their bodies were still melded as one, but there was no way he was going to draw away from her. Not right now. Not while this incredible sense of perfection filled him, as if this was the way his life was meant to be.

Years of lovemaking. Of taking Jo over and over. God, he could go mad thinking about it.

If you have the years. If you don't wake up some morning after a night of taking her, to find out you've taken everything, including her life.

It was like plunging his heart into a bucket of snow. Involuntarily, Tollson cradled her against him, but she never moved. Quickly he leaned up on one elbow to brush the hair away from her sweaty face. Her eyes were closed; her breathing was

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steady. After her long and frightening vigil last night, and now two volcanic orgasms, Jo had fallen asleep out of sheer exhaustion.

With utmost care, he pulled himself out and away from her delicious warmth. Without jiggling the little bed, Tollson got to his feet and began to pull on his clothes.

Before he left her room, he turned to allow himself one final look at her, lying totally replete, her lovely body sprawled across the covers. Her skin still glistened with perspiration and the final evidence of their lovemaking.

Knowing she would soon grow cold, he picked up one of the extra quilts from the top of her bureau and covered her. He had to force himself not to kiss her cheek, but settled for one against her hair.

As silent as a wraith, he exited the little room, leaving behind his heart along with the woman who had been his only reason for living.

Chapter 25

“Jo! Jo?”

She tried to raise her head off her pillow, but it felt as if a heavy weight was sitting on top of her, almost smothering her. Slowly she blinked and finally managed to look over her shoulder.

“Huh? Shea?”

Shea gave the woman a harried look and shook her again. “Good heavens, girlfriend! It’s a good thing I came over! First I lose track of your beau. So I go over to his place, but it’s empty! Then I come over here—”

“What?” Jo interrupted, managing to sit up. The quilt slid down to her waist, leaving her breasts exposed to the cold. She glanced down at herself and remembered everything that had happened—Drew asking for forgiveness because he had to leave her, her impassioned plea for him not to go...the incredible sex that had wrung her out like a wet dishcloth. Goodbye sex.

Shea had started talking again, but most of it was incomprehensible. Until one phrase came back to hit Jo between the eyes. “Wait a minute! What do you mean, his place is empty?”

She leaped out of bed, ignoring the look of wide-eyed surprise from her friend. Her clothes were still lying in a heap by the doorway. Quickly she dressed, grabbing her coat to put it on after she’d left her room. Vaguely she caught sight of the piece of red cloth hanging over the blanket she used as a doorway. Someone

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had placed it there, knowing the red was a request for privacy. No one would disturb her until it was too late to do anything.

“Jo! It’s a little over an hour before your wedding! What’s going on?” Shea had to stretch to keep up with her friend’s long-legged stride. However, the woman acted as if she couldn’t hear her.

I went over to his place, but it’s empty. Jo could feel the constriction begin in her chest as the truth slowly leaked out. Frantically she began praying, hoping Shea was wrong, although there could be no other reason.

She almost flew up the steps leading to Tollson’s room. Before she reached the doorway she could sense the emptiness.

The bed was made up; it had not been slept in the night before. Of course not. He had been with her. Until when? When did he leave her alone—alone in her room, then alone in the world.

Shea placed a consoling hand on her shoulder. “I checked the drawers. His clothes are gone. So’s the backpack he brought with him. But there’s a little bag by the pillow, and note with your name on it.”

Jo felt as if she was treading through thick mud. Her legs were being stubborn, refusing to cooperate or to take her over to the double bed where she and Drew had made love the first time. Where she had taken his virginity, and discovered it was the greatest gift he could have ever given her.

Her friend was right. There was a little blue denim bag beside the pillow. And a note, bearing her name with a sweeping flourish, not the hasty printing he used when conversing. Picking up the paper, she slowly opened the folded-over sheet.

My Jo,

We have always been of like minds, so you know what I have to do is the only possible answer. Remember I will love you forever.

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Drew

She was unaware of a sob tearing out of her throat as she crushed the small piece of paper in her fist. Reaching for the small bag, she was surprised to find it lumpy. Heavy, as if it contained small pebbles. She pulled apart the drawstring opening and dumped the contents on the bed. It rained bright, cellophane-wrapped peppermint disks over the quilted cover.

Her favorite candy. He'd never forgotten. And by some miracle he'd found some of them. What hurt more than that was the realization that he had saved the candy for when—if—he ever found her. Unable to take the pain, Jo's legs went out from underneath her, and she half-sat, half-fell onto the edge of the bed, covering her face with her hands as the tears poured between her fingers. Her shoulders shook with the force of her grief.

There was no other sound in the room except for her breathy sobs. Once she was able to gain a small amount of control, Jo wiped her face with her shirt sleeve and looked up to see Shea still standing in the doorway.

"Want me to go tell Alicia the wedding's off?"

Jo saw the sympathy in her friend and co-worker's face. Shea didn't know why he'd left. She probably felt he'd stood her up, like so many men did. For some reason, Jo couldn't let it stand that way with her. Drew hadn't abandoned her, or jilted her, and she had to make that totally clear to the woman.

"Drew suffers from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. He...he has these horrific night terrors when he tries to sleep, and when he does, he gets violent. He can't help it, and Dr. Donna says there's nothing she can do to help him." She took a deep, shaky breath, yet the tears continued to wet her face. "He's so scared he's going to hurt me. That he's going to wake up and find me bruised. Or worse. He tried to break the news to me earlier that we couldn't be married, or that he could even stay." Another huge wave of grief washed over her, and Jo bent her head against it.

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Immediately Shea was there offering her comfort as only a friend could. Consoling her with a hug. "He'll be back, girlfriend. I just know he will."

She couldn't stop her shoulders from quaking as she started weeping all over again. There was no end to her tears or to the hot pulsing in her face that sucked the air from her lungs and left her in unceasing misery. Clutching her friend, she admitted, "I had no life for so long. Then, when Drew came back, I knew why. It was because I loved him. I loved him, and there would never be anyone else. He...his life had been the same way. No woman but me. Oh, God, Shea, what am I going to do without him? I tried to tell him we could work it out. I tried everything to change his mind. I guess I just didn't love him enough."

"No, girl. Now, you hush that kind of talk, because love is the reason why you're in the predicament you're in. You do love each other enough. But sometimes love calls for sacrifice, to prove that love is deserved. You said he was afraid of hurting you? Good heavens, woman, just think about it! That man spent the last seventeen years waiting to find you! And you...if ever there was another woman who totally shut down her emotional system like you did, I don't know where she'd be. We all pretty much assumed you had been hurt real bad sometime in the past. How were we to know any differently?"

Pausing, she gave the younger woman a kiss on the forehead. "Now that I think back on it, I can see why you had that little fling with Michael Gretchens. He looked a lot like Drew. And I think you subconsciously did, too. But you knew in your heart he wasn't Drew, and never could be, no matter how much you wished it otherwise, and that was why you broke off your engagement to him." She sighed loudly. "Whatever the hell you saw in Brennan, though, just stumps me to no end."

"He was a warm body in bed when things got too cold and too unbearable," Jo whispered, admitting her weakness.

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Shea nodded. "That makes sense, then. There are some nights you can have a dozen quilts on your bed, and it still isn't enough to keep you warm." Picking up a piece of candy, she raised an eyebrow in question. Jo saw her expression.

"I love peppermints. Drew used to hoard candy canes for me back when we were kids. I remember one afternoon, in the middle of June, he gave me a whole bunch as a surprise." She gave a weak laugh. "We got so sick eating them, but I've never lost my taste for them." Rearing up slightly, she ran her fingers through the pile. "God, it's been years since I've had any." She stared at the candy for another moment, then suddenly jumped to her feet, pulling a handkerchief out of her back pocket, and blowing her nose. In that instant, she once again became the all-business Jo whom Shea had known for the past fifteen years.

"Shea, go tell Ross that Drew's left, and tell him to check with his men to see if they might have seen him leave. I have to know which direction he went."

"You're going after him." It wasn't meant to be a question.

"If he won't stay in Promise, then neither will I." Jo shook her head. "This isn't just his decision to make, damn him." She started to leave when Shea motioned toward the pile of peppermints on the bed.

"What about these? And if you're going after him, won't you need to pack some clothes?"

"No time! I have to find him now! No telling how far ahead he is!"

Shea watched her friend hurry off without saying goodbye, or if she'd be back. Shaking her head, she gathered the candy disks back into the little denim bag, tucking the note inside with them, and left to find Polinski to give him Jo's message. After that, she went to give the others the news that there may not be a wedding after all. When she was finished there, she planned on going back

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over to Jo's place and packing her a traveling bag, just in case she came back to get it.

And, no, she wouldn't forget to include the little bag of candy.

Chapter 26

There was no telling which way Drew had gone. But it would be easy to find out, considering the fact that the whole town now knew of him. The backpack would also be a dead giveaway that something wasn't right, especially since the man was supposed to be getting married in less than an hour.

Best to start at the beginning. Jo went straight to the guards watching the front entrance. Knowing that if she made it sound like he had left permanently, she would be bogged down with questions. Instead, she made up something that would sound more like an innocent inquiry.

"Has Drew been by to check on things yet?"

The guard, who had been on duty for the past two hours, shook his head. She gave him a smile and a quick thank you, and hurried off to check with the next man in line.

Word had spread quickly about the little test Tollson had put himself through on the target practice range. Not only did the others in Polinski's security squad raise their appreciation of the man a few more notches, but it also added more fuel to the gossip already surrounding her and Drew. And that didn't even take into consideration how nearly every woman's tongue had been wagging about Drew's appearance.

Jo couldn't help but smile with pride. Evelyn had called him a Greek god. At six-two and nearly two hundred thirty pounds of all muscle, and with shoulders that looked like they could easily heft a

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building or two across them, she could see why. Not to mention the fact that, although he wasn't as snowy-haired as he'd been as a young boy, he was still as golden blond as his mother had been.

She blushed. Except for one place where the golden was more of a darker honey color. Or amber.

The next guard hadn't seen him. Neither had the guard watching near the granaries. Because of the recent rash of break-ins, Polinski had placed guards within what he called "eyeballing" distance of each other. So that at any time during their duty, at least two guards were always within hailing distance of each other.

Rounding the back side of the livestock cavern she could see where a couple of men were working a goodly distance away, just beyond the pasture. She stopped to see if she could tell who it was, but they were too bundled up against the wind. It looked as though they were loading—no, they were unloading something from underground bunkers. Odd. Jo's eyes narrowed. When did Abel have storage bunkers dug out there? Dammit, she had probably been thinking about a hundred other things when it was brought up in one of their Triad meetings.

She started to keep going when some internal alarm went off. Pausing, she turned back to look again. She knew how Abel worked supplies. She also knew how Ross preferred to handle guard duty. Something wasn't right, and it took her another minute to figure it out.

Okay. The men were unloading something from the bunker. Not unusual. But they seemed to be in a hurry, and no one appeared to be keeping watch for scavengers.

She shifted her stance. Why wasn't one of them standing guard? And where were they putting the stuff they were unloading? There wasn't any wagon out there, as far as she could tell.

Her eyes widened. Their body language said it all. They weren't planning on bringing the items back in this direction, back

to the town. Whatever they were loading was being taken away from there.

Ohmigod! Without a doubt she knew they were the scavengers who had been hitting their stores these past couple of months.

Her feet refused to move. Quickly she glanced around to see if there was a guard nearby that she could motion to. She'd taken the long way, on the off chance she might spot Drew. A curse word formed on her lips when she realized the guard was just beyond the ridge, out of sight but still within hailing distance. But if she called out, she feared the other men might hear her, enabling them to get away before anyone could reach them.

Which left just her. But...her heart flipped and shrank further inside her chest. She had to find Drew. She had to keep searching for him, even if a little voice told her he had slipped away unnoticed, and her quest to find a witness would prove futile.

A moral war waged inside her. Her sense of duty told her to she had an obligation to the community. They had given her the responsibility to care for them, and she couldn't betray that trust no matter what.

No matter what.

No matter what it cost her, emotionally or physically.

Before she was aware of what she was doing, Jo began to run toward the men, ducking behind large boulders and hillocks whenever she could to keep them from spotting her. It was easier than she expected. They were deeply engrossed in what they were doing. Maybe if she got close enough she could see who all was involved. Nothing like a little positive identification to take back to Ross, who would clip this operation in the quick.

They had guns, rifles slung across their shoulders as they hefted the metal boxes Abel's people made to hold various items and foodstuffs in. One man carried out several bags tied with rope. She recognized the familiar containers used to hold precious flour and other grains grown in the hydroponics gardens.

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A huge gust of wind nearly knocked her down. A wide bank of black clouds had swept in from the northwest without warning, blotting out the pale sun until it was nearly as dark as nighttime.

In the distance the men paused long enough to light a small lantern, then continued to pull items from the bunker. By this time Jo was certain the underground facility hadn't been part of Abel's plans. It had to be one dug out by the scavengers as a place to ditch their stolen bounty until they could come back later to fetch it.

The wind knifed through her, forcing her to button up her coat and throw her hood over her head. The scavengers did the same thing, eliciting a curse from her. She would have to get closer to make a positive I.D., now that their faces were more obscured. If anything positive could be said about the rising storm, it hid any sound she made as she approached the men, who were bent further to their tasks. Obviously they wanted to be finished before the blizzard arrived in full force.

The last rock she rounded put her less than a dozen feet from the bunker. Carefully she reared up to peer around the boulder and spotted the low wagon. No, it was more like a cart on four wheels. The thing had a doubled set of ropes tied to one end, meaning the men themselves would provide the muscle to pull it. The wide bed was nearly full. She wondered how much was left inside to still haul out.

As far as she could tell there were four men total, but between the intermittent darkness, the pale gleam of light, and the hoods framing their faces, it was still too difficult to tell if they were anyone she knew. They needed to look up, hopefully where the light could catch their features. Maybe if she moved over to that next rock where she could have a straighter shot at the mouth of the bunker—

Something pressed hard into her back, between her shoulder blades. "Don't do anything except turn around very slowly," a gruff voice ordered her.

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She did exactly as she was told. The man was a stranger, but he eyed her up and down with more than a glint of interest.

“Get up and move.” He gestured with the tip of the rifle toward the bunker.

Again, Jo stood up and started down the short slope to where the others were working. Too late she realized she’d been wrong. There had been a man standing guard. She just hadn’t spotted him, since he had been keeping vigil among the rocks.

They were halfway across the clearing when the others noticed them approaching, and stopped what they were doing. One man in particular stepped forward wearing a big grin on his face. Seeing him, Jo felt her anger rise along with a surge of desperation.

“My, my. Good catch, J. D. Last thing I expected to see out here was your pretty freckled face, my dear,” Brennan Runnion taunted her. He reached to take her wrist, but she hid it behind her back before he had the chance. Her act of defiance didn’t sit well with him. “Well, now you realize you’ve put me in a rather sticky spot, don’t you?”

“What are we gonna do with her?” one man questioned, dropping two more sacks onto the cart.

“We can’t take her with us,” J. D. stated flatly. “We’d be spending all our time keeping watch on her, and we don’t have that luxury.”

Runnion agreed. “You’re right.” He turned back to Jo and smiled again. “So, does anyone have a suggestion on what to do with her?”

Another man emerged from the bunker in time to hear Runnion’s question. “There’s probably two more loads left inside,” he commented. “We could leave her inside. It would give us plenty of time to get this stuff safely away before they find her.”

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J. D. snorted. "If they find her." He ran his gaze over her again, then looked to Runnion. "Didn't you say she wasn't your woman any longer?"

"She's taken up with that Tollson guy who showed up a couple of days ago, remember? That's why we had a change of plans." He dug a hand into her hood, cupping her cheek and running a gloved thumb over her lips. Jo was tempted to bite it, but fear had her paralyzed. "You just made things too easy, my dear. Whenever you and that wonderkid were playing the horizontal tango, it gave us the perfect opportunity to strike. Because heaven knows Polinski and his boy scouts couldn't track an elephant in the middle of a football field."

Another thought darkened his face, knitting his brows together as his eyes reflected an instant of fear. "What are you doing out here, anyway? Where's your intended? You're supposed to be over at the mess hall right now getting married. Or, at least, that was the information I was given." He pulled away from her and glanced around as he pulled the rifle off his shoulder. "She could be a decoy, guys. Tollson could be out there right now, waiting to strike." Whirling on her, Runnion shoved the barrel of his rifle into her side. "Call him out, Jo. Right now."

"He's not here."

"Bullshit! Call him out!" He shoved the sights into her ribs, knocking her off-center. She stumbled but quickly regained her footing.

"He's not here!" she repeated. Tears popped up in her eyes, and she damned herself for the quivering in her chin. Runnion saw the distress on her face and grinned.

"There where is he?"

"He left." Her throat had suddenly closed up. The words that managed to squeak out sounded weak.

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“Left? He left you?” Runnion laughed heartily. “Oh, this is rich! He got tired of you even faster than I did!” He roared again with glee, not caring that tears were rolling down her cheeks.

It was J. D. who commented, “Maybe she’s lying.”

“No. No, she’s not,” Runnion smiled. “If there was one thing I could always tell with JoBeth it’s that I always knew when she was lying to me. Face it, cupcake. You’re a lousy liar.”

Man number three emerged from the bunker and dumped his load on the overburdened cart. “Last one,” he announced.

“Perfect.” Runnion gave her a little push in the direction of the bunker. “Damion had an excellent suggestion and solution. We’ll just leave you in the bunker where you can’t tell anyone about your little discovery until we’re far enough away from here.”

“Bren?”

Runnion glanced up to see J. D.’s eyes taking in Jo’s figure. He knew that look, and knew what the man was going to suggest before he opened his mouth. Even without a nice set of tits, the woman was a passable lay, even if she couldn’t get off on it. “Yeah?”

“Want me to make sure she’s locked up nice and tight?”

“Sure, man. Do whatever you think you need to do to make sure she doesn’t escape before we can get to the wagons.” Runnion added a grin to let the man know he knew what the guy intended to do. “We’ll meet up when you can join us.”

Jo glanced from Runnion to the man now staring openly at her. Her fear was escalating with the knowledge that Brennan was leaving her alone with this guy. As much as she wanted to deny the inevitable, she could feel her gorge rising. She took a step back, ready to bolt at any second, when a pair of hands grabbed her by the shoulders and literally dragged her backwards toward the bunker. She tried to kick the man holding her. A scream broke her out from her paralysis, but Runnion backhanded her across the

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mouth. Sharp, flat pain stunned her. She tasted blood, then she felt herself being picked up by the ankles and carried.

They threw her into the bunker. She landed face down on the rough floor, skidding across the broken surface, tearing the flesh from her hands and banging her knees. More pain shot through her legs, stealing her breath as she tried to get back to her feet. Someone came in behind her carrying the lantern. She knew it wasn't Runnion. The door shut behind him, leaving them alone.

Slowly, Jo turned to look up at the man who was beginning to undress.

Chapter 27

Tollson took shelter beneath a rock overhang. The wind had come up unexpectedly, grasping everything in its bitter cold fingers.

He had snuck out of Promise without any difficulties and without being seen. Polinski had a major hole in his perimeter. The man must think that because a small mountain nestled right up against the northeast section of town that it automatically prevented outsiders from coming down the slope to attack. It wouldn't. Didn't matter if the slope was nearly vertical or not. If a scavenger wanted to get in, they got in. They were like cockroaches that way.

For once in his life the cold felt good. It kept a portion of him frozen—a portion he wanted to keep numb and without feeling, because once it thawed, the pain would be unrelenting.

Do you love me enough to take the time to let them go away again?

Her words cut deep. Did he love her enough?

Loving wasn't the point. It was putting her life in danger that made it impossible to stay.

He had left Maine to find out whether Jo had survived the apocalypse. Once he'd found the proof he'd been seeking, he had set his mind on finding her. He'd told himself he just needed to see if she was all right. If she was happy. He had fully expected her to be married and raising a couple of bratty boys like he and David had been. Or maybe with a little girl who was the spitting image of

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her, right down to the cornflower blue eyes and clusters of freckles.

The last thing he had thought possible was that he would find the other half of his heart. And find out that the only thing that had kept her sane, like it had for him, had been the impossible belief they could be reunited.

Do you love me enough to take the time to let them go away again?

That's the problem, Jo. My beautiful Jo. I love you too much. He stared off into the distance and tried to keep the gut-wrenching pain from twisting up his insides.

She had become a woman. A woman so incredibly giving. Soft on the outside, strong on the inside. Passionate. The moment she'd fallen into his arms and cried out his name, it was as if the years had vanished like smoke. She was little nine-year-old Jo, and he was eleven again, and they were huddled together on the bank of that little creek out behind their houses. The only thing wrong was that he couldn't tell her how much he loved her. How much he had always loved her, and how he would go to his grave thinking of her. The last words his lips would form would be her name, whether it came out verbally or not.

A frigid blast slid around the rock. Tollson held up his backpack as a shield. She said they could sleep in separate beds. In separate rooms, if need be. Yes, she was afraid of what he might do, but that didn't mean she was afraid of him. They were two totally different things.

How?

He felt a tightening in his chest. Crap, he hurt. He tried to get back on his feet, but it was as if the world suddenly decided to tilt at an odd angle, forcing Tollson to grip the side of the overhang for support.

This was crazy. The further away he got from Promise, the more he hurt. It was like there was this rubber band connecting him and Jo, and as the distance between them increased, it drew

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the band thinner and thinner, tighter and tighter, until it threatened to break—or rip something out at the base.

My Jo.

His thoughts shifted without warning. Promise. They'd named the place Promise because all the inhabitants had promised to protect each other. To keep each other safe from the world. To try and recreate a halfway decent, civilized, normal, and hopefully sane way of life again. Tollson gave a soundless chuckle. To him the name had a completely different meaning. Promise was his future with Jo. A life together, with years of sharing love. And laughter. Giving life to children who would never know the terror he had faced. The Promise of a happy ever after.

Do you love me enough to take the time to let them go away again?

Yes, I do, but I can't.

Why not?

Tollson blinked. It was Jo's voice, as clear as if she was standing in front of him.

If you love me enough, why won't you stay? Why won't you let Promise live up to its name?

I can't risk it, he argued with her. With himself. With the wind and rock.

I love you enough to risk it, her voice came to him. *I love you enough to believe you'll never hurt me. I love you enough to chance anything, as long as we can stay together. We have to stay together, Drew. Don't you know that? We have to. We have no choice. We wouldn't want it any other way.*

Do you love me enough to Promise?

He swiveled his neck to glance back the way he'd come. Separate bedrooms? It wouldn't be the end of lovemaking. It just meant he couldn't wake up with her in his arms, or spooned against him. Not now. But the chance, the Promise that it could happen, that there was the possibility that in the future the

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nightmares would crawl back into their black hole and leave him alone like they had before.

He had never hurt either one of his foster fathers when the sweats and terrors had overtaken him. Was it possible he and Jo could share some kind of life together?

Tollson turned to face south. He hadn't put a lot of distance between him and the town. If he hurried, he could be back in no time. But would Jo want him back? How was she facing the townspeople right now, knowing she had been left in the lurch on their wedding day? Was she cursing his name because he had humiliated her?

Come back to me, Drew. Keep your Promise to me. Prove you'll love me forever.

His feet began to move of their own volition. He couldn't stop them, no more than he could keep that rubber band from dragging him back the way he'd come. Straining against the pull to lessen the tension. Lessen the pain and the hurt. Lessen the distance.

Funny how his heart started beating again as he began to jog. Funny how the wind was now at his back, literally pushing him toward the town. Funny how he could breathe without the knife-like pain slicing through his lungs.

Come back to me, Drew.

Forgive me, my Jo. I'll make it up to you. I Promise.

Topping the rise, he paused to catch his breath. He was running now, literally running as fast as he could. At the top he could see Promise in the distance, although, if he hadn't known about the town's existence before, he would never had known what he was looking at. The place was well fortified, despite the fact that Polinski needed a few pointers here and there. It was also well camouflaged. It was just the type of place where he could feel safe enough to not worry about a mere blanket serving as a door between him and the outside world.

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It was just the type of place where he could come home. Where he could have a home. With Jo.

He dropped down into the tiny gully to follow its meandering path where he knew it would open up into a wider washout. He was almost there when he caught the sound of loud clattering and indistinct talking. Men's voices.

A greasy pool of warning slid around inside his stomach in nauseous waves. Then that prickly feeling like a million bee stings crept underneath his skin. His extra sense was telling him to go. Run for it. His sense of self-preservation kicked in with both feet.

Training instantly took over. Tollson sought cover, not ready to reveal himself until he could determine whether the men were friend or foe. Basic Survival Rule—never assume the best in people until you get to know them better. In this day and age, caution had to prevail.

The clattering got louder. It had the telltale rattle and roll of a loaded vehicle, but Tollson couldn't catch the sound of horses pulling it. That meant there had to be at least two or three men accompanying whatever they were transporting.

The men's voices got louder. Apparently they felt confident enough they wouldn't be overheard. It wasn't long before Tollson could make out some of their words filtering past the wind.

"...long before he catches up?"

"...dunno. Could take...a while. J. D. likes...thorough, if you know what I mean." The man snickered.

Tollson froze. Now he knew why Polinski's men hadn't found Runnion to question him about the granary break-in. The guy was working for the scavengers. He was either one of them, planted inside the town to help aid in their raids. Or he had been approached by them, and persuaded to act as their contact. More likely bribed, if that was the case.

Either way it no longer mattered. Runnion was going to answer to Tollson's Law. And it wouldn't be nice.

Chapter 28

This was just too easy. Runnion mentally patted himself on the back as he watched the two men pulling the wagon. Rollie walked beside the top-heavy load, keeping an eye more on the shifting cargo than on the terrain. Runnion shook his head. These retards couldn't even load a wagon properly so the shit wouldn't fall off. Well, after today it wouldn't matter. What they'd managed to accumulate would keep them in high cotton for a good, long time.

Two and a half months of random sacking was on that cart. Except for the two head of cattle, which Custler had to take on ahead. That had been such a lousy break for Tollson to come when he did. These idiots under Polinski had no idea Runnion was using security's duty schedule to coordinate their hits. But Tollson, that guy had some smarts. Already he had been able to dig up a few clues, and Runnion knew it wouldn't be long before the finger would point directly at him. That was why he'd gone ahead and taken that sweater from Tollson's room. It would divert the others' attention and make them a little suspicious just long enough to where Runnion and his men could get their stuff packed and out of there.

The wagon tilted as a wheel rolled over a rock. Runnion caught a bag of corn before it fell and split open on the ground. "Watch what the hell you're doing!" he yelled at the two men drawing the cart.

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The figure came from out of nowhere, as silent and deadly as his moniker. Biddings was his first target. The scavenger took the initial assault to his kneecaps, which blew them out with a wet crunch and placed the man permanently out of action. Biddings screamed as he fell to the ground. His knees jutted out backwards from his body like a chicken's.

In less time than it took for them all to grasp what was happening, Tollson struck out at the second man pulling the cart. Chapa felt his legs go out from under him as the Wraith knocked him off his feet with a roundhouse kick. A heavy, double-fisted blow to the chest instantly knocked the man unconscious as his heart went into defib. A second, less critical knock on the sternum set the heart back into regular sinus rhythm. The man would remain incapacitated for at least another forty-eight hours, but he would live. Barely.

Rollie Jones had his rifle up and was searching underneath the cart for the man who had slipped beneath it immediately after taking out the two haulers. A handful of dust thrown into his face blinded him long enough for Tollson to grab the barrel of his gun and pull downward with both hands. The scavenger's forehead hit the edge of the cart with a hollow thunk, and Jones slid to the ground without a sound.

The moment the attack had begun Runnion had hefted his gun and backed away from the cart. The move temporarily got him out of Tollson's range, but not before the Wraith launched a chunk of caliche at him. Runnion's instincts threw his hands in front of his face; the rock bounced off the fore end of the pump action, right where his nose would have been if he hadn't raised the shotgun. The momentum was enough for Runnion to level the gun at the man crouched beneath the cart before Tollson could get in a second try.

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Both men froze. Tollson's eyes remained boring into Runnion. It was difficult to tell what the man was thinking, but Runnion knew it wasn't pleasant.

"Good try, Tollson. I can see why everyone's so hepped up about your skills. You're a one-man army."

It was like staring down a man-eating lion. The guy's eyes never wavered. He felt he was being sized up for supper. All Tollson needed was for him to make one slip. One tiny mistake. One wrong move, and the guy would be pulling his tongue out by the roots. After what he had done to the other three, Runnion had no doubt the man wanted them all alive so they could go back to Promise and be held accountable.

The other three... Runnion grinned. The man didn't know about Jo. Nor did he know about their fifth compadre who should be heading back this way any time now. Suddenly things didn't seem as tense as before. Runnion's grin got bigger.

Stall.

"In case you're wondering, this baby isn't carrying buckshot. Of course, you've probably already figured that one out. Nowadays you have to adapt guns to shoot whatever you can find. I've got some nicely filed slugs in this over/under. Guaranteed to punch a good size hole in you through and through. Wanna see?"

As he asked, Runnion cocked an eye over the sights and fired.

Tollson stood, up-ending the cart by lifting one side with his massive strength and tilting it in Runnion's direction. The lead slug burst open two sacks of dried corn before embedding itself halfway through the floor of the wagon. Bags and boxes went tumbling toward Runnion.

At the same moment Tollson launched himself over the side of the cart, making a flying tackle at the man who managed to get off his second shot. The slug whined harmlessly over Tollson's head.

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Tollson hit him at waist level, and both men went down. Runnion fought, trying to use the empty shotgun like a club. The battle was over in less than a minute. Wrenching the gun from the man's grasp, Tollson drew back a fist to ensure Runnion a long night's rest, when the man hissed, "Good luck finding her."

He shuddered to a stop. His arm froze in midair as Tollson stared down at the panting man.

Opening his eyes, Runnion looked up to see fear and indecision spread over the man's face. A comment Jo had made echoed in his head.

He's not here. He left.

In an instant Runnion knew what she meant. Tollson had left Promise altogether, and she had gone looking for him. That was why she happened to stumble across them when she did. She'd been hunting for her new lover.

Just their luck they had almost run him down on their way out. Still, it was good to know he would have the last laugh. No matter what Tollson or the others did to him, Jo would never be the same after today.

Tollson seemed to read his mind. He glanced back in the direction they had come, back toward Promise. The man wasn't even breathing heavily. "Of course, it's probably too late by now," he added then chuckled.

His face erupted into grinding black pain, sucking him straight into unconsciousness.

* * * *

Jo watched in cold horror as the man calmly shed his coat, then began unfastening his pants. His actions were casual, as if he had all the time in the world.

She managed to scoot backwards until she met the rough wall on the other side of the bunker. The man watched her useless attempt with a smug smile. The interior was small, and the only opening was directly behind him. She was going nowhere.

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Jo eyed the man as he untied his boots and slipped them off, then dropped his pants down hairy legs. She realized the man was toying with her. She knew he probably got off on hurting women. Humiliating them. No telling how many others he'd done this to.

Well, she would live through it. Once he was done with her he'd leave, and she would never have to face him again. Let him do what he wanted, without a struggle, and get it over with as quickly as possible. Because if she fought him, she knew he would beat her. Maybe break something. The less pain she had to endure, the better.

It was difficult enough accepting the fact that Drew had left her. That was a pain more real and more damaging than anything this man could do to her. Her world had collapsed in pieces. There was almost nothing left that this man could do to her that would scar her as permanently.

She bowed her head as tears dripped from her cheeks.

"Tears ain't gonna save you, sweet pea," the man taunted her. He kicked his pants to the side and proceeded over to where Jo sat hunched over against the wall. Reaching down, he grabbed her by the shoulders.

The moment he touched her all reason left her. The calm resignation she had planned on presenting in order to sustain her sanity through her violation—vanished. Her entire body went into instant and angry denial. She and Drew had made love less than an hour ago. She could still feel his body on hers. His dark, rich scent remained on her skin. His soft kisses lay along her neck and shoulders, and wet on her mouth. The way his hands had caressed her was burned in her memory. She still held his seed inside her.

There was no fucking way this man would take that away from her.

Her mind rebelled. Her last memories of Drew had to be the love they'd shared, not this bastard's hateful intrusion.

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When his fingers curled around her arms, Jo screamed, lashing out with her feet. The guy seemed to expect it, as he neatly sidestepped her kicks. Jo screamed again, shrill and piercing. The bunker was naturally insulated. No one would be able to hear her. But the sound hurt his ears. She opened her mouth again as she struggled to free herself from his tightening grip. He released one shoulder to backhand her across the mouth to shut her up.

Jo had hoped he would make that move. A split second before he hit her, she bolted in the only direction open to her—between his legs.

The man cursed loudly. Her move had taken him by complete surprise, and he nearly toppled over when she knocked him off balance. Jo quickly scrambled on her hands and knees toward the door. She fought the spears of agony coming from her bruised knees and thighs, finally reaching the door. She tried to get to her feet in order to grab the handle when a hand snatched her boot and jerked her backwards. Jo landed heavily on her already damaged legs. A squeal of pain and fear broke from her paralyzed throat.

The man cursed at her again. His fingers loosened on her boot for a second so he could go for her leg. Feeling it freed, Jo swept her leg outward and tried to kick him. Too late, her foot connected with the lantern sitting nearby on the floor. Glass broke with the sound of tiny bells, and oil began traveling across the rocky floor with a slow but steady ooze. The flames made little puffing sounds. Suddenly fire began to follow the trail of oil as it spread in a widening pool.

Before she could react, two hands found the bottom of her jeans. Jo tried to kick him again. This time, however, he managed to twist her legs, one over the other, and force her onto her back. With nothing to hold on to, Jo struggled against the man as he pulled her into the center of the room.

There was a sudden loud cracking noise, then a pop. And another, followed by a long series of more pops, until the bunker

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sounded like a fireworks stand going off on the Fourth of July. Both knew almost immediately what was happening. The tiny, dark gray chips in the walls and floor were particles of lignite. The low grade coal peppered the rock, and it was catching fire started by the broken lantern, and spreading. The interior was beginning to heat up like an oven.

Shouting an expletive, the man let go of Jo and headed for the door, snatching his pants and boots on the way. Jo followed, hoping the man would remain sidetracked enough to allow her the chance to escape.

She nearly plowed into him when he stopped abruptly in the doorway and turned back around to face her. The look on his face left her cold. "Where do you think you're going, sweet pea?" He flashed her a leering grin as his eyes wiped themselves over her body one last time. "You know I can't let you out."

"You can't leave me in here." She tried to sound authoritative. Instead her voice betrayed her fear. In the span of less than a minute she had gone from the threat of rape to the greater threat of burning alive. She tried to say more when the man stepped outside and began to close the door. Jo screamed and lunged after him to get out. Their scuffle was brief. The man was bigger, stronger, and outweighed her by at least a hundred pounds. He shoved her with both hands, making her fall heavily to the floor.

Jo froze as the door closed and she heard the sound of the heavy lock fall into place. Behind her the flames began crawling up the walls like sputtering curtains of light.

* * * *

The cold wind sliced through his flesh, reminding him that the weather was nothing like the rising temperature inside the bunker. The man gazed at the solid metal door. The damn thing was already beginning to feel warm in the center from the sheets of metal reacting to the heat on the other side.

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“Serves the bitch right,” he muttered aloud, trying to placate himself from the tempting pleasure he had anticipated but lost. She probably wouldn’t have been worth the trouble anyway.

Another blast of air came around the side of the bunker, reminding him he needed to put his clothes back on. He was standing there half naked. Turning around, he leaned up against the rock side of the underground shelter to pull on his pants when he saw the huge figure standing less than a dozen feet away.

* * * *

Tollson stopped on the top of the small rise to look down the pathway leading to Promise. This was the back way, the edge of the narrow trail skirting around the cliff which opened up further down.

Taking out Runnion had felt good. Clenching his gloved hands, Tollson cursed himself for his stupidity. He had made a mistake that could have cost him his life, and it might have already cost him Jo as well. Carter’s voice came back to him with condemnation.

“Before you go all piss and vinegar on your target, Drew, check out their numbers first. If you don’t, you could easily end up with one of them at your back.”

They’d left one behind. Clouds of blackness rolled inside him. Runnion and his cronies had left one of their own behind. With Jo.

If he hurt her in any way, Tollson promised himself the man wouldn’t last out the hour.

A gust of wind greeted him at the top of the next rise. Once it died away he heard what sounded like a muffled scream. Tollson flew down the slippery incline as the scream was followed by a hollow, metallic thump. Then silence. He topped the next small hill to find a man standing beside what looked like a door set into the side of a mound of earth. The door was a dull gray. Metal. That would explain the thump he’d heard. As Tollson tried to swallow the bile that had risen in his throat, he also knew why the other

member of Runnion's party had been left behind. The man was naked from the waist down. There was no doubt in Tollson's mind what had occurred.

The guy turned around to find a pair of eyes burning holes in him. But the moment his face came into view, Tollson reacted with undeniable shock. The man went totally still despite the cold wind that was making his legs shake.

He looked exactly the same as he had seventeen years ago.

Tollson realized he hadn't imagined seeing the man earlier, back at the attack on the caravan. The nightmare was back.

Blood swept through Tollson's mind. In that moment he was eleven years old again. A terrified kid with his hands bound behind his back as he witnessed his family's brutal execution.

"That's right, Mr. Tollson. That's part of our service. I'll haul away the trees once I've finished cutting them down."

Then the knife sliced downward. It was a big blade. The biggest goddamn blade Drew had ever seen in his life. He had no idea people made knives with blades that huge. If he wasn't so shit-scared out of his mind, he would have asked the guy about it. But the knife came down, fast and already slicked with red. Drew hiccuped and sucked in another quick breath to keep screaming, screaming, screaming as loud as he could.

That little movement was what had saved his life. That tiny hitch just as he opened his mouth had moved his chest a fraction of a centimeter when the Bowie knife had plunged into his breast, and the enormous, wide blade had slid past his small heart instead of into it. But the attack had thrown his body into instant shock, making him appear dead.

Tollson felt every nerve in his body firing up. The man standing there as the man who had betrayed his family. The man who had stood behind an eleven-year-old innocent kid and jammed a fucking Bowie knife into his chest.

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His name. A flash back to that time and place. It had been stitched to the guy's shirt.

Tollson's eyebrows lowered as he fought to remember. Something...something...

J. D. The guy was called J. D. In bright red lettering. Like blood.

How the hell he had come to be in Promise, Tollson couldn't care less. But the man was here now. He had taken away Tollson's family, his innocence, and now he had violated Jo and left her inside that underground bunker.

Tollson felt his fingers flex inside his gloves as his feet started moving him toward the man. The guy trembled from the cold and fear. He started to dig in his pants he held clutched against his bare belly. Stiffening fingers found the hilt of the big Bowie knife, but he never had the chance to release it from its scabbard.

The guy shrieked as Tollson snapped his wrist, leaving his throwing hand dangling without control. He dropped his pants and reached for the arm that pinned him against the side of the bunker like a beam of pure steel. Fingers wrapped themselves around his neck, ready to crush his windpipe and snap his vertebra at a second's notice.

Through dazed eyes, and unable to even curse at the man holding him without mercy, all the guy could do was stare in confusion as Tollson began to undo the catches on his coat. There was not a shred of humanity in Tollson's golden eyes. Nothing there to reflect what the man planned to do to him. Nothing other than a rising shadow of death.

Once he got his coat undone, Tollson pulled it back and reached for the hem of his sweater and undershirt, jerking them up over the well-honed muscles of his chest. A grunt of pain leaked out of the guy as Tollson gave him a little shake to get his attention, then directed his eyes to the thin white scar just below his left pectoral. The guy's widened, recognizing the scar as an old

knife wound, but he raised questioning eyes at Tollson, uncomprehending.

Sighing, Tollson gave him another little shake, then made three movements to explain—he pointed to the man, made a downward, stabbing gesture to the scar, then pointed at himself.

The man blinked. Finally, he understood, if not completely. He had stabbed Tollson in the past, but fuck him if he could remember when or where. There had been so many, and who could remember every time he'd taken out a guy?

Tollson saw the dawning on the man's face. The fact that one of his victims had lived and come back to haunt him was evident in the way he lifted empty eyes at his executioner. At least the guy had tried to make it clean and quick. Tollson could do no less as he separated the man's skull from his spine.

He released the man's lifeless body and watched it slide the rest of the way down the sloped side of the bunker to the ground. He wiped his hands on the thighs of his pants to symbolically remove the feel of the man from his fingers before turning to the door. Now it was time to get Jo out of that bunker.

Chapter 29

Before he even laid hands on it, Tollson could feel the heat emanating off of the metal door. The bunker was on fire inside, and Jo was trapped in there with it.

There was a sliding lock on the massive piece of metal that was sunk into the limestone-riddled soil. He tried to tug it open, but the bar wouldn't budge. Either the heat was affecting it, or something else was keeping him from opening it. Pounding on the metal, Tollson placed his ear as close to the door as possible to catch any sound inside.

Was she able to hear his banging? He tried again, when another thought went through him with an explosion of darkness.

What if she was unconscious? What if that son of a bitch had left her unable to answer him?

What if she was dead?

A deep groan vibrated inside his chest. Tollson shook his head vehemently, as if the action would negate any such possibility. He beat harder on the metal door, barely making out the echoes of his pounding reverberating inside.

Whatever had caused the fire could be the reason why she wasn't answering him. Or it could be preventing her from calling out. He tried once more to slide the thick, flat bar out of its notch in the rock, but it refused his best efforts.

Think, Drew, think!

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He paused, staring into space as he tried to reason out the situation. If the bunker was enclosed, there was no way a fire could last more than a few minutes inside. There wouldn't be enough oxygen to keep it going.

Not unless there was an air hole somewhere feeding the flames.

Tollson ran around the back side of the bunker which extended into the rock base at ground level. Cursing silently, he went the other direction, only to find the same thing. If the bunker was built downward, he was screwed.

Yeah, but what if it was built like a tunnel and not wide, as most were?

He hoisted himself on top, looking for the back of the bunker. Here the hillside was almost pure caliche until it curved slightly. A chilly gust hit him but Tollson felt none of it.

There was a curl of smoke coming from a crack in the rock.

There was no way he could dig out the hole with his hands. Not unless he had a crowbar or something like it. But there wasn't a crowbar anywhere nearby. There was nothing, unless Tollson chose to run back to the overturned cart and snatch one of the guns to try and pry the opening wider. But by that time it could be too late. If Jo was still alive inside, taking the time to go back to the cart could seal her death.

But there was something else he could try.

Going back to the dead man lying next to the front door, Tollson relieved him of the Bowie knife. If a weapon had a soul, this was the chance for it to redeem itself for wreaking years of bloodthirsty havoc.

He ran back to the crack and began chipping out the hard rock, using the knife like an icepick. Little bits and shards flew outward as he worked to enlarge the hole, making progress one inch at a time. More wisps of dirty gray smoke curled from the crack, and soon Tollson could feel a warmth blowing on his face.

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He knew he was making a tremendous amount of noise, but there was no way he could call to her to see if she was inside. If she was aware he was trying to reach her. Or if she was alive.

A large chunk the size of his head suddenly broke off, and Tollson could see a small ledge jutting into the enclosure. The hole was too small to accommodate his bulky figure. Pulling out, he threw off his coat and sweater, then crawled back inside. The fit was tight and too narrow for his big shoulders. Yet somehow Tollson managed to squeeze through the opening as more smoke poured over him on its way to escape.

He coughed, fighting the heat. His eyes stung as he wriggled further along the ledge, until finally he could see into the tiny room.

Jo lay curled on the floor almost directly below him. He couldn't see her face. She had covered up with her sweater in a vain attempt to protect it against the fires. A small rain of loose rock and dirt showered down beside her, unnoticed.

The interior was like crawling into the mouth of a volcano—the walls were covered in thin sheets of flames, and the floor was pockmarked with small tufts of fire. The whole place was incredibly hot, and growing hotter as the fire was fed by the hole he'd enlarged, and by other clumps of lignite it found buried deeper in the ground.

Tollson forced his body as far into the hole as he could manage. He could feel his skin being peeled from his chest and back from the rock's sharp little teeth. He had handled much worse physical pain before. Grimly, determinedly, he pushed forward another inch. Then two.

Then no more. He was as deep into the hole as he could manage, but there was no way he could get all of him into the room. No way in hell.

And it was hell. The room was hot enough to roast a whole cow, and getting hotter. The flames were crackling like insane

breakfast cereal, masking any sound he could make. He tried to reach down and touch her, but even with a nearly yard-long reach, he couldn't get to her. Not unless she stood. Not unless she got up on her tiptoes and extended her arm toward him.

The wall to their right flared suddenly, sending a shower of sparks arching through the tiny enclosure. Jo never moved although she reacted to the sound. Hope leaped in his chest. She was alive and awake. But unless he did something and quickly, the fire would literally broil her alive.

Futilely he beat on the rock to get her attention. More bits of rock rained down on her, unnoticed. Tollson could feel the skin on his freed arm and face already turning red against the conflagration. He had to get her out of there. He had to get her attention. She had to look up. *Look up! Jo, for God's sake, look up before you cook to death!*

"Unnnn!" It started as a groan, rumbling deep within his chest. "Unn! Unnnj!" He worked his mouth, trying to force the sound past his lips, past years of memories that had fused his vocal chords together.

Flames licked at his elbow. Tollson jerked his arm away. Seconds from now this side of the room would become engulfed as the fire ate its way around the walls.

"Uunnnjjj!"

That J. D. guy was dead. His parents were dead. Runnion was as good as gone.

Life was open to him. To them. If he couldn't save her, then everything he had endured will have been for nothing. Every pain-filled night he had managed to get through because of Jo would be worthless. Every moment he had cherished and kept locked away inside him of their brief time together would be just another pile of ashes on the floor.

No! No! Not Jo. If anyone deserved to live, it had to be her! If anyone had earned the right to live, it was her, with her beef jerky

brown-colored hair that he used as a blanket against the demons on his most horrific nights. And with her cornflower blue eyes that had reached into his heart to soothe him, pet him, and assure him they would be together again one day. Some day.

“I love you, Drew. God, I love you so much.”

“Unnnnj! Jjjjjjj! Jo! Joooooooo!” It was a pathetically thin and weak cry. More of a wail than a yell. His voice was rusty. Unused, like a centuries-old piece of machine that had fallen into disuse, then was expected to start working again. He took a bigger breath and tried again, reaching down toward her.

“Jo!”

She moved slightly.

“Jo!”

A reddened face peered up at him. “Drew?” Instantly she was on her feet, stretching up toward him. As if all his prayers had been answered, her hand slipped into his gloved one as she managed to reach him, and she curled the fingers of her other hand around his wrist.

Slowly Drew began to pull back, dragging her with him. The withdrawal seemed easier than going in, until he noticed the redness on the limestone as he squirmed in reverse.

His eyes remained locked on hers as he pulled her through the little hole. Once she was over the lip of the ledge, she let go with her other hand and let him do all the work so her shoulders would fit through the opening he’d made.

It felt like hours later when his feet found the ground behind him, and he managed to drag her out of the smoky, enlarged crack and into his arms. Her face and hands were bright red with first and second degree burns, but she was alive as she coughed and tried to suck the fresh, freezing air into her lungs.

Tollson held her tightly against him. He didn’t care what that J. D. character had done. It didn’t matter, and it never would. Never again. He was not letting her go, and whatever nightmares

he suffered in the future, they would never drive him away from her again.

She clutched at him, wrapping her arms around his neck to prevent him from going away. She tried to talk to him, to tell him what had happened, but between the terror she had faced and his return, no words would come to her. All she could manage was to hold him fiercely and cry tears of relief.

They had no idea how long they stood there in each other's embrace. Then, like dawn breaking fresh and clear, Jo lifted her face to look up at him with widening eyes. She hiccuped as she placed a hand to his cheek to get his attention. Reddened eyes looked down at her with love.

"You...did you say my name?"

His lips formed the word as he tried to respond. It took him clearing his throat and trying a second time before it finally came out, croaking like a frog. "Jo."

Fresh tears rolled down her cheeks. Their salt stung mercilessly, but she didn't care as she smiled back up at him. "Say it again," she whispered, watching his mouth perform a miracle.

"Jo. My Jo."

She nodded. "You got that right." She tried to laugh again, but it came out more like a sob. "You came back for me?"

Tollson nodded, still overcome by how close he had been to losing her forever. "I love you, Jo."

His confession drained her. Jo leaned back against him, snuggling her pained face along his neck and shoulder. "Are you staying?" she asked hopefully, praying.

"Think the town will be mad because we missed our own wedding?"

She gave a little shrug and giggled. "They'll get over it." She felt him kiss the top of her head. "We're still getting married," she warned him.

A Different Yesterday

“I need a bath first.” It was getting easier to talk. He was surprised by how low his voice sounded.

“So do I. In cold water. I feel parboiled and baked. Dr. Donna’s gonna have a fit when she sees us.”

“Jo.”

“What?”

He moved slightly to make her look back up at him. “I will love you forever...Bethy.”

Before she could retort, Tollson gently took her mouth, promising himself that later he would kiss away all the boo-boos left by the flames, starting from the top of her head right down to her ten little piggies. And after that he would stay with her. All night, sharing the same bed after they had shared their bodies.

He had the feeling he would never again suffer from nightmares.

Chapter 30

Yesterday, June 9

"I don't wanna go next door!" Seven-year-old Drew crossed his plump arms over his chest and gave his mother his best obstinate face. It didn't faze her.

"You don't have much choice," Teena Tollson told her son, reaching for his hand. She pulled him to his feet and tossed him a clean shirt. "Put this on. I don't want our new neighbors to think I'm an unfit mother."

"I don't like that shirt!" He threw it on the floor and earned a swat to his backside for his little act of defiance. Tears welled up in his eyes.

Bending down to where they were nearly nose to nose, Teena ordered her youngest, "Put it on right now, Andrew." She never called him Andrew unless he was an inch away from a good spanking. Sniffing loudly, he took off the t-shirt he had worn all day and put on the clean one.

"Don't know why we gotta go there anyway," he grouched.

"It's the neighborly thing to do," his mother answered automatically as she tossed toys from the floor of his bedroom into the wooden chest the boys used as a toy box.

"What's that mean?"

Straightening, she sighed and checked his appearance. She ran a hand through his thick mop of pure white hair, combing it with

her fingers. "It means that when someone new moves into the neighborhood, you go over and introduce yourself. See if there's anything you can help them with. Let them know you're available if they ever need anything." She added a smile. "I think they got a girl about your age you can play with."

"A girl? Yuck!"

Teena laughed. "Never turn away the chance to make friends, Drew. You never know how important they might become in your life."

He followed her out into the living room, but he made it a point of dragging his feet just to show his displeasure. His favorite cartoon was coming on television, and he was going to miss it while he was being neighborly.

Drew paused. Unless that girl like to watch cartoons, too. Naw. Immediately he shook his head. Stupid girls didn't like watching cartoons. They liked to play with dolls and other dumb stuff like that.

"Pick up your feet, Brewski," older brother David ordered. Drew hated to be called that, and David knew it. He picked up a twig lying on the carport of their home. When David wasn't looking, he'd poke him with it.

They walked across the lower section of the Kindletons' front yard, since there was no sidewalk, and Drew's father didn't want to walk in the street. They went up to the front door, and Cort Tollson rang the doorbell.

A slender woman answered the door, a smile already pasted on her pretty face. "Hi! Come in! Come in! Mitch and I have been expecting you!"

The men shook hands as the women gave each other a brief hug of welcome. Drew felt a hand on his shoulder turn him around from where he had been staring at the paintings on the wall. Paintings of outer space and planets, and all kinds of fantastic galactic things.

A Different Yesterday

“Nancy, Mitch, these are our sons, David and Drew. Boys, say hello to Mr. and Mrs. Wythe.”

David said hello, but Drew settled for a wave. He wanted to get back to examining the really cool pictures on the wall, when Mrs. Wythe said, “This is our daughter, JoBeth. We call her Jo.”

Drew turned to see the diminutive figure dressed in a light blue pair of shorts and a striped shirt. She had more freckles on her than he’d ever seen on a girl, and her long reddish-brown hair hung in a braid all the way down to her butt. But what stopped him cold were her enormous blue eyes. Blue blue eyes. And they were staring at him with undisguised surprise.

“Hi,” he said. They were nearly the same height, he noticed.

“Hi,” she replied.

“I’m seven.”

“I’m five. I get to go to school next year,” she told him.

“Jo will get to start kindergarten this fall,” Mrs. Wythe explained. She placed a hand to Jo’s back and gave her a little push. “Why don’t you two go play in Jo’s room?”

“You like cartoons?” she asked him as she led him away from where the grownups could talk about dull grownup things. David, although he was just four years older than Drew, would hang around with the menfolk as if he belonged with them instead of with a couple of “babies”.

“Yeah. You got a TV?”

“Yeah.”

So he had followed her into her room where they ended up talking about stuff they both knew about instead of watching the television show. They discussed the town Jo had come from, a place called Cincinnati, and things she missed. He told her about a couple of places he wanted to show her, especially this really cool creek bed that ran behind their houses. At one point Jo leaned over to touch his hair.

“Gee. It’s soft. I never seen a boy with hair like yours.”

A Different Yesterday

"I never seen a girl with your color eyes," he admitted.

Jo smiled and blushed, and the world went from technicolor to effervescent. "You wanna be my friend?" she asked timidly.

"Yeah. Sure!"

"I don't care if you're a boy."

"I don't care if you're a girl. Hey, I know this really cool tree we can climb. You can see all the way into town if you get up high enough!"

"Neat! When can we go?" Jo giggled at the prospect.

Drew took that sound and memorized it.

Before he realized it, his mother stuck her head around the corner of the doorway. "How are you two getting along?"

"We're okay," Drew told her.

"Well, it's time we were heading back home."

"Aww, Mom! School's out," Drew immediately protested. It felt as if he'd just gotten there, and there were a gazillion things he still wanted to talk to Jo about.

Teena laughed softly. "Tomorrow, young man. You can come back over right after breakfast."

"Then you can show me that tree," Jo whispered to him.

Drew nodded. He was already looking forward to it.

As he followed his family back to his house, he ventured one last look over his shoulder at the threesome standing under the light on their front steps. Jo gave him a little wave, which he returned. In the back of his mind he could hear the echo of his mother's prophesy.

Never turn away the chance to make friends, Drew. You never know how important they might become in your life.

He skipped on ahead of the others so he could get his bath and go to bed, and get this day over with.

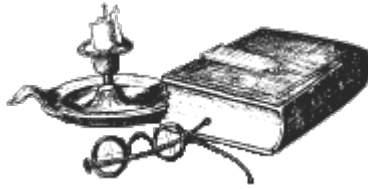
There was a whole new tomorrow to look forward to.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Linda loves to write romance with a fantasy or science fiction flair. Her technique is often described as being as visual as a motion picture or graphic novel. By day she is a kindergarten teacher, wife, and mother of two who lives in a small south Texas town near the Gulf Coast. But at night she delves into alternate worlds filled with daring exploits and sensuous, erotic romance.

Included in her accomplishments with Whiskey Creek Press Torrid are ten consecutive Number One Bestsellers, and in March 2010, Linda was named the Whiskey Creek Press Torrid Author of The Year.

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